Ashoka Alumni

10 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE · ashoka UNIVERSITY

Our Stories

VOLUME TWO

Ashoka Alumni

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Ashoka → the world over

Nearly 100 alumni have served as full-time staff members at Ashoka

Ashoka alumni include 1 Gates Cambridge, 3 Rhodes, 4 Chevening, 4 Erasmus Mundus and 14 Fulbright Scholars

More than 150 alumni have donated an amount of Rs 20+ lakhs to support scholarships at Ashoka

Over 170 alumni are now pursuing their PhDs in universities in India and overseas

Canada
USA
Iceland
Norway
Sweden
Denmark
Netherlands
United Kingdom
Ireland
Belgium
France
Italy
Spain
Switzerland
Germany
Czech Rep
Austria
Ukraine
Finland
Estonia
Turkey
Israel
Qatar
Oman
United Arab Emirates
Senegal
Ghana
Nigeria
Ethiopia
Somalia
Uganda
Rwanda
Kenya
Zambia
Zimbabwe
Malawi
South Africa
China
India
Bhutan
Nepal
Bangladesh
Myanmar
Thailand
Cambodia
Phillipines
Malaysia
Japan
South Korea
Australia
New Zealand

Map not to scale.
Source: Survey of India

Contents

Foreword

I am pleased to present the second edition of Ashoka University's Alumni Stories. Our 5,600+ alumni, spread across more than 60 countries around the world, make us proud every day, for who they are, what they have become and where they are headed.

2024 marked the tenth year of the University and this milestone makes this second edition even more special. Ten years ago, we planted the seed of an idea to become India's top university in Liberal Arts and Sciences and one of the world's leading universities in teaching and research excellence with a commitment to nurturing responsible future leaders who would pioneer change and innovation in diverse fields globally. And today, the idea is a proud reality, with immense potential to continue doing more and scaling more. This would not have been possible without our students, the passionate custodians who made Ashoka their home and who championed our founding values in all their endeavors during and especially after Ashoka.

Coming from all walks of life, many of our alumni have gone on to reach the top of academia, entrepreneurship, filmmaking, journalism, sports, art, business management, policy making, grassroots impact and many other coveted fields. They are present and contributing far and wide globally. And this makes them stand out. Our alumni are a generation of changemakers who are prepared to confront the toughest challenges with a thoughtful appreciation for interdisciplinary perspectives and natural variability in the world around us. They are gritty and motivated to push traditional boundaries of knowledge and set new standards of leading life with purpose and making an impact that is much bigger than themselves – wherever they are.

The 50+ alumni featured in this edition reveal our Ashokan stories and I hope each story inspires our readers with a wider sense of engaging with the world, rooted in the power of a true liberal education to shape and transform human lives.

— Pramath Raj Sinha

**Chairperson, Board of Trustees,
Ashoka University**
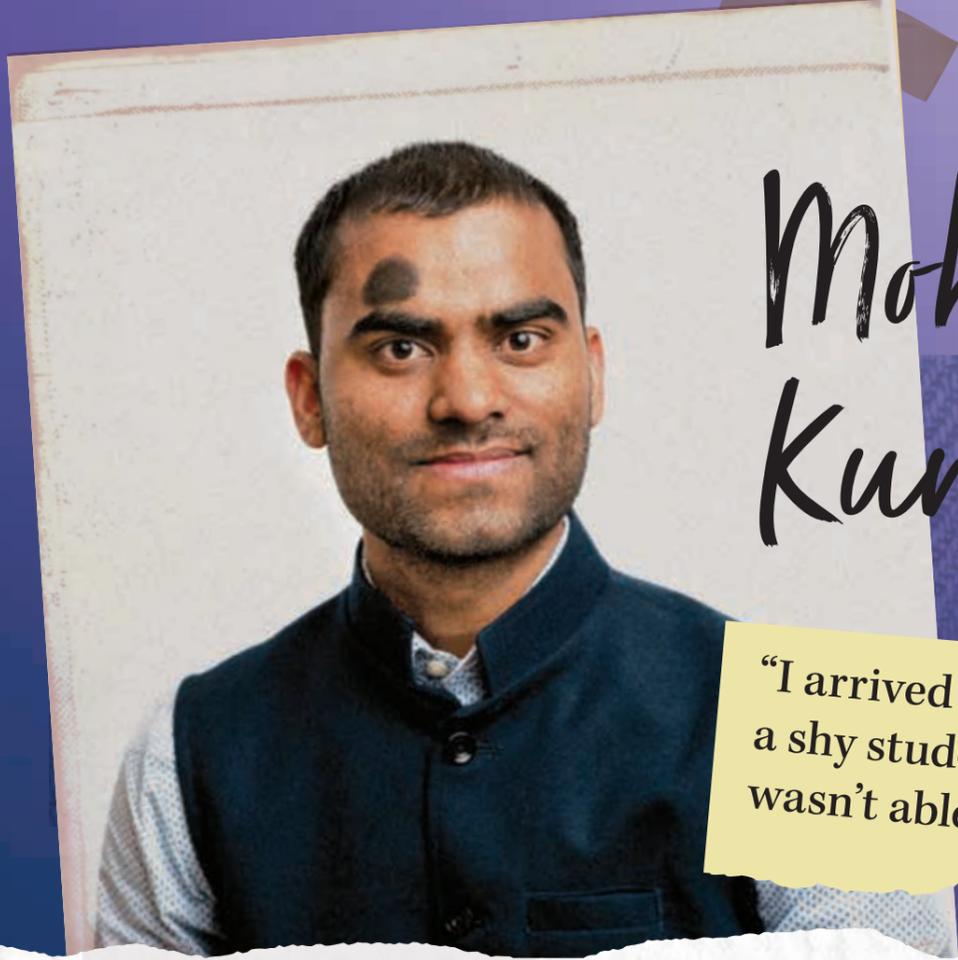
Mohit Kumar

> "I arrived on campus a shy student, who wasn't able to speak"

Vidyagyan School
Ashoka University
McGill University

Mohit Kumar (UG 2022) was the first Indian to win the McCall MacBain Global Scholarship in 2023. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in Educational Leadership at McGill University

Growing up in a small farming family in a rural village in Uttar Pradesh, Mohit went to Vidyagyan School, Bulandshahr, where he first heard about Ashoka University.

Accustomed to rote learning, he initially struggled during his first semester. "I arrived on campus shy and overwhelmed, but left Ashoka as a confident leader, enriched by tremendous personal and academic growth. It was challenging to engage in academics and class discussions in the first semester, but

I am glad I recieved support from my professors and the Centre for Writing and Communication," he recalls.

Mohit soon realised this would not be enough and shifted his approach towards learning by immersing himself in rigorous reading and building the confidence to express his ideas. "I did so many courses with Professor Rudrangshu Mukherjee, one of the best teachers I have ever had." He remembers others fondly as well, such as his History and Persian professors, Pratyay Nath and Nadeem Akhtar.

During his time at Ashoka, Mohit gradually came into his own. "I went on to co-lead the Sustainable Development Goals Society at Ashoka, I was a Resident Assistant and then became a Resident Assistant mentor. I also worked with the Office of Learning Support for a research project on Neurodiversity. All these experiences widened my horizons and shaped my personality," he says. During his fourth year, Mohit applied for the McCall MacBain Scholarship and became the first Indian to win Canada's first comprehensive, leadership-driven scholarship for master's and professional degree studies. "Like many students, I had a desire to study overseas and get international exposure but I never had any such opportunity earlier. It was only when I was at Ashoka that such an aspiration seemed possible," he says.

"The experience has been fabulous. I come from a background where efforts are still needed to improve access to basic education. I made it to Vidyagyan School and Ashoka University, and now I am pursuing my studies at McGill University."

"It's an incredible feeling. Meeting new people here, from different countries and backgrounds, has allowed me to explore new avenues and learn things that you don't find in textbooks," he says.

But his heart still lies in rural India and he dreams of returning home one day to give back to his village. In 2019, he started *Sarathi*: The Guide – a project to support the education of over 800 students across ten Indian villages. The goal: educate children to become future leaders. Mohit is now working towards a career in higher education and community development, driven by his experiences at Ashoka. "At some point, I want to pursue a PhD and also work on educational projects for the community," he says.

Girl Rising

St. Stephen's College ·····▸ Ashoka University

▸ SwaTaleem Foundation ·····▸ University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

▸ Texas A&M University

IIT Kanpur ·····▸ Ashoka University

▸ STiR Education ·····▸ SwaTaleem Foundation

"What accelerated our journey was having mentors through the YIF"

Vaibhav Kumar and Ananya Tiwari

Vaibhav Kumar and Ananya Tiwari (YIF 2016) co-founded SwaTaleem, a grassroots initiative that advances gender equality through education

Vaibhav and Ananya met in 2012 while volunteering on a social impact project at the NGO, *Prayas*. While Ananya was an alumna of St Stephen's College, Vaibhav was pursuing a degree in Mechanical Engineering at IIT. After working together for three years on social impact projects, the duo applied for the Young India Fellowship (YIF) and joined the 2016 cohort.

"There was a certain practical element to the work that I had already done, but I wanted to sharpen my skills and gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical aspects of gender, caste and class which I could bring back to the kind of work that I wanted to pursue in the future," explains Vaibhav. While he was certain he wanted to pursue a career in the education/development space, Ananya was interested in linking research with the social impact space.

Post YIF, Ananya began working on a project in rural Bihar while Vaibhav joined STiR. Later, he also got to design and facilitate one of Delhi government's flagship programmes for the professional development of teachers.

All the while, the two kept exchanging stories and field notes from their work in the development sector as they were both working in the same area, albeit in different geographies. "Ashoka made me think very bravely," Ananya says. "I observed a lot of the guest speakers, the kind of lives they had designed for themselves and were leading; and the professions they were in, the work they were doing. It was all very inspiring. And it was also a mark of the insane amount of courage that they showed. But at the same time, it was also very simple and achievable," she adds.

"I think patience plays a very important role in the social impact journey, just understanding that you are not the first one who is doing it. So you might as well learn from the people who have already done it in the past and also build that support system. What accelerated our journey was having mentors and support systems through the Young India Fellowship, the Mother Teresa Fellowship and beyond that as well," says Vaibhav.

Panipat. Even things like our website and the social media content in our initial years was run by them. Our first crowdfunding campaign was circulated in different networks and the YIF network was one of the important ones that helped us garner resources," he explains.

"Ashoka taught us the importance of pursuing excellence in our work," Ananya says. "There were these amazing and excellent teachers, who were really scholars and experts in their respective fields, who were dedicated to their craft. They were extremely passionate about what they were doing and were able to maintain that pursuit of excellence over a long period of time."

By 2018, they were keen to set up an initiative *focused* on applying interdisciplinary *educational approaches* to reduce social inequalities

By 2018, the duo were keen to set up an initiative focused on applying interdisciplinary educational approaches to reduce social inequalities. The idea sparked the creation of SwaTaleem, which today serves 33,000 adolescent girls and almost 2,40,000 parents across two states in India. Set up to create thriving school communities for underrepresented girls in India, SwaTaleem works in partnership with the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya national school project. "Our journey has been quite remarkable. We started off with just two people and a group of volunteers. Today we have a team of almost 50 part time and full time members spread across Haryana and Karnataka," Vaibhav says.

"Our very first team of volunteers came through the ELM (Experiential Learning Module) project at Ashoka. When we had no funds our very first pilot was done by the ELM team in

Tanmay Singh

Breaking Barriers, Building Futures

Ashoka University

→ **Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Evolutionary Biology**

One of the first special-needs students at Ashoka, Tanmay Singh (UG 2022) worked with University staff to put systems in place for students with disabilities

Belonging to an Indian Foreign Service (IFS) family, Tanmay Singh grew up across countries but chose to join a university in India. He heard about Ashoka through an outreach event when he was in school.

"In 2018, a team from Ashoka came to our school and spoke about a new Liberal Arts and Sciences university and how they were setting up their Biology course. This brought in an element of uncertainty. The department itself was new, the

labs were still being set up. There was very little information on how Biology would be integrated in the Ashoka way of things. I decided to join and once I did, I realised that while the department was nascent, the faculty were experienced and supportive," he says.

Other factors also played a role.

"Undergraduate education overseas was too expensive but the challenge for me was to find a university in India which would look beyond my condition and not let it get in the way of my university life," he says. "After joining, I realised from the first semester itself that my academic life in Ashoka would be excellent. I found my classes to be thoroughly stimulating and enjoyable and worked hard to learn all I could. Thankfully, it paid off. I graduated with distinction in 2022 and submitted a good thesis the year after for the Ashoka Scholars Programme. The challenge, however, was how I would balance my studies with a non-academic life," he adds.

Tanmay was one of the first special-needs students at Ashoka. He recalls, "the biggest advantage for all of us was that the Office of Learning Support (OLS) was willing to listen and learn about my needs from the get go. Even if this meant detailed, one-on-one discussions during my first two-three months to put systems in place for me."

During this process, the OLS kept in touch with Tanmay's mother, for her to share any insights as the parent who had been the key determinant of his educational and personal journey. He states, "I was very happy to see how the OLS kept reaching out to my family to ensure my success at Ashoka. My mom is my strongest pillar of strength and support and was able to point out nuances about me that even I had missed!"

"I think Ashoka did a really good job of making sure that I could safely and securely manage my life on campus," he recalls. "I use a walker and have to continuously tell universities, even overseas, that physical accessibility consists of far more than merely organising bathrooms for special-needs students. Having a walker means, for example, if I'm walking on a ramp, I cannot always use two hands because I need to use one hand to hold the handle of my walker. If I have classrooms which are placed very far apart it is difficult to reach the next class on time," he explains.

During his final year at Ashoka, Tanmay applied for and was admitted to the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Evolutionary Biology (MEME). It is a two-year research-oriented master's programme for talented and motivated students who are interested in understanding evolution in all its facets.

The Ashoka impact is evident as Tanmay speaks about his academic progress. "It's been a continuous journey and I'm still learning, but being at Ashoka increased my respect for trans-disciplinary research. These are words that we tend to use very frivolously, but it is the need of the hour and I realise it each day during my fellowship. Many of the problems we have in the world today can be solved through collaborative research. Different fields need to talk to one another because problems don't discriminate," he says.

Catering to these specific needs meant looking into the details of physical accessibility as well as infrastructure design. "The angle of the ramps might be too high for safety purposes. For example, if you're on wheels and the ramp itself is very steep, it could become a safety issue. I was glad that Ashoka listened and took my views into consideration," he says.

Living alone on campus was the next hurdle Tanmay had to surmount.

"Prior to Ashoka, as I was a day-student I never had to prepare myself for a residential experience in a campus hostel. After detailed discussions with the OLS and people at the Office of Student Affairs, I was able to be fully independent in the Ashoka ecosystem," he says. "They were very supportive and did their best to accommodate me," he adds.

During his final year at Ashoka, *Tanmay* joined the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Evolutionary Biology (MEME)

Nitya Kuthiala

Nitya Kuthiala (UG 2017) works with Gamoteca, a game-based learning platform

"Ashoka encouraged us to ask questions, critique things and make mistakes. I think the education I got at Ashoka was of a really high standard.

We were the first batch and Ashoka's faculty really *invested* in us. They gave us access to resources and were very hands-on. Classes were so small that everyone had to contribute. Ashoka taught me to question things, think analytically and *have the courage* to seek my own answers. I remember how students from our batch and my extended circle of friends would go on these long walks on campus where we would talk about life and what we were learning in class – because it was so interesting and new for many of us. Some of the best conversations I've had were during *those 10 pm walks.*"

"Someone else was paying for my education and I was very respectful of that"

Md Irfan Dar

Jamia Millia Islamia ....

Ashoka University ....→ Red Stone Films

Mohammad Irfan Dar (YIF 2012) is a filmmaker and the founder of Red Stone Films

I was born and brought up in Srinagar and studied Biochemistry in college. I was expected to choose between Engineering or Medicine. During my undergrad I began to take part in local theatre, thanks to the National School of Drama (NSD) that conducted an outreach programme in Kashmir in 2005.

I've always wanted to explore different mediums of expression. Theatre introduced me to the possibility of an alternate future and I soon switched streams and chose to pursue a master's in Filmmaking at Jamia MCRC. After completing the course I took a break and returned to Kashmir to try and figure out a career path. During this period of introspection I spent about six months just taking black and white analogue photo portraits of people, most of which have never been processed or printed.

It was a mentor in Delhi who insisted that I apply for the Young India Fellowship (YIF). I was surprised when I got a scholarship and felt certain it was a hoax. It was only when the welcome kit with personalised merchandise arrived that I allowed myself to believe it was real.

Our first subject in term one was Sociology with Professor André Beteille and that was the best introduction to Ashoka ever, because it would be difficult to find a better teacher. I struggled to find my feet for the first few months on campus but I also knew that this was a great opportunity for a boy like me who could never have afforded the fees. Someone else was paying for my education and I was very respectful of that.

The beauty of the first couple of years of the Fellowship is that it's really rigorous. You have to pass 26 credits. But every term, you grow and improve. In the end you realise that a lot of the belief systems you held on to for most of your life were merely opinions.

After Ashoka, I applied for a job but it didn't work out. In hindsight it was for the best as I went on to co-found Redstone Films and my first client was Ashoka University. We worked on many projects for the University over a period of two and a half years and then gradually scaled up. Today we work with clients from across the globe, including several UN agencies and in 2023 we opened a studio in the UAE.

YIF provided a foundation for me to make sense of the world. During my time at Ashoka I was constantly challenged to learn. Sometimes by my professors, by the reading material, or by my peers. The multiplicity of thought process, the diversity in how you can think about the same issue in different ways

made Ashoka/YIF an intense experience. It became clear that I couldn't expect to cruise through my course as a bystander. I was forced to get in the ring and participate which in turn opened up new dimensions of thinking and being.

My biggest takeaway from my time at YIF has been the people who came into my life: the faculty who treated us as equals and showed us what empathetic teaching looks like and my batchmates who wouldn't shy away from expressing their thoughts and yet find time to listen to others. The kindness of people made me realise that you can be at war with the world, but you don't have to do it alone.
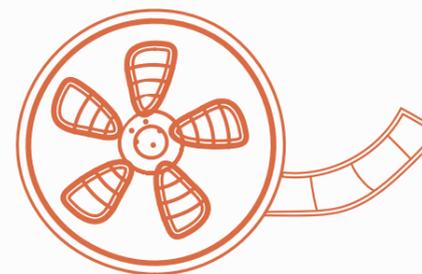
Ansh Baid

Ansh Baid (UG 2017) is a filmmaker, inter-city hiker and founder of Studio Bavl

"To me, a Liberal Arts education meant liberation from the rigid confines of Indian academia. Ashoka's multidisciplinary approach allowed me the freedom to explore varied subjects like Applied Sciences and Philosophy. The latter, in particular, gave me the tools to look at the world more critically and curiously.

After Ashoka, I walked – travelling on foot between Maharashtra and Goa. This taught me more about my own biases *than I could have ever* imagined. I then worked with farmers, where I learned practical skills like building huts and growing vegetables. Farming instilled in me a deep reverence for hard work and nature. Later I was introduced to craftsmanship when I apprenticed under a French carpenter in Mysuru. This period influenced my approach towards creating functional sculptures by blending *creativity, precision and a deep* understanding of materials and concepts. In 2022, I set up my own wood-work studio, Studio Bavl, in Bengaluru, where I create sculptures and furniture.

All of these tiny steps have led me to where I am today. My journey hasn't been only about acquiring specific technical skills but also about personal growth. One of the things I've become better at over the years is the act of learning itself."

> "The skills I learned at Ashoka and my experiences there have proved invaluable, often in ways I don't consciously realise"

Rosary Higher Secondary School ⟶ Ashoka University ⟶ Goa Civil Service

Mrunal Marathe

Mrunal Marathe (UG 2020) is a civil servant in the Department of State Tax, Goa

Growing up a confused child with an interest in multiple subjects came in handy when I applied to Ashoka's undergraduate programme in 2017. It was here that I pivoted from my initial idea of going into investment banking or corporate finance, to working as a government civil servant.

Ashoka changed a lot of things for me. It spoke to the child in me who liked to study all kinds of subjects, but was always told to focus on one. Ashoka's environment facilitated learning at every level – not just in the classrooms, but also through peers. At Ashoka we were taught that things don't have to be one-dimensional.

Lectures by Professors Shivshankar Menon and Pulapre Balakrishnan, among others, inspired me to look at societal issues from a multi-dimensional perspective and strive to develop a solution-oriented mindset. In January 2023, I secured the first position in the Goa Civil Service Examination. I now serve my country as the Deputy Commissioner of State Tax, Government of Goa.

My current role in the Department of State Tax requires me to constantly juggle between disciplines, be curious, absorb information quickly and develop an understanding of legal statutes.

As bureaucrats and administrators, we are expected to be generalists – to learn quickly and develop expertise across diverse sectors. The most important skill is the ability to be curious and fast on the uptake. Ashoka played a pivotal role in helping me learn how to learn.

More than anything, Ashoka allowed us the flexibility to approach our professors and ask questions. The critical thinking skills that we learnt at Ashoka, the ability to not take things at face value – they have been a huge help to me, even in my career.

To those thinking of joining Ashoka, I would say: take that leap of faith. And for students already at Ashoka, I will say: stay curious. Don't stop learning and don't be afraid to fail. If you are interested in learning about a subject – even if it doesn't currently make sense in the bigger picture of your career ambitions – go ahead and pursue it. You never know when it may come in handy.
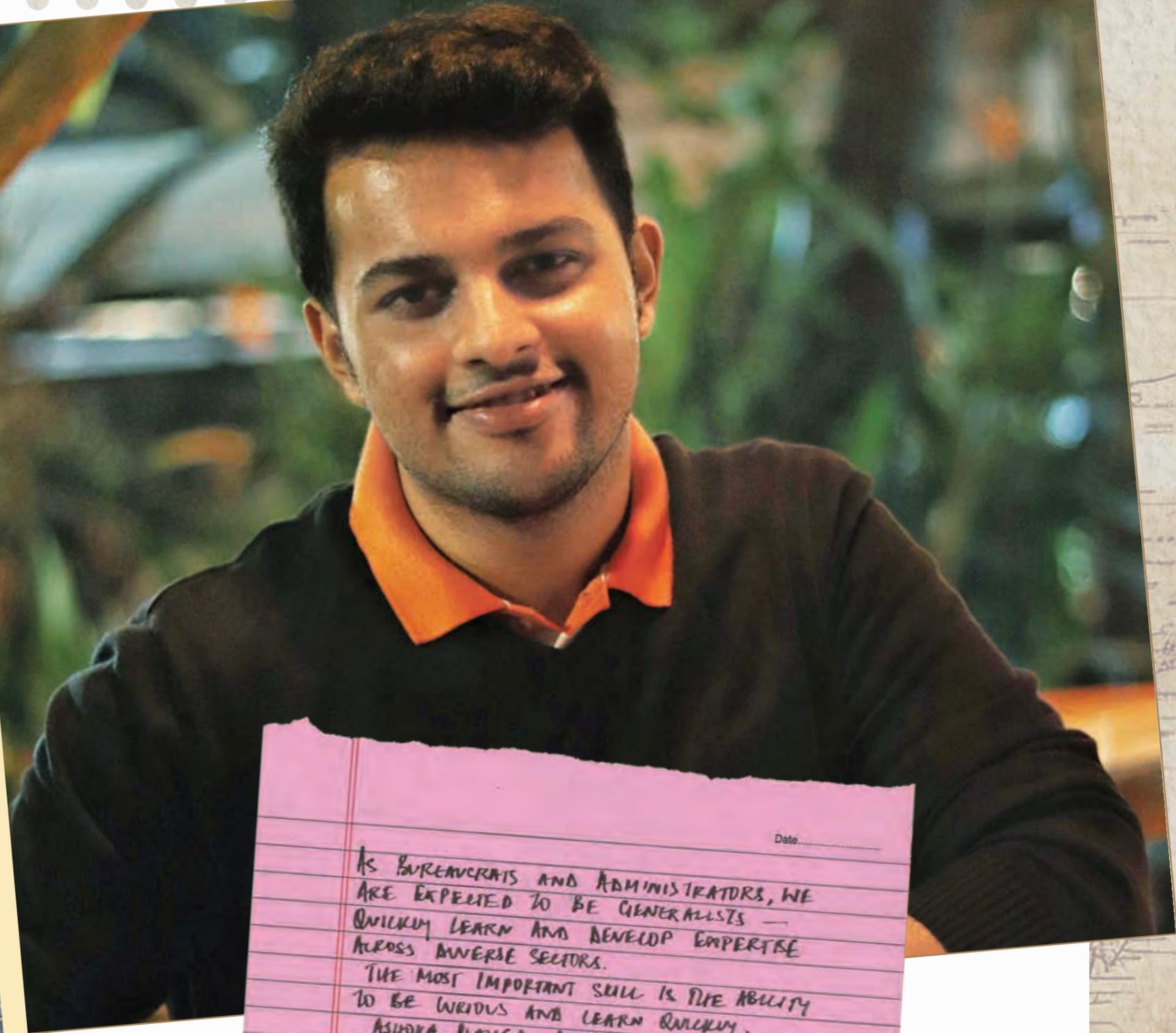
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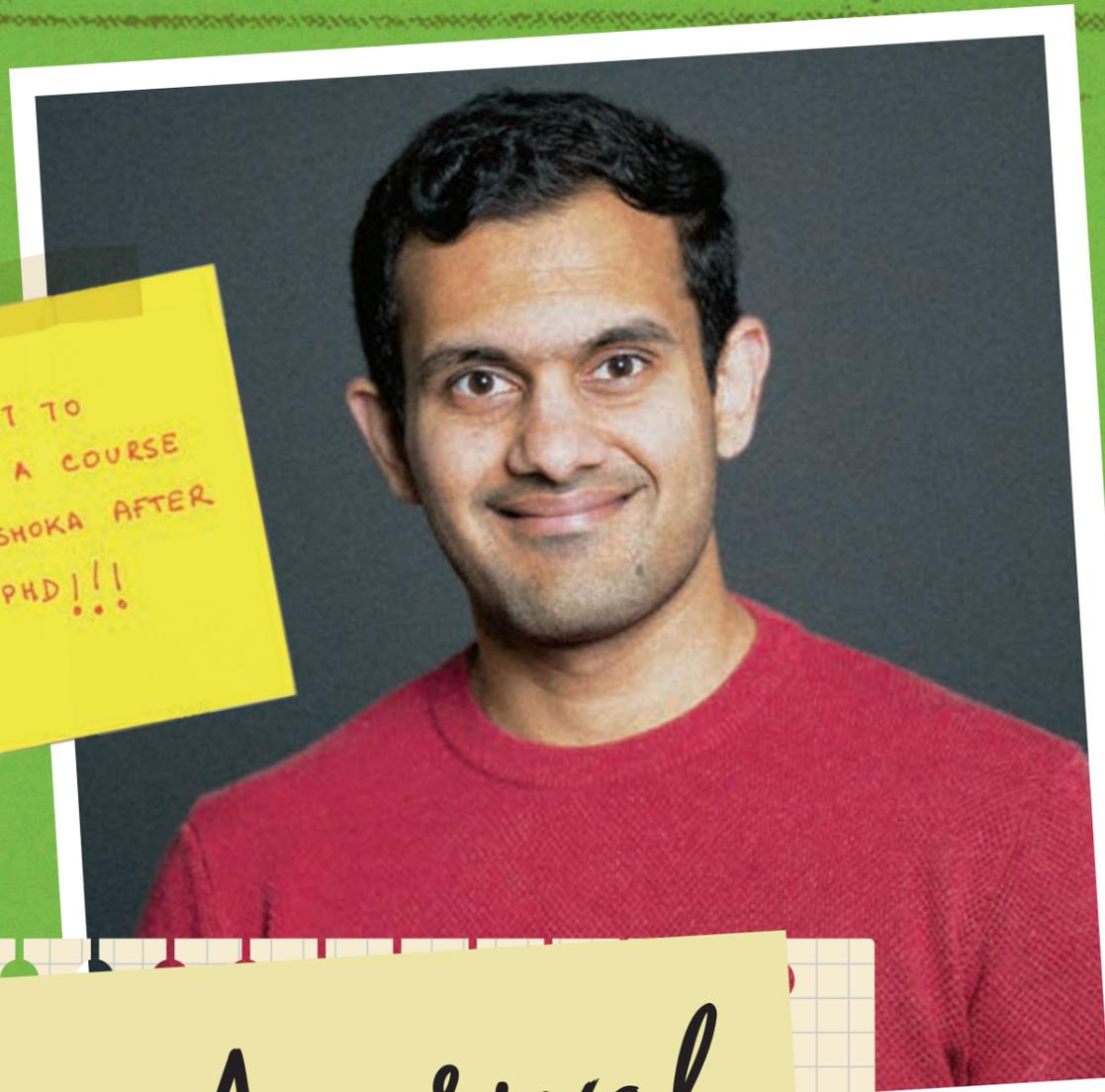
I WANT TO TEACH A COURSE AT ASHOKA AFTER MY PHD!!!

Dhruv Agarwal

Dhruv Agarwal (UG 2019) is a PhD student in Computer Science at Cornell University and the recipient of the inaugural Quad Fellowship in 2023

"I wanted to attend a more established, 'prestigious' engineering college, not a two-year-old university that no one had heard of but my cousin convinced me to apply to Ashoka. It was the *best decision ever*.

For the first time, I was forced to step out and interact with the Arts and Social Sciences and with people who had different cultural beliefs and life experiences. I would often witness *intense debates between economists* and political scientists in our dorm rooms during late-night hangouts. It is hard to quantify the amount of knowledge I was exposed to at Ashoka.

The University prepared me for pursuing a PhD which requires critical thinking and preparedness for rigorous study and research. It laid the bedrock for Computer Science fundamentals *while the Liberal Arts* curriculum inspired my interest in interdisciplinary studies. One of my goals after my PhD is to teach a course at Ashoka, so I can inspire a similar interest among new undergraduates."

Continuous Reinvention

Gauri Bansal

Ashoka University ····▶ **9.9 Insights/Albright Stonebridge Group**

▸ **Twitter** ·······▶ **Spotify**

Making the switch from Liberal Arts to Tech, Gauri Bansal (UG 2018) now works in products and strategy at Spotify, building consumer products and driving strategic growth initiatives across global markets

I had no idea what to expect at Ashoka but the moment I set foot on campus, I instantly fell in love with the energy, the people, the conversations. It was just such an out-of-body experience. Initially Ashoka was a cultural shock because I came from a relatively small public school in Delhi NCR where my peers were a very homogenous set of people, from similar backgrounds with identical aspirations. At Ashoka I met people from all walks of life... a beautiful cultural melange with peers across nations, backgrounds and ideologies.

I found my feet both within and outside the classroom. After a few disciplinary detours, I went on to major in History and International Relations. I was also with *Abhinaya* – the Dance Society – and helped found Ashoka's first cultural fest *Banjaara* and the Ashoka University Leadership Summit. I had a lot of freedom to set up a lot of these legacy programmes with peers who were equally driven. Ashoka taught me how to think critically and ask the right questions, and in turn become a better listener and communicator. It opened my mind to how people around the world think, how to influence change around oneself and how lasting relationships are forged.

After Ashoka, I joined 9.9 Insights – the India arm of the Albright Stonebridge Group, a policy consulting firm, where I immersed myself in learning the classic consulting toolkit while advising clients across sectors on policy and commercial issues.

While deeply transformative, I yearned to find depth and transition into technology – a high momentum, creative sector. My Ashoka education enabled me to reorient my mindset, adapt effectively and upskill quickly by learning new skills like data analytics and machine learning. I credit Ashoka with giving me the appetite to switch domains because that's the sort of interdisciplinary shift that we had to make day-to-day on campus.

Eventually I went on to assist the Managing Director for Twitter in India to build and scale the platform in its second largest market. In this role I worked across 20 global teams and led a lot of strategic initiatives for the company during the COVID-19 pandemic when Twitter became a sort of lifeline for real-time information and resource gathering. Realising that lasting

My stint at Ashoka enabled me to upskill quickly

change rested in the product itself, I helped set up Twitter's first tech site dedicated to emerging markets in India and became the first few product managers to join the team. It was an experience that I'll never forget and one which led me to the kind of career path I have now chosen for myself, which is to advance the impact of technology in emerging economies.

I run a very similar chapter now at Spotify, where I focus on their product and business strategy growth for emerging markets, specifically South Asia, Middle East and Africa. It's been a long and exciting journey of continuous reinvention.

Manasi Rao

Manasi Rao (UG 2018) is a PhD student in Political Science and Government at Yale University

"I was a little sceptical about Ashoka. I thought it would be a bunch of snobby South Delhi kids and we would live in this elite boarding environment, completely removed from the real world. But here I was able to *make life-long friendships* and meet people who have pushed me to be more *brave, honest and generous.*

Ashoka's academic community was vibrant – everyone was doing research and asking super interesting questions, and as students, you were also encouraged to do the same. I was most excited about the faculty. I would read their articles in newspapers and still do. In class, we were never shamed for asking questions and often our assignments required us to *think outside the box* and *be creative* with our coursework.

The years between 2018-21 were challenging, but the time I spent at Ashoka has shaped my *view of the world* and what I can do to make it a better place."

I made lifelong friendships @ashoka :)

Phurbu Dolma

Ashoka University ····▶ Geneva Graduate Institute

▶ HURIDOCS

The personal has always been the political for Phurbu Dolma (UG 2017) who is pursuing a career in human rights advocacy

I was born and raised in Kalimpong, a picturesque hill station in West Bengal. I studied in Kolkata which is where I learned about Ashoka from my school counsellor. Liberal Arts was definitely a new concept to me but multidisciplinary education was not. When I arrived at the University, I knew I wanted to study Economics. However, later I moved towards Sociology and Anthropology. Even though I went on to eventually pursue International Affairs, whenever I think of myself in an academic environment, I always identify as an anthropologist.

During my final semester, I submitted my capstone thesis on *Majnu Ka Tila*, the Tibetan refugee colony in Delhi, in an attempt to research and document the living conditions of Tibetan exiles in India.

By the time I finished my degree I had joined the Ashoka Scholars Programme. I took a gap year and worked as a teaching assistant with Professor Ravi Sriramachandran, who teaches Anthropology and Sociology. I also did a bit of field work with a communications organisation based in Delhi. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I completed my master's in International Affairs from the Geneva Graduate Institute. Soon after, I began working with Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems (HURIDOCS).

"Human Rights are not merely an intellectual pursuit but rather a deeply personal quest"

For me working on human rights issues is not merely an intellectual pursuit but rather a deeply personal quest. As a person of Tibetan origin, whose grandparents were born in Tibet and arrived in India as political exiles, questions about the role of society and political rights has dominated my life and shaped my personal identity. It also sparked my interest in Anthropology and Sociology and helped me to better understand my own culture. I've been working at HURIDOCS for the last three years now. My work gives my life a sense of purpose and allows me an opportunity to give back to the Tibetan community.

As a person of Tibetan origin, whose grandparents were born in Tibet and arrived in India as political exiles, questions about the role of society and political rights have dominated my life and shaped my personal identity.

Vaishnavi Agarwal

Vaishnavi Agarwal (UG 2017) is a PhD student at Tufts University

The first batch was in pretty high spirits and we sailed through the year on hope

"I remember wearing *hard hats* during the campus tour. The atrium was almost complete, but they hadn't even finished putting up the jolly. The Admin Block was more or less complete in the sense that they had a functioning ground floor and *they had the structure of* the Multipurpose Hall to show us. Literally one classroom was finished in the old academic block and one dorm room was ready as a prototype. But the first batch was in pretty *high spirits* and we sailed through the year on hope. That first year it was literally just us, the first batch, on campus. Everywhere you went, you bumped into people you knew."
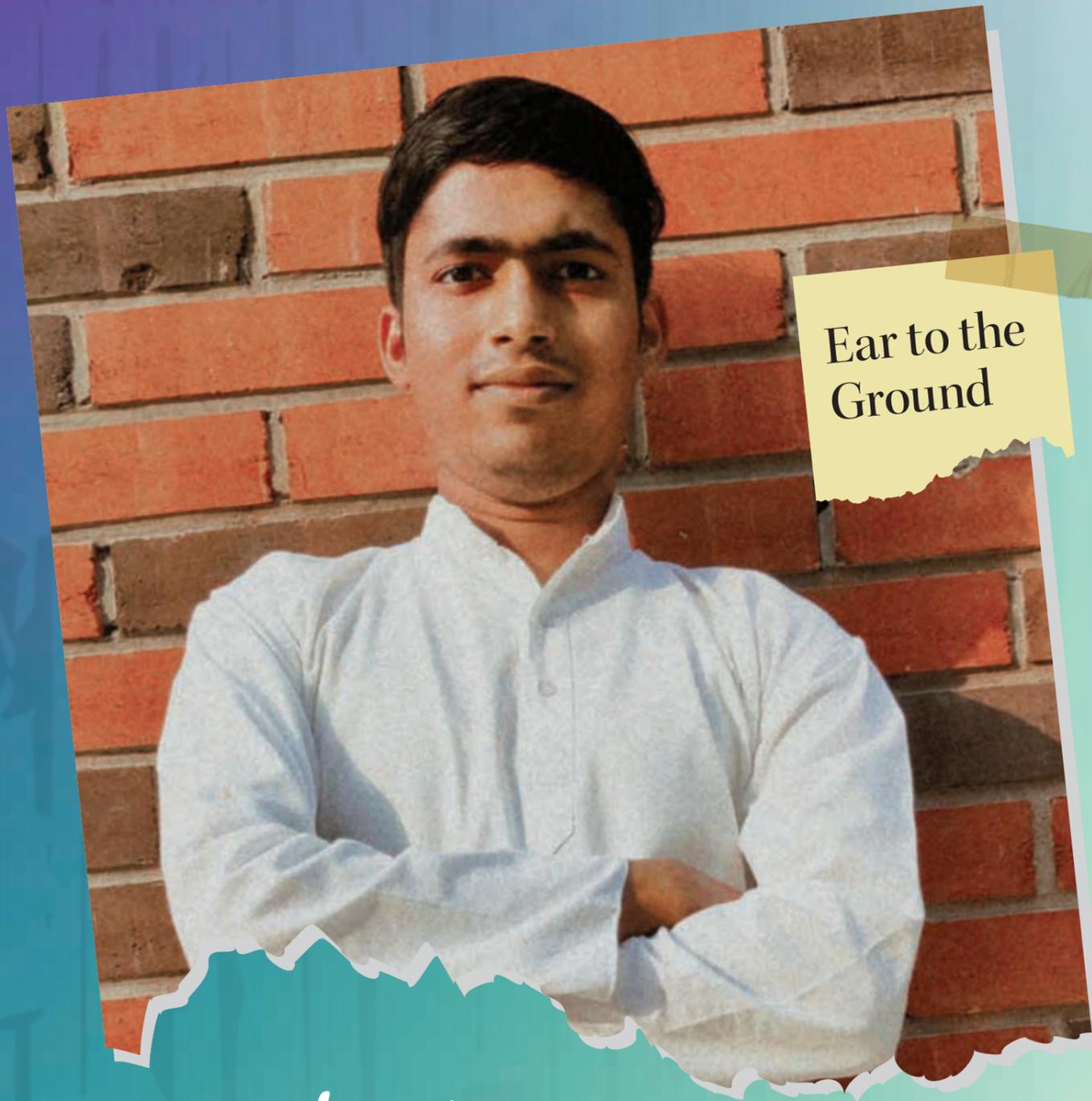
Ear to the Ground

Sahil Balmiki

Ashoka University
Antara Foundation

Sahil Balmiki (UG 2022) works in the development sector. He is the co-founder of *Jagran* Club and a communications associate at The Antara Foundation

Sahil Balmiki grew up in a neighbourhood in Kolkata, witnessing the struggles of child labourers. This experience ignited his passion for improving his surroundings and advocating for a better future for the community. When he was twelve, he started a social group called *Jagran* which collaborated with NGOs, organised street plays and puppet shows in West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Maharashtra. *Jagran* also started a Sunday school for the children of sex workers in Kolkata to provide them with basic education.

Sahil first heard about Ashoka University during an internship with an NGO in Karnal, Haryana. He remembers thinking how the university building – seen even from a distance – looked like the photos he had seen of universities overseas. He was determined to get in and started learning more about Ashoka and its scholarship programme online. Finally, in 2019, he was offered admission to the undergraduate programme.

Ashoka's library was like a treasure trove for Sahil. "I would spend hours there, reading a wide range of books that deepened my understanding of the issues I was already working on. The interdisciplinary approach at Ashoka allowed me to study many different subjects, which is rare in other universities," he says. "Initially, I was afraid I might not be able to graduate, but with the support of the professors and different departments, I completed my major in Political Science, with a minor in Media Studies and another in Sociology and Anthropology. I also took courses in Visual Arts and Entrepreneurship, which broadened my understanding of social issues structurally and comprehensively," he adds.

Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone and *explore subjects* or fields you're not familiar with.

After Ashoka, Sahil decided to apply his academic learning to real-world challenges. "I joined the Antara Foundation as a fellow, where I worked intensively on projects aimed at improving maternal and child health in rural Madhya Pradesh. My role involved collaborating closely with local health workers, analysing data and developing strategies to combat malnutrition and anaemia among vulnerable women and children," he says. Sahil has now transitioned into a role that blends his experience with his passion for media. "I create content and campaigns that highlight the impact of our work and raise awareness about critical health issues, amplifying the voices of those who are often unheard," he explains.

Sahil says his professional journey has been deeply influenced by the experiences and learnings at Ashoka. "The interdisciplinary approach allowed me to look at social issues through multiple lenses, providing a well-rounded perspective that was crucial when working on the ground. Courses in Sociology, Anthropology and Political Science taught me to analyse complex social dynamics and understand the systemic barriers faced by marginalised communities," he says. "When I joined the Antara Foundation as a fellow, these insights proved invaluable," he adds.

"Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone and explore subjects or fields you're not familiar with." That's his advice to future Ashokans.

Trisha Mukherjee

Trisha Mukherjee (UG 2020) is a Student Success Coach at Ithaca College, a former Indian Air Rifle shooter and international athlete

"As an athlete, one of the main reasons I chose Ashoka was because they had a rifle shooting range, which aligned with my passion. During the admissions interview, Ashoka acknowledged my sporting experience and emphasised how I could thrive here. Transitioning to Ashoka was a challenge due to its high academic expectations. Growing up speaking multiple languages and studying in Maharashtra State Board, scholarly language did not come easy. I found the syllabus rigorous and the assignments overwhelming. I had never written an academic paper before and struggled. Looking back now I see how my time at Ashoka *helped me grow* holistically and provided a foundation for my higher studies and career in the US. As a sportsperson you learn very early on that even if you have excellent physical and technical skills, if you aren't mentally resilient you are not going to be able to *compete at a higher level* consistently, particularly in international tournaments. This knowledge parlayed into a career path for me as I now work as a student success coach at Ithaca College.

As a Resident Assistant (RA) at Ashoka, I spent a lot of time talking with students and learnt *the importance of communication.* It is those invaluable skills that I put to use in my job each day."

Malavika Menon

Dancing Queen

Malavika Menon (YIF 2019) is a Mohiniyattam dancer and an empanelled artist at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations

Discipline, devotion and creative rigour have been the central pillars of Malavika's life. As a young child growing up in the Gulf, she would return to Kerala during summer vacations, just to spend time with her Guru, Vinitha Nedungadi, to learn and practise Mohiniyattam. However, as the idea of becoming a professional artist never sat comfortably with her, she chose to pursue a degree in Law.

Yet, life kept drawing her back to the stage. While pursuing her Law degree, Malavika realised she missed dancing full-time. "By the time my course was ending, I began to look for a degree that could enhance my knowledge and inspire me to pursue dance in a more creative fashion," she says.

Malavika joined Ashoka's Young India Fellowship batch of 2018-19. She recalls it as a year of learning. "It was all about meeting new people, visiting new places and reading. I realised there were so many areas of interest worth exploring," she explains. "Another aspect was that today, being a professional dancer is not just about getting on a stage and dancing. You have to do everything – networking, publicity and raising funds. Before Ashoka, I wasn't even aware there were sources available to fund activities like dance. A professor helped me find funding for my first choreographic project – a thematic Mohiniyattam production which premiered in 2023."

Malavika says the YIF programme sparked her creative journey. "A lot of avenues opened up for me at Ashoka and I began to experiment with ideas for stage performances." A critical writing essay she wrote at Ashoka, which involved five different Bhakti poets from different timelines, eras and languages led her to the idea for a stage production. Similarly, one of the courses she took, Indian Ecosophy, inspired her to create a Mohiniyattam performance based on a poem by Rabindranath Tagore.

Malavika is now an empanelled artist with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the recipient of a senior scholarship in Mohiniyattam awarded by the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training at the Ministry of Culture (2019-21). For now, she wants to perform as much as possible. "I want to take Mohiniyattam to newer audiences and create awareness around this dance form. Opening a dance school is very much part of the plan, but I want to set up, not just any school, but a holistic space for learning and practising different aspects of the arts," she explains.

Apart from dancing and teaching, Malavika spends her time writing for leading art journals and researching new systematic approaches for Mohiniyattam with her Guru.

Aditi Malhotra

> "Music is a mask that reveals deeper truths"

Ashoka University ·····>
·····> Berklee College of Music

Aditi Malhotra (UG 2019) is a vocalist and composer from Delhi who received a full-tuition scholarship to study at the Berklee College of Music

"You're either a Bollywood playback singer or nothing" – these were the words Aditi Malhotra remembers hearing when she was growing up in Delhi, nurturing a passion for Indian classical music. "For almost eight years of my childhood I trained in Indian classical music, but it was Ashoka that taught me that there is more in life," she says. "Later, as I grew older I started appreciating different kinds of sounds like R&B, the blues and soul music. Ashoka seemed like the perfect place for someone like me who wanted to pursue a Liberal Arts education but was still unsure about her career path," she adds.

At Ashoka, she tried different majors, like Math and Psychology, while constantly wondering which course to pursue. Eventually, she chose English and decided to become a professional musician.

"The realisation that I wanted to pursue music full-time happened at Ashoka. I began spending my summer vacations at the Swarnabhoomi Academy of Music in Tamil Nadu and would spend my weekends booking music gigs around Delhi," she says. "I enjoyed performing whenever the opportunity came. I was part of *Vistaar*, the music society and I was also part of the acapella

group for a while, and met some of my close friends there," she says.

"The main difference between me and others at Ashoka was that I realised I wanted to pursue music full-time while others treated it more as a hobby. I took some extracurriculars, including a Carnatic music course, which was interesting. Ashoka gave me strong friendships, as you'd expect from living on campus full-time," she adds.

Aditi looks back at her time on campus fondly. "Honestly studying English at Ashoka was kind of a dream, with professors like Madhavi Menon, Jonathan Gil Harris, Mandakini Dubey and Abir Bazaz. I took some incredible courses, including one called 'Indian Literature in Translation' with Abir Bazaz. I also took the 'Bollywood and the Idea of India' course with Rita Kothari, which was really cool," she says.

During Aditi's last year at Ashoka, the Berklee School of Music conducted workshops in Delhi and auditioned a few vocalists. They conducted a five-day bootcamp and selected a few vocalists including Aditi to audition for the undergraduate programme. The year after she finished her degree at Ashoka she was accepted at Berklee on a full scholarship.

"I've been learning some Jazz, African-American music and Brazilian music, singing in different languages and learning about theory and composition. I've also been working on piano. Right now I'm in the process of applying for a few teaching positions and music gigs around here. Being at Berklee has allowed me to diversify as a musician," she says.

"Ashoka definitely opened up my mind. When you grow up in Delhi, you're mostly around people from North India. Ashoka expanded my horizons. I started discovering more about myself and what I wanted to do," she adds.

Ashoka seemed like the *perfect place* **for someone like me who wanted to pursue a** *Liberal Arts education* **but was still unsure about her career path**

Ashoka definitely opened up my mind. When you grow up in Delhi, you're mostly around people from North India.

Ashoka expanded my horizons. I started discovering more about myself and what I wanted to do.

Soumil Agarwal

Soumil Agarwal (UG 2023) works as a financial analyst at the World Bank

what I was studying and the opportunities I was given were extraordinary. Clubs and societies also played a big role in shaping who I am today, especially *The Edict*. It made me more aware of the issues on campus, what students were going through and at the same time helped me view my own position in the larger context. Ashoka provided the kind of international exposure that was crucial for me when I was in the US, where I worked with people from different countries. Ashoka taught me not to assume anything about anyone, to allow space for different thoughts and opinions, and to understand *that people from different backgrounds* may express things in ways that are unfamiliar or surprising. The classes at Ashoka cut across disciplines and created space for thoughtful discussions – something that has proved to be an invaluable asset in my career."

"Since graduating, I've come to appreciate Ashoka even more, realising daily how much it has given me. The exposure I had to students doing amazing things – super smart, talented individuals engaged in incredible work – was critical *in shaping my worldview*. The professors genuinely cared about

Worrin Muivah

Creating academic opportunities in the North-East

St Joseph's College ····▶ Ashoka University ····▶ Jamia Millia Islamia ····▶ Erasmus University Rotterdam ·······▶ Naropa Fellowship ····▶ STEP North-East
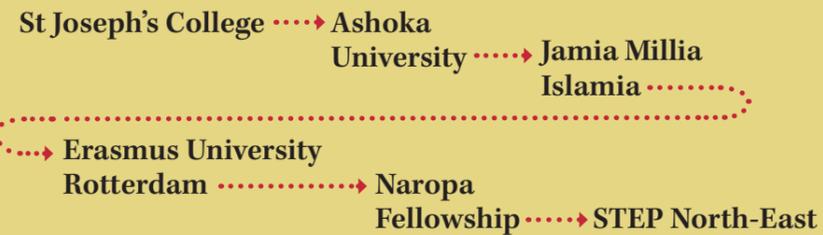
Worrin Muivah (YIF 2014), founder and CEO of STEP Academy, aims to make quality education accessible to all students in the North-East

Growing up in Manipur during the peak of the armed conflict in the 90s and 2000s deprived us of many things, including education, global exposure and a comfortable upbringing. Many children grew up without proper guidance or direction which led to a lack of clear goals and career ambitions. This reflected in the way we pursued our studies – a haphazard process of trial and error.

In 2013, I got the opportunity to study at the Young India Fellowship (YIF) on a full scholarship. This experience was my first introduction to the true meaning of education. YIF opened numerous doors for me, allowing me to pursue higher studies overseas on fully funded scholarships, which in turn led to good career opportunities.

Since childhood, my parents and grandparents instilled in me the importance of helping others. Despite their poverty, they embodied this value throughout their lives. From a very young age, I knew my calling was to serve others.

My grandparents' values influenced my career choices significantly. Working at Amnesty International opened my eyes to the systemic injustices in our society. Later, my experience with Leader's Quest allowed me to work with top executives at some of the biggest Fortune 500 companies. This exposure reinforced my belief that providing equal opportunities to people is the surest way towards creating a fair society.

During the first pandemic lockdown, I had a moment of epiphany when I realised my journey was made possible due to the many opportunities I had received and that thousands of students back home in the North-East deserved a similar opportunity. My experience played a crucial role in motivating me to give back to my community by setting up STEP North-East in 2021 and STEP Academy in 2023. STEP Academy is an offshoot of STEP North-East that focuses on making the youth of North-East job ready.

Since 2021, STEP has worked with over 60 schools and colleges in Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. We have conducted workshops on career development, personality development and employability (soft) skills which have changed the lives of more than 5,000 students. Recently a student from STEP Academy became a Young India Fellow, the first student from Nagaland to do so.

Mahesh Jakhotia

An engineer turned entrepreneur, Mahesh Jakhotia (YIF 2012) is the second alumnus to join the Ashoka founder community. He founded the agritech company, Bijak

"Ashoka, at the time I joined, felt like a startup before its MVP phase – an environment where you trust the people and their vision long before you see a finalised model or curriculum. The individuals I admired and looked up to were behind this *emerging institution* and that was enough for me to commit.

While hard skills can propel you forward, what truly sets you apart is understanding human behaviour. This emotional intelligence, cultivated through a world-class Liberal Arts education and a *remarkably diverse community*, is the most powerful asset you can gain. Studying Liberal Arts at Ashoka is like developing your own internal "polygraph" of understanding people, enabling you to comprehend and empathise with clients, customers, employees, friends, family and investors. This is the unique strength a top-tier Liberal Arts programme provides over traditional STEM or other fields.

Ashoka also taught me the value of engaging with ideas that challenge my own. By *embracing contrarian perspectives*, you learn to stand in someone else's shoes, enriching your understanding of the world and freeing yourself from the confines of your own biases.

This transformative experience reshaped my personal and professional life. I made the decision to return to Ashoka as a founder. Ashoka's influence is something I want others, especially those less privileged, to discover for themselves."
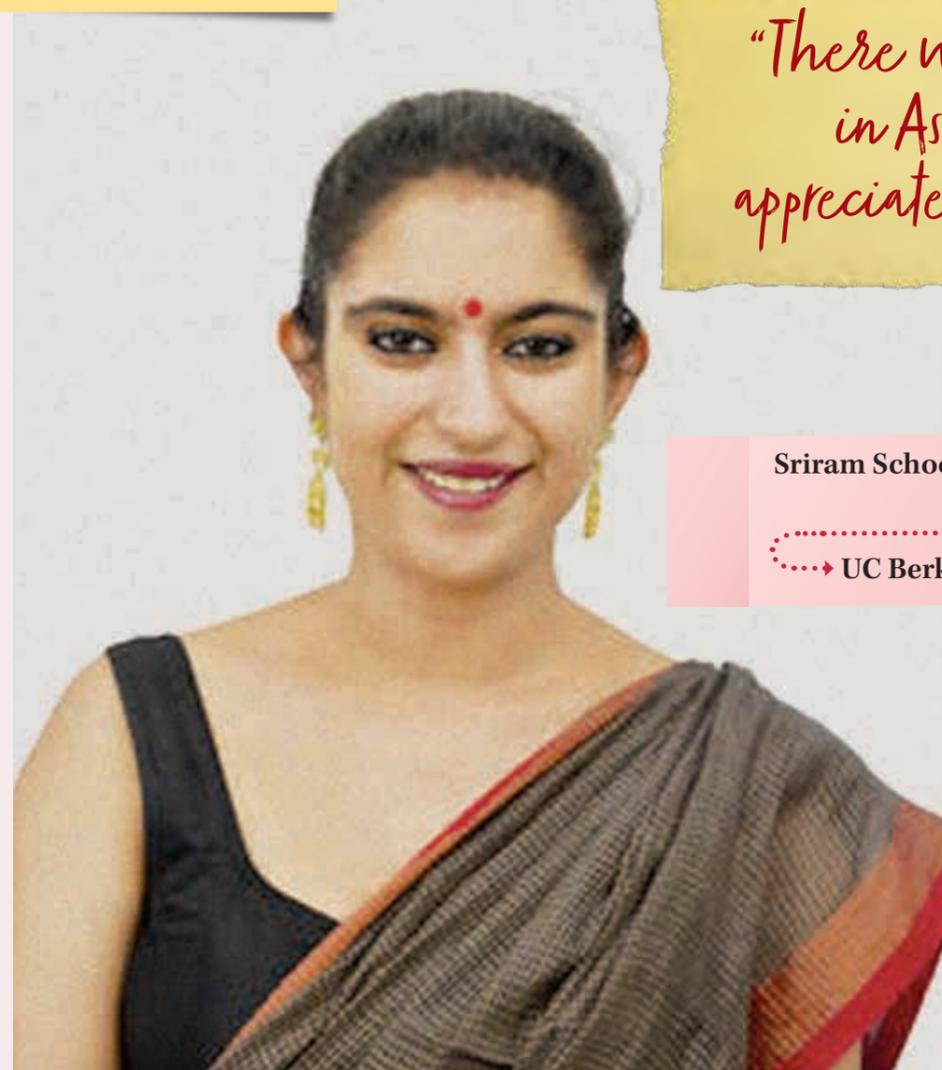
"There was a culture in Ashoka that appreciated eccentricity"

Sriram School ·····▶ Ashoka University ·····▶

·····▶ UC Berkeley

Uttara Chaudhuri

Uttara Chaudhuri (UG 2017) teaches at UC Berkeley and is a PhD student. Her subject is Aesthetic Labour which is a deep dive exploration of how artists, writers and thinkers thought about the work of making art in 20th century India, during the anti-colonial movement

"Life Lessons via Ashoka"

There were many opportunities to build Ashoka: I was a part of the founding batch and since we were such a small group of students, it felt like what we did mattered and we were building the institution together with the faculty. The kind of intellectual intimacy that one had with the faculty was amazing and something I have never experienced since. Because Ashoka was still a blank slate, it was a very creative time for students to start a lot of projects. It was great fun and a really special time.

At Ashoka, ideas matter: Students learned that their intellectual life was not separate from their emotional or social life. There was a lot of warmth on campus and even when I return for events like the Alumni Weekender, you can see that there is a real sense of community. There was a culture in Ashoka that appreciated eccentricity, where idiosyncrasy was nurtured.

Ashoka has influenced my career: I teach reading and composition courses for first year students at Berkeley and at that age they are fresh and receptive to new ideas. It also helps that first year students are not yet mired in the ways of the institution. Ashoka has really influenced how I teach and has inspired me to try and make my work as accessible as possible. I think the way that I run the classroom has been hugely influenced by my classes at Ashoka. I try to recreate the intellectual intimacy that I shared with my teachers there, with my class here.
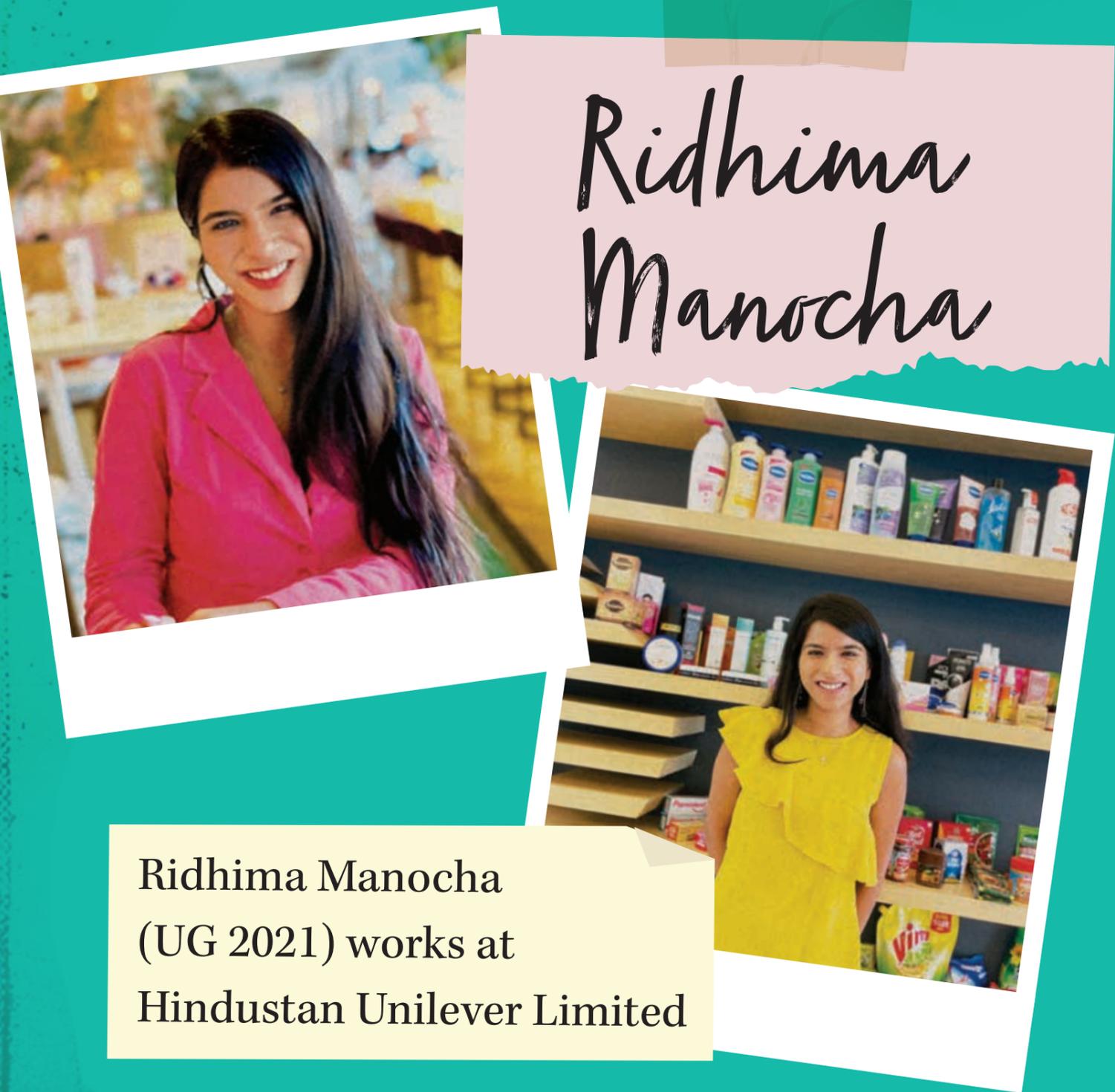
Ridhima Manocha

Ridhima Manocha (UG 2021) works at Hindustan Unilever Limited

"There are so many things I remember about my time at Ashoka – like sitting on the mess lawns and chatting with friends about everything under the sun. But what Ashoka really gave me was the skills and confidence to take a leap of faith and dive into the unknown. I think what makes Ashoka so special is its faculty. They know *how to spark a student's interest* in a subject and keep them engaged. My professors have mentored me both in the classroom and beyond.

I was surprised when I got an internship at HUL, the country's largest consumer goods company. Later I returned to Ashoka in the fourth *year to pursue an advanced diploma in Entrepreneurship*, thrilled to be mentored by people who had decades of corporate experience. I now work as an area sales manager at HUL overseeing a 12 member team and handling a turnover of almost Rs 360 crores."
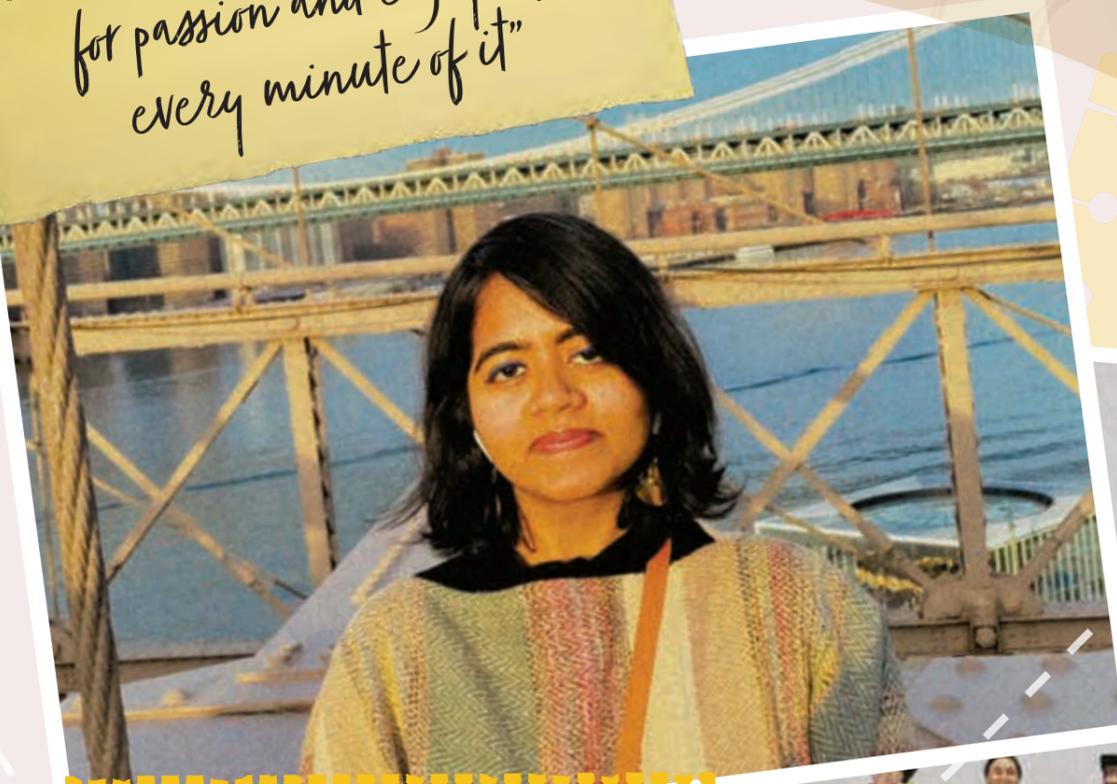
Ashoka University ·······▸ Scroll ·······▸
·······▸ University of San ·······▸ Bombay Poetry
Francisco Crawl

Saranya Subramanian

Saranya Subramanian (UG 2018) is the founder of The Bombay Poetry Crawl, an archival research project dedicated to poets who were writing in and about the city between 1947-1999

As a student in Mumbai I was interested in pursuing a course in Humanities, when a friend's mother mentioned a new university coming up near Delhi. That new university transformed me. Ashoka gave me the chance to step out of my comfort zone and explore academic independence. Moving from the Maharashtra Higher Secondary Certificate education to Ashoka's rigorous academic standards was challenging at first. But the focus on critical thinking and the guidance I received from Fellows and teaching assistants made the process smoother. By my second year, I began to grasp the academic approach. Apart from that, the social life on campus was great. Studying at Ashoka was a liberating experience. The quality of education and the friends I made ensured I had the best four years of my life.

During my fourth year (Ashoka Scholar's Programme) in 2018-19, my thesis focused on the poet, Arun Kolatkar. Professor Johannes Burgers, who taught digital humanities, helped me map characters from Kolatkar's Kala Ghoda Poems. This project revealed connections between Kolatkar's characters and various global locations, highlighting Mumbai's rich literary connections and exposing uneven developments in the city. This exploration led me to set up The Bombay Poetry Crawl, an archival research project dedicated to poets who were writing in and about the city between 1947-1999. Although The Bombay Poetry Crawl began its life as a University project, it has now taken on an identity of its own. It has played host to poets and attracted diverse participants for its walks while expanding into different languages.

I once believed that limited career options existed in the field of Humanities but here I am, proving myself wrong and pursuing a passion project while enjoying every minute of it.

Samik Chakraborty

Samik Chakraborty (MA 2024) is an Odissi Dancer, LGBTQ+ rights advocate and works at Value Research

"For me, *peer-to-peer learning* was a valuable takeaway from Ashoka. That is also why I felt a sense of belonging and attachment to this place.

The crowd is *warm, welcoming, polite* and largely inclusive unlike many other universities that I have had the opportunity to visit. Despite people coming from various economic strata, I feel one finds like-minded people here because of the *liberal ethos* that this University has been founded on.

I was a panelist in the first Queer Political Assemblages – a Queer studies research conference in India and also participated in international debates. This in turn *gave me visibility*, which made me known to other queer people as a symbol of hope, as someone they can talk to and share their problems with."

Karantaj Singh and Shaayak Chatterjee

Ashoka University ····▸ KPMG India
····▸ Breathe ESG

Ashoka University ····▸ Alliance for Sustainable Finance
····▸ Breathe ESG

"Ashoka ensured that our firm is a more inclusive and collaborative space"

Karantaj Singh and Shaayak Chatterjee (UG 2020) are crafting solutions that transform how organisations achieve their sustainability goals

Karantaj and Shaayak met in Ashoka in 2017. Today, they are the founders of Breathe ESG, which develops software for organisations to achieve their sustainability goals. "During the summer at Ashoka when we did our exchange programmes at Stanford and Berkeley respectively, we became friends. This was around the time the ESG (Environmental, Social and Governmental) investment boom had just taken off in the US so we had a good understanding of that space," recalls Karantaj.

"In 2022, when we started Breathe, Shaayak was working at a boutique consulting firm and leaving for his master's in Sustainability Management at the Ross School of Business in Michigan while I was working at KPMG. While there, I realised all the processes around ESG were logged in manually on Excel sheets. And unlike core business functions there was no system available to execute end-to-end sustainability," Karantaj explains. "We were inspired by studying how several big tech companies were using ESG as a huge branding play and how the environment played a crucial role in determining how firms were positioning themselves," he adds.

They had also witnessed first-hand the effects of climate change in India's capital city, New Delhi. "I think that sort of tangible experience of climate change was always at the back of our minds," says Shaayak.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Shaayak worked with the India Climate Collaborative that had set up verticals around climate finance and renewable energy. "At that time, no one was talking about sustainability in the corporate sense, but being in the thick of it, I realised how much there was to do," he adds.

All these factors combined to create Breathe ESG which aims to simplify the journey to sustainability. The firm's software works to manage compliance, reduce carbon footprints and drive sustainability initiatives.

But it's not always been smooth sailing. As Karantaj explains, "Being an entrepreneur teaches you resilience. There's nobody to really walk you through the difficult times, you have to just figure it out as you go along."

"It was an uphill battle," Karantaj says. "I think we got probably 30-40 rejections before we received the first funding from investors. Even now, as founders, our key focus is sales. The other challenge has been convincing and converting organisations in India to adopt ESG goals."

The duo says that Ashoka has played a key role in their entrepreneurial journey.

"Ashoka has definitely made an impact. We've also hired three alumni," Karantaj says, adding that he has incredible memories of his time at Ashoka. "I feel lucky that I was able to study there. First of all, I love the friends I made and the professors. But apart from that, I enjoyed the diversity on the campus. While it often gets pigeonholed as an elitist college, my experience was the opposite. Also the fact that whether you wanted to or not, just by osmosis, you gained so much knowledge, which is something I don't take for granted," he says.

Shaayak says Ashoka definitely influenced the kind of approach and thinking that he brings to his life and work. "Ashoka shaped me as a person and definitely changed my sense of self. It is the Ashoka ethos that has ensured that Breathe ESG is a more inclusive and collaborative space," he says.
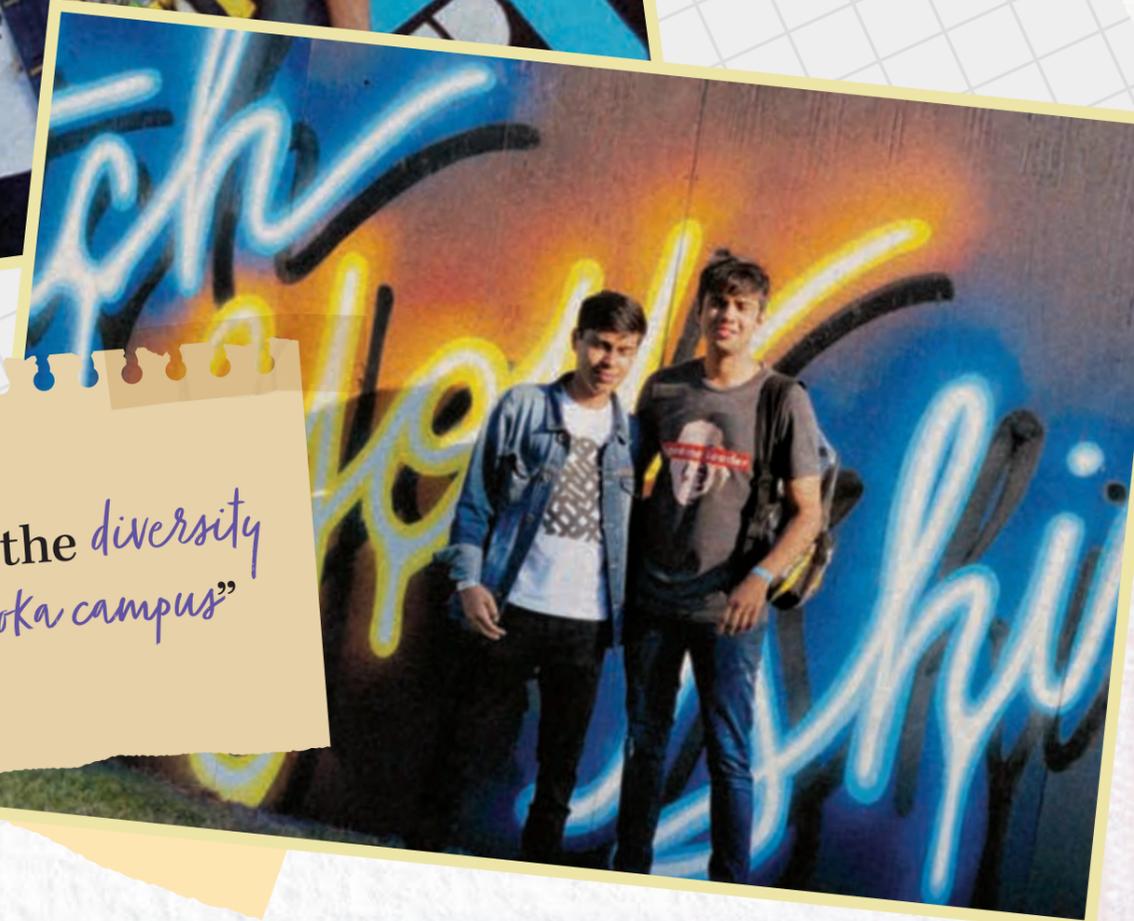
"I enjoyed the *diversity* on the *Ashoka campus*"

"Ashoka has been instrumental in instilling in me a sense of curiosity and a love for learning. Its multidisciplinary pedagogy of providing a thorough *grounding in one subject* but also using that as a tool to think about other aspects of the world made my transition to law school easier. I think my biggest learning has been to retain a *wide lens view of the* world and to constantly try to think of how things intersect.

Ashoka was incredibly fulfilling both personally as well as academically and I would not change anything *about my time there.*"

Shranya Gambhir

Shranya Gambhir (UG 2017) is an LLB (Hons) graduate from King's College, London

Niti Deoliya

Ambedkar University
Delhi ··········► Ashoka University ·····
······► Samaj Pragati Sahyog ·······
····► United Nations ·····► Entrepreneur

"YIF is an incubation pod for mavericks"

Niti Deoliya (YIF 2015) has worked at the United Nations in Geneva and alongside farmers and rural women in Africa. She then switched careers and is now a certified expressive arts therapy facilitator

I joined Ashoka as part of the Young India Fellowship and worked in rural areas as a part of my ELM (Experiential Learning Module). YIF taught me that anything was possible. When I saw my peers at Ashoka pursuing further studies at great universities or getting scholarships or starting their own companies, it made me realise that it was possible to achieve whatever you set your mind to. Ashoka expanded my idea of what was possible to accomplish. Otherwise, I may not have created a unique pathway as fearlessly.

Post Ashoka, I wanted to continue working in rural India so I joined Samaj Pragati Sahyog (SPS) in Madhya Pradesh for about two years and worked with women co-operatives to get hands-on experience of working with tribal communities. I completed my master's at the Graduate Institute, Geneva and volunteered at organisations working with refugees. I then joined the United Nations (UN) in Geneva, Switzerland and spent almost five years working in rural and tribal areas of East and West Africa. I am proud to have now transitioned into the field of mental health and work as a certified expressive arts therapy facilitator. I am also heading an international organisation, United Religions Initiative, as their Regional Coordinator for North and West India.

During my stint at the UN, I was working in challenging circumstances with different Ministries, community-based organisations, women, youth and self-help groups of farmers in the remote interiors of Africa. While working with local communities I realised that there was a hidden mental health epidemic that was unaddressed and unacknowledged. Emotional support for communities was lacking or undervalued. During this time my own mental health took a beating and I was burnt out. That's when I sought refuge in painting and dancing, enjoyed filling my art journals, learned about the field of art therapy and pursued the training passionately.

At present, I am in the process of creating safe spaces of expression for youth and women in rural and semi-urban areas. I recently founded Sajha Samadhan Development Foundation with the aim to offer emotional wellbeing and mental fitness to individuals, community groups and organisations. The idea is to provide care for caregivers and psycho-social support to economically marginalised sections of society.

YIF is an incubation pod for mavericks. We are a very different breed of people. If we are not convinced with what we do, we will constantly innovate and reinvent. And I think that is our way of being in constant evolution. Ashoka has certainly made me more resilient. No matter how many challenges came my way, I survived in part because Ashoka provided us with the tools and the support system necessary to navigate through challenge and change.

Aastha Dhandhia
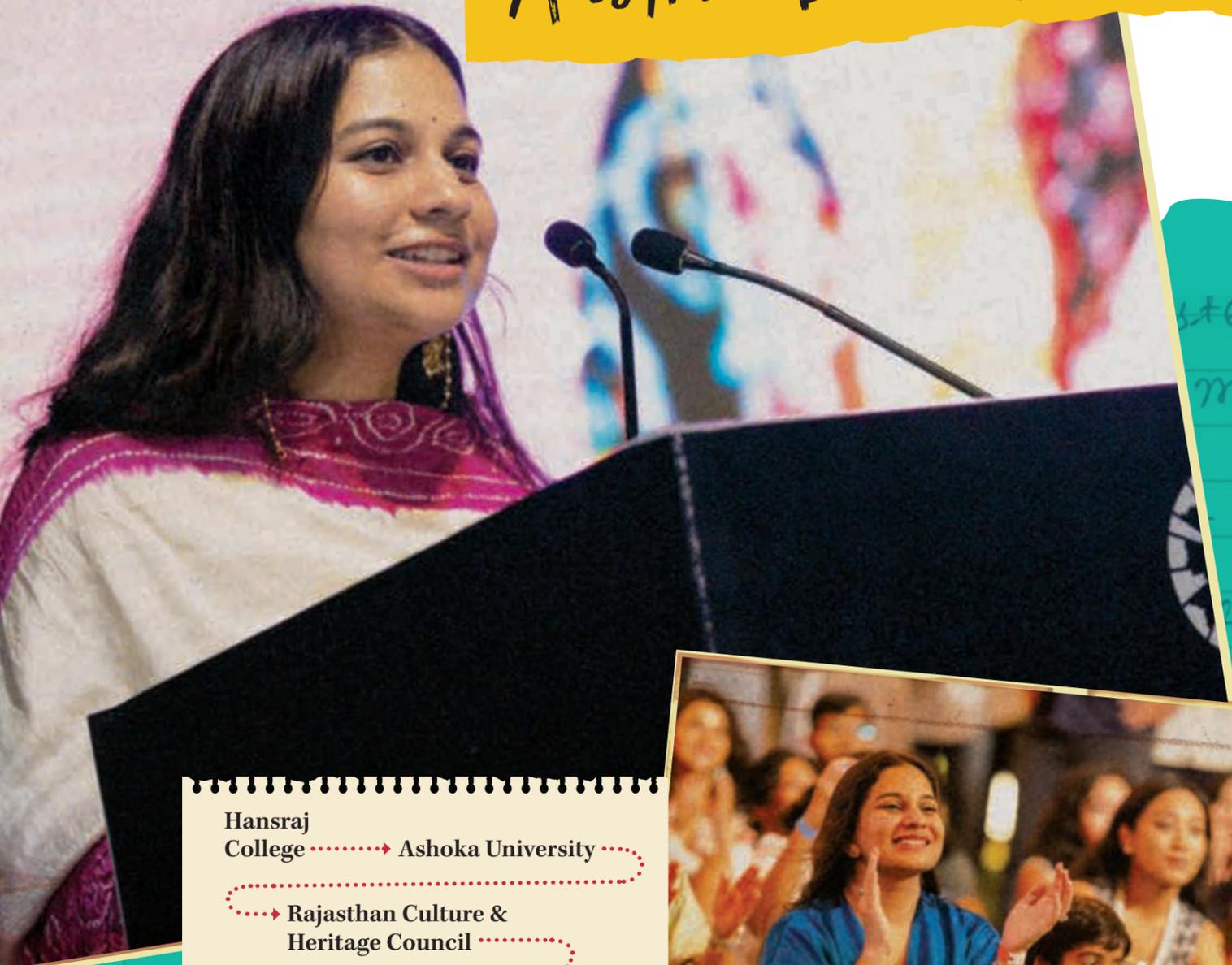
Aastha Dhandhia (YIF 2015) is Community Champion for India (North) and Nepal, Global Shapers Community, an initiative by the World Economic Forum. She was part of the founding team at Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership (GCWL)

Hansraj College ········→ Ashoka University ·····

·····→ Rajasthan Culture & Heritage Council ·········

·····→ Global Shapers Community

Dear Ashoka,

I remember those wonderful years with a lot of admiration when we all felt like we were part of a collective dream. Everyone – students, faculty and staff – put their hearts into building this institution. There was a warmth on campus that extended to everyone, including the communities surrounding the quaint campus of a budding university: Ashoka.

The classrooms were alive with energy – fiery debates and electric conversations that made learning an exhilarating experience. For the first time, I was learning so much about different subjects. It was nothing short of amazing.

My batchmates quickly became lifelong friends. Late-night strolls around campus at 3 AM, sleepless yet brimming with ideas, defined those years. By 8 in the morning, we were back in class, grappling with the intellectual brilliance of our professors, whose insights often felt just beyond our grasp – a challenge that was as fantastic as it was humbling.

The Young India Fellowship really celebrates the collective – this diversity of dynamic human spirit – while simultaneously validating the unique journeys of individuals.

I was also fortunate to contribute to the founding of the Genpact Center for Women's Leadership. What began as an Experiential Learning Module (ELM) in 2014 became my way of giving back to an institution that had shaped me so profoundly.

Ashoka, you were my steepest learning curve – a place that challenged me to master a completely new domain. You really pushed us as students to learn very quickly how to adapt to a new interdisciplinary environment. In a single semester, I navigated Mathematical Thinking alongside Shakespeare, learning to shift seamlessly between subjects. At the same time, I was observing my transformation — a witness to the shifts within myself.

You have been instrumental in making me who I am today and for that, I will always be grateful.
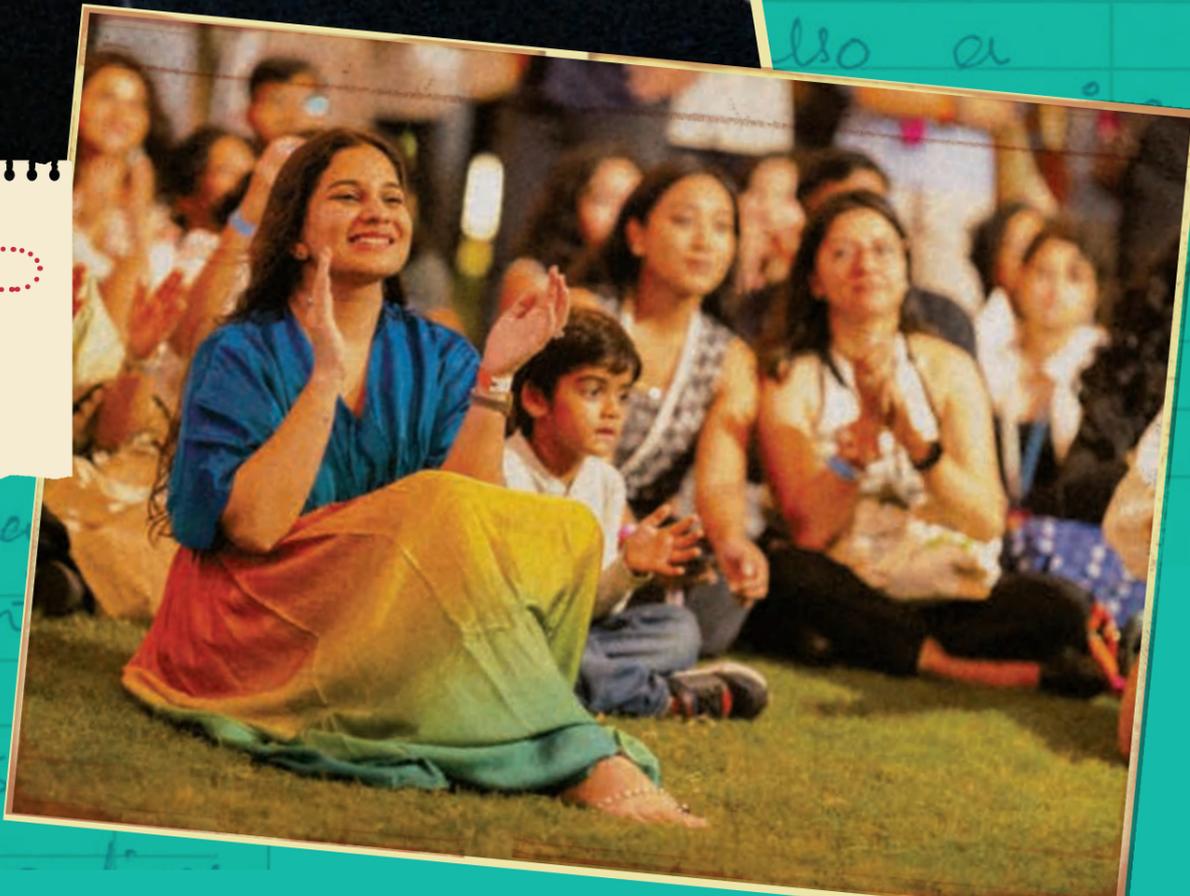
Yasha Kuthia

Cathedral Vidya School

Ashoka University

9.9 Education

Yasha Kuthia (UG 2017) works as a senior consultant with 9.9 Education

Dear Ashoka,

It seems unbelievable that a decade has passed since the day we, the students of the first batch, arrived at your gates in Sonipat for a campus tour wearing hard hats. At the time you were only a nondescript plot of land dotted with a few buildings. It's remarkable to think that you rose from such humble beginnings. I took a leap of faith when I decided to study at an unknown university but I knew even then that life with you would never be boring. You held out the promise of a Liberal Arts education and I'm proud to have been a part of the first batch of students to graduate from Ashoka.

You have always had a special and unique vibe – the red brick buildings, the exquisite jaali work – hold a special place in our memories and over the years the affection has only deepened as you have lived up to all the expectations I had when I first arrived on campus.

Looking back, I owe it to you for inspiring me to explore new academic avenues. Before I arrived on campus, I had never considered studying History but the foundation classes changed my mind and I went on to do a minor in the subject. I have applied this lesson – to remain open to ideas and experiences – in my life as well. You introduced me to ultimate frisbee, which not only changed the way I looked at sports, but helped me find friends that I cherish, including my life partner. After my graduation, I completed my master's in Education Development from the University of Warwick. Today I work in the higher education sector.

It's not too trite to say that you have been an experience I cherish.

Basabi Bagchi

Basabi Bagchi is Ashoka's first PhD graduate in the Sciences

"My time as a PhD scholar in the Department of Biology at Ashoka University was an *incredibly fulfilling experience*. As one of the first PhD students in the department, I had the privilege to contribute to *several organisational initiatives* such as setting up laboratory spaces, working closely with undergraduate students as a graduate teaching assistant, an opportunity very few people get during their PhDs. These opportunities taught me the importance of *balancing multiple roles*. I also discovered a love for both research and teaching.

I am currently pursuing my postdoctoral research at the University of Montana and carry with me *fond memories* of the lessons and experiences from my time at Ashoka."

Raghvi Garg

Raghvi is the First PhD graduate (Economics) from Ashoka University. She is currently Assistant Professor in the Department of Economic Sciences, at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

"The lack of a cohort of fellow researchers can be a big drawback for any PhD student. However, Ashoka created an environment that *enabled collaborative research* between students enrolled in the master's and undergraduate programmes. This allowed me the *freedom to pursue research* in an informal and inspiring manner which in turn has helped to build a strong resource foundation for future PhD students."

Aafaque R Khan

Shooting for the Stars

A Young India Fellow (YIF) from Ashoka's 2014 cohort, Aafaque was part of the team that designed ISRO's Aditya-L1 project, India's first solar mission

Aafaque R Khan remembers looking at the four moons of Jupiter through a telescope and seeing the rings of Saturn for the first time, as a child. The incident left him curious and eager to learn more. As the son of the principal of a school in Madhya Pradesh, he was introduced to the world of Astronomy in middle school through an Astronomy outreach programme. When the first Mangalyaan was launched, many students at his school watched a video of the launch and participated in inter-school quiz contests on space. The winners were taken to an observatory centre in Bhopal near Koral Dam where they studied the stars at night.

"As far back as I can remember, I have always been passionately curious about the origin of things," he recalls. By the time he was a teenager, Aafaque had spent countless nights on the terrace of his Ujjain home, trying to spot star clusters and galaxies through his home-made telescope. "Perhaps it was then that I began to dream about building bigger, better telescopes and becoming an astrophysicist," he says.

Aafaque started to build small telescopes and volunteered with amateur astronomy groups teaching others. "We did a lot of outreach often with groups that are marginalised and have limited access to education and exposure to Science. We were able to reach students and motivate them to pursue the Sciences," he explains.

"I have always been _passionately curious_ about the _origin of things_"

Over a decade later, Aafaque still has stars in his eyes and on his mind. He is currently a Future Investigator on a NASA Earth and Space Science and Technology (NASA-FINESST) grant at the University of Arizona. He has already made a mark as a team member on the Aditya-L1 project, India's first solar mission designed and developed by ISRO.

As one of the lead engineers working on the Solar Ultraviolet Imaging Telescope (SUIT) project aboard Aditya-L1, Aafaque played a key role in building one of the major instruments onboard the observatory – the very telescope which now studies the Sun's atmosphere.

Landing this role was destiny. A mechanical engineer, Aafaque had planned to pursue higher education overseas. After interning at Pune's Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA),

he reached out to the Centre for a letter of recommendation. Instead, impressed with his dedication towards Astrophysics, the Centre offered him a job as a lead engineer for the Solar Ultraviolet Imaging Telescope (SUIT) project, one of the primary 'payloads' or technological instruments of the Aditya L-1 mission. Between 2015 to 2019, Aafaque worked to lead the design and development of SUIT with various teams at IUCAA and ISRO. Aditya L-1 is now operational in orbit and receiving data. This is the first time full-disk images of the Sun are being taken from space in the 200-400 nm wavelength range. The Science team is currently calibrating and analysing the data and it is expected that these observations will soon be released to the public. Some first light images are already available on the ISRO website and it is expected that these will go a long way towards providing scientists with crucial data to understand why the solar atmosphere is hotter than the surface. The project will also help to keep a tab on charged particles which can pose a danger to satellites in space and satellite-based communication.

As a systems engineer, Aafaque was not just responsible for design details and technical problem solving, but also project management funding and systems engineering. All this, while being one of the youngest members in a team of seasoned professionals.

In 2019, he moved to the US to pursue higher education and is currently in the fourth year of the Astrophysics PhD programme at Astronomy and Steward Observatory. His doctoral research, in collaboration with the NASA-Jet Propulsion Laboratory, focuses on the advancement of UV detector technologies and the development of next-generation space-based astronomy missions. Aafaque is currently working on his next space telescope, Aspera, a NASA-funded small satellite mission which will be launched in 2026.

Vishnupriya Rajgarhia

Vishnupriya Rajgarhia (YIF 2016) is an artist who earned a spot in the 2023 Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia list in the Arts category

"Ashoka instantly felt like home. It was where my journey as an adult truly began. People came from such diverse walks of life and they were open to sharing their *experiences and vulnerabilities* authentically. Ashoka was like a thali – there was something for everyone. And the beauty of it was that even if you didn't like something, you always gave it a try to form your own opinion.

Thinking back, the encouragement I received to pursue every eccentric idea – be it an installation, a graphic novel, or a play – was surreal. Everyone, from the founders to the Dean, the programme team and my batchmates, cheered for it. I feel *deeply grateful* to have joined this community because these kinds of ties are rare to find today.

After Ashoka, I pursued an MFA at Oxford as a Levett Scholar, becoming what I believe was the only Indian to complete this programme. I was also selected as the only South Asian Research Fellow to represent the British Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale.

Recently, I concluded my work as a consultant with the G20 and have taught at Ashoka twice as visiting faculty – *a serendipitous experience.* Now, I'm trying to bring all these roles together by starting something of my own. I'm transitioning from being part educator, part artist and part innovator to *becoming an entrepreneur.* I don't know where life will take me, but I'm excited to find out.

Ashoka isn't just an Ivy League education; it's an education for life. What they offer goes beyond any career – they *teach you about life* itself. And perhaps even more importantly, they give you a community that has your back, no matter where in the world you go."

"I'm creating out of sheer joy"

Pracarsh Rastogi

Malviya National Institute of Technology Jaipur

→ **Ashoka University** ┈┈→ **Research Assistant**

→ **Natural building enthusiast**
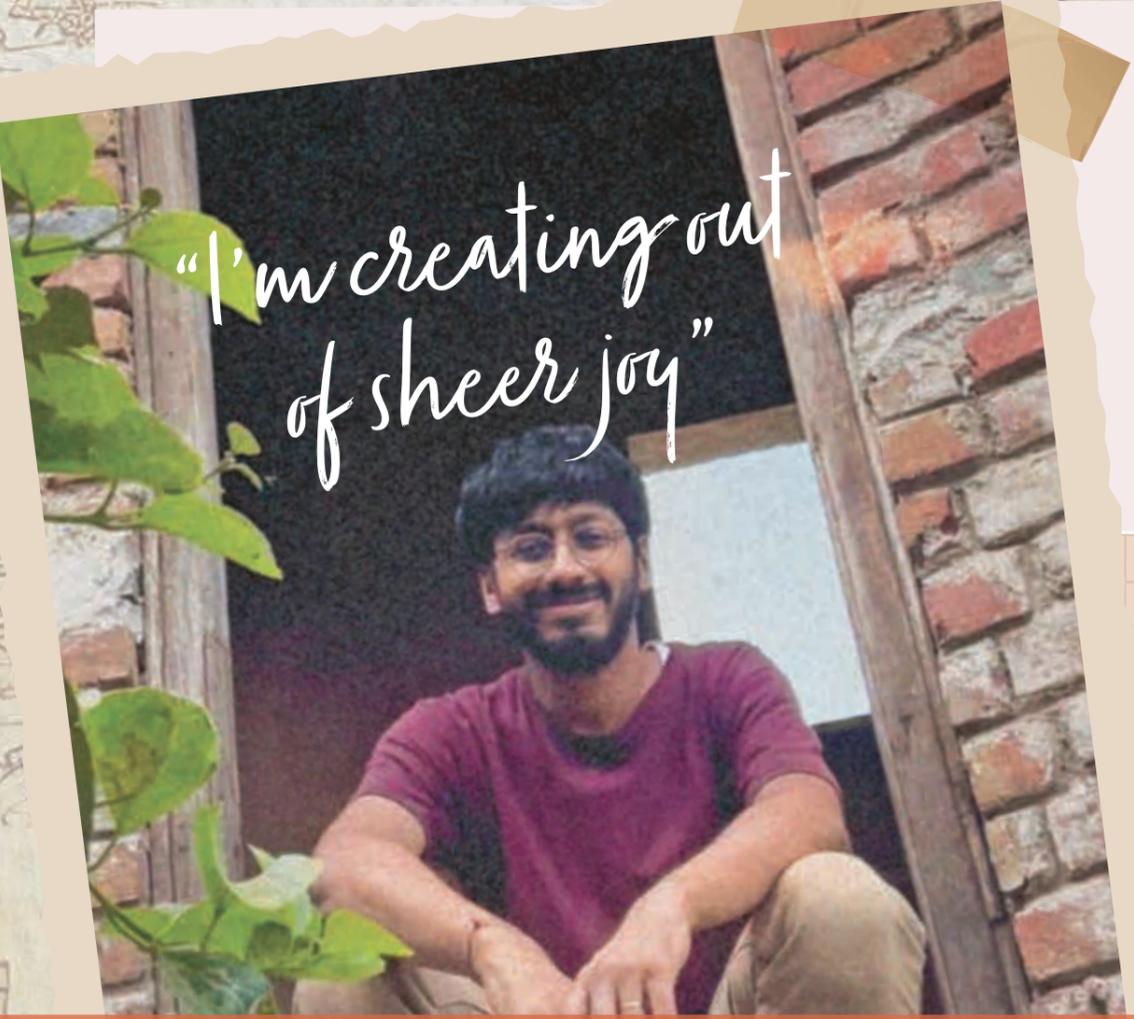
Pracarsh Rastogi (YIF 2020) is training to build eco-friendly mud-houses and conducts workshops to promote alternate ways of living

I grew up in Ajmer, Rajasthan and ended up in an engineering college in Jaipur which I disliked. That's when one of my seniors told me about the Young India Fellowship (YIF) programme. I applied and was selected. In the very first term, we had a course called Ecosophy where we looked at alternate ways of living. I was really drawn to it because it raised some fundamental questions I had been grappling with. I think the rest of the YIF programme was shaped by this one course because it became the lens through which I started seeing life.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic I could not go anywhere after my course. Instead I began working as a research and teaching assistant to a professor who was writing a book. I did that for almost two years and taught Ecosophy to subsequent YIF batches.

I then moved to Uttarakhand to live and work in a remote village. It was an earthquake-prone area, and I saw first-hand how a natural disaster could impact everything from farming to infrastructure to the local habitat.

I now live in Ajmer and I'm trying to do something that's different – building a house out of mud, stone, lime and wood without using any cement or steel. I also conduct workshops to create awareness about traditional construction methods.

My Ashoka experience and Ecosophy are woven into my current project. I create out of sheer joy. If it were a task, I would not be doing this. The hope is that others can share this joy. It's this feeling that gives you an anchor and confidence to do whatever you want to do.

What we are doing while building this house is, at its essence, just following a mystery and creating something out of it. The house has no plan and no architect, it's all organic. I'm just going with the flow and following that mysterious process. If something substantial comes out of it, it would be really nice. If not, that's also okay.

Pooja Srivatsav

Pooja Srivatsav (UG 2017) is a Product Manager at Curefit

"One side is, of course, the quality of its academic programme – the faculty and the research – but the other side is the *invaluable soft skills* that you learn and the opportunities you receive on campus.

The foundation courses at Ashoka taught me communications, critical thinking, design and empathy, skills that would later on play a huge role in my MBA and in my career.
If I could give any advice to students I'd say:

make the most of it. Volunteer and *dabble in everything* that piques your interest.
Ashoka allows you to explore and expand the boundaries as a student. A community like the one at Ashoka – with all its varied ideas and opinions – will be difficult to find again."

Clinton Manoti

"Before Ashoka, I always thought I'd follow a traditional career path"

Starehe Boys' Centre and School ⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱

→ **Ashoka University** ⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱ → **NawiriTech** ⸱⸱⸱⸱⸱

⸱⸱⸱→ **University of Aberdeen**

The founder of NawiriTech, Clinton Manoti (UG 2020), was awarded the Chevening Scholarship to study at the University of Aberdeen

I grew up in Kisumu, a small lakeside city, in Kenya. After primary school I joined a school in Nairobi, which was the first time I visited the capital. During my final year, I remember being in the director's office when two Indian gentlemen came in and started talking about Ashoka University in India. They were looking for international students at our school because our school had a strong reputation. After they left, I looked up Ashoka on Google. At the time, I was preparing for my LSATs with plans to apply to universities in the US, but then Ashoka offered me a full scholarship, including tuition and accommodation. I didn't come from a wealthy family, so I decided to take a leap of faith and go to India, even though it wasn't part of my original plan. I ended up joining Ashoka in 2017 and had an amazing four years there, despite the interruption caused by the pandemic.

I majored in Economics and minored in Media Studies and Creative Writing. I enjoyed writing stories, and one of the professors, Saikat Majumdar, really helped sharpen my writing. I wrote for almost every magazine on campus and also joined the Ashoka football team. I eventually became the vice-captain – incidentally, the first international student to hold that position.

After finishing my undergraduate degree, I completed the Ashoka Scholars Programme (ASP) online. Then things got difficult. It was right after the pandemic and many people were being laid off. I was scared because I had returned to Kenya. Meanwhile, I saw my peers landing jobs at big companies like McKinsey, PwC and Deloitte, which made it even harder. I started taking some short courses to improve my skills, particularly in areas like Excel and programming, since many of the vacancies I was applying for were for analysts.

Before Ashoka, I always thought I'd follow a traditional career path: get a job, work 9-5 and climb the corporate ladder. Starting a venture wasn't on my radar until the idea for NawiriTech, the company I currently run, came about. I had noticed a gap in the market for people from non-STEM backgrounds who wanted to learn data skills.

In 2022, I joined a Data Science course at Equitech Futures. I spoke to the founder, who allowed me to pilot NawiriTech under their support. We primarily cater to people from non-computing and non-STEM backgrounds, helping them learn data skills without being intimidated by statistics. It's important in media, communications and so many fields beyond just STEM. Since launching in August 2022, we've received over 1,300 applications from 27 African countries and we're currently preparing for our next cohort.

In 2024, I was awarded the Chevening scholarship and arrived at the University of Aberdeen to complete a master's in Data Science. After my master's, I plan to scale NawiriTech using the skills I've gained.

Ratan Sunil Guha

Ratan S Guha (YIF 2017) is senior consultant, corporate strategy at Fidelity Investments in Boston and an MBA from The Wharton School

"Ashoka offered a supportive peer group that fostered a sense of belonging during career changes. You'll always find people from Ashoka who are willing to help you... This network is *incredibly supportive* for small issues like visa questions and big ones like job searches. You can always *count on finding* an Ashoka alumnus nearby who will assist you in any situation, which is a comforting feeling in a foreign country that can *sometimes feel overwhelming*."

"I continue to be excited by interdisciplinary ideas"

Abhilasha Kumar

Ashoka University ·····→ Washington University

·····→ Indiana University ·····→ Bowdoin College

Abhilasha Kumar (YIF 2015) is a computational cognitive scientist and Assistant Professor of Psychology at Bowdoin College in Maine where she leads the Lexicon Lab

I grew up in Delhi, a very curious child who spent a lot of time writing poetry and drawing cartoons. When I was about to graduate from IIT, I was searching for ways to explore non-technical fields and topics. I did not want to become a coder or a consultant. Ashoka was the perfect place that happened at the perfect time. I knew of another IIT alumnus from a previous batch who had had a wonderful experience, so that also encouraged me to apply.

At Ashoka, I learned so much from the writing class taught by Aniha Brar – it taught me how to channel my critical thinking abilities into coherent arguments and was a form of writing I had not explored before. I was feeling disillusioned about a career in writing and was unclear about how to proceed when I attended Ritwik Agrawal's class on Cognitive Science. It was a turning point for me. The course content was so fascinating and so well-taught, that in many ways it changed my life. I decided to stay on for another year at Ashoka to work on a project involving memory recall and digital lifelogging with Sudheendra Hangal while applying for PhD programmes in the US.

I have fond memories of my YIF friends at the Maggi shop, discussing whether my decision to pursue grad school made sense. I remember my friends getting excited about it! It made me feel as though I was on to something promising.

I started my PhD in Cognitive Psychology at Washington University in St. Louis in 2016. My work focused on the interplay of memory and language. After completing my PhD, I spent a year at Indiana University as a Postdoctoral scholar. Soon after I became a tenure-track Assistant Professor at Bowdoin College. Here, I lead the Lexicon Lab, where we are looking at how humans search through memory to communicate and coordinate with each other to solve complex problems. We use a mix of behavioural experiments, computational modelling and psychological theory to answer these questions.

The Liberal Arts curriculum at Bowdoin is reminiscent of Ashoka and was one of the main reasons I chose this path. I continue to be excited by interdisciplinary ideas and feel that Ashoka was instrumental in inculcating an open mindset in me. My teaching is informed by the wonderful instructors who taught me so much more than course content along the way. My research still touches on themes I had started exploring at Ashoka so many years ago. It truly feels like life has come full circle.

Vikrant Zutshi

Vikrant Zutshi
(UG 2017)
is Deputy Vice
President,
IndusInd Bank

"My first impression of Ashoka was that it had a very homely vibe. There was something about that red-brick architecture and the fact that everybody was doing something new for the first time. The *biggest takeaway* for me, I think, would be the experiences with my peer group. Everybody in my batch had something so distinct about themselves that there weren't really any people you could forget. Everybody was determined to prove themselves in some way, shape or form.

I have literally seen the University grow up from a few buildings to what it is today. Every year something new and *more prestigious* would happen. It went from being a 'risky idea' to a *solid institution* that people wanted to go to.

Also, the biggest gift Ashoka gave me was that this is where I met my wife, Aashna, in my first semester. We got married last November."

Monica Pesswani

"In that one year of YIF, I transformed into a completely different person"

Singhad Academy of Engineering ┄┄▶ Ashoka University ┄┄
┄▶ NRB Bearings ┄┄▶ The Apprentice Project ┄┄
┄┄▶ Harvard University

An engineer turned Liberal Arts major, Monica Pesswani (YIF 2015) co-founded The Apprentice Project, a nonprofit working to end educational inequity through 21st-century skills-based curricula

As the child of parents who migrated to India as refugees during the Partition, Monica Pesswani grew up listening to stories of struggle and reinvention. "My father had a really difficult upbringing and my parents were determined that their children should have a better life. We were made to believe that education would solve our problems and education meant getting good grades," she says. Till the 10th grade, Monica was a model student but when she shifted to a private college she began to struggle.

"I went into a shell, because I couldn't communicate, I couldn't problem-solve, I couldn't find my voice. So for two years in college, I turned into an introvert who did not know who she was," she recalls.

Monica went on to enrol in an Engineering course and started working with Infosys. There, she heard about Ashoka's Young India Fellowship (YIF).

"During that one year at YIF, I transformed into a completely different person. I found my voice and learned to fight for things I believed in," she says. Soon after, Monica joined NRB Bearings to set up an Artificial Intelligence and 3D printing startup. While working on a project in Dharavi, Monica met a boy who had 3D-printed a door knob. He explained that he hoped this would prevent his father, who was a violent alcoholic, from entering their home late at night.

"That incident taught me that all children need are skills, opportunities and exposure. I remember thinking that if this child is able to find a solution to a real world problem with a small printer, imagine what he can do if he is given an opportunity. That's when the shift in my mind started happening," she explains.

In the months ahead, Monica travelled extensively across India and was part of Uttar Yatra, travelling through flood affected regions in Uttarakhand. There she met families in remote mountain villages who told her about the desperate need for education in rural India.

"I'm a person who follows her intuition and I decided that I have to find a solution. I felt that if I didn't do this work then I'm not fulfilling my purpose in life," she says.

Thus was born The Apprentice Project, a non-profit she set up with co-founders Anand Gopakumar and Prashant Kumar, to provide a holistic education to children in need. Over

Monica credits the Ashoka community for always having her back. "As an entrepreneur you have this big vision but the path isn't clear and you can only see ten steps ahead. YIF played a big role in my career because I'm inherently a cautious person. Beyond the academia and courses, this is a very special place where we are able to have honest, difficult conversations with each other. We push each other to be better versions of ourselves," she says. "So much of what I later did came out of conversations I had with Anunaya, Pramath and others. The people at Ashoka gave me courage and supported the maverick in me. They said: Go do your thing, we are with you," she adds.

Ashoka is a very *special place* **where we are able to have** *honest, difficult conversations* **with each other**

the years the company has grown from a three member team to a 48 member workforce that works with governments in Maharashtra, Delhi, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.

"We wanted children from underserved communities to have the right to choice. My co-founders and I deeply believe that India needs to be built and it will be transformed by future generations. But first they need to receive the right education which should be accessible to all," she says. "India is now ready for change. The National Education Policy gave us hope, because technology-centred learning and holistic learning were its central anchors," she adds.

During the COVID-19 pandemic her company transitioned to a completely tech-based solution, a WhatsApp chat bot ecosystem. "Learning shouldn't stop for children. Our chat bot is called TAP buddy and is a virtual "didi" that appears in the lives of our children. We send them content in the field of visual arts, performing arts, STEM and financial literacy," she says.

From the Ganges to the World

Pubarun Basu

University of Calcutta ⟶ Ashoka University ⟶ Ashoka X

Pubarun Basu (YIF 2024) is a photographer and trained tabla artist. A recipient of the Sony World Photography Awards 2021, he has also been featured in Forbes 30 Under 30 (Asia)

Born and brought up by the banks of the Ganges in North Kolkata, the majestic flowing river was a constant presence in my childhood. Because of this, I always felt a deep connect to the environment and was curious to learn more about the relationship between man and nature in an urban setting.

My father was a photographer and I grew up surrounded by cameras and photographic equipment. The room right across from my bedroom was a darkroom – his lab – and although my father never instructed me, I started taking a keen interest in photography from an early age. He allowed me a free hand to explore in a creative environment so that by the time I was four years old, handling a camera had become second nature.

After graduating in English Literature from the University of Calcutta, I began to research freshwater conservation with the support of the National Geographic Society and the Nature Conservancy. I spent a year on that project and then decided to explore interdisciplinary studies focused on rivers and their national heritage. I documented the Garo tribes of Meghalaya and the Ramnami sect in Chhattisgarh and soon realised that my work went far beyond photography. It was instead a combination of Anthropology, Heritage Studies and History. This realisation led me to the Young India Fellowship (YIF) where the multidisciplinary approach aligned perfectly with my evolving interests.

During this period I had begun work on a long-term photo project *The River and Her People* which was later exhibited at Ashoka and featured a series of photographs documenting the connection between people and the Ganges.

Through this work, I became more aware of the ground realities – the paradoxes of traditional folklore and customs such as how we revere the river as a holy mother while also polluting it in the belief that it will cleanse itself. These contradictions affected me deeply.

During my time at YIF, I developed a self-designed project on the Yamuna River, documenting over eight months, the lives of a community of divers who scavenge in hazardous conditions. Though I couldn't undertake many photography projects

during the Fellowship due to its academic demands, the exposure to various disciplines – such as foreign relations and trade – helped me explore the roots of societal issues in India.

Currently, I manage a media lab at AshokaX, where I oversee the visual design of online projects, ensuring that they remain engaging and inclusive. Simultaneously, I'm developing a media project on climate mobility which will examine how natural disasters force some people to migrate while others remain trapped in a hopeless situation. This project aims to create a visual archive of our time.

Looking back, I've learned three key lessons:

First, a quote by Henri Matisse, "creativity takes courage" which has resonated with me. Breaking norms, even when it's uncomfortable, is essential for growth.

As a trained tabla player, I've learned the value of patience – whether it's waiting for the right photographic moment or practising tirelessly to achieve creative growth, everything takes time.

I also learnt that effective teamwork isn't just about the right credentials but the willingness to unlearn and collaborate – a lesson from my time at YIF.

Beyond academics, I discovered the power of community and resilience. I lost my father in April, and three months later, when I joined YIF I found myself in a new place – alone, without family, adjusting to life in a new environment. My father was my sole source of inspiration, so surviving the avalanche of grief that followed his demise was challenging. However, the experience at YIF helped immensely and I'm forever grateful that it gave me the mental push I needed to forge ahead. Currently, I'm creating a visual archive of my father's 40-year career as an artist, during which he explored almost every genre of photography. This is my tribute to him.
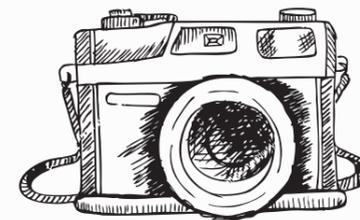
Vighnesh Hampapura

"Arriving on campus I was very scared and intimidated"

My biggest takeaway from Ashoka is the *intellectual rigour* and *commitment* that the faculty *embody* and *inculcate* in us.

Ashoka University ········
→ Oxford University ········
→ Teaching Fellow, Ashoka

Vighnesh Hampapura (UG 2020), the first Rhodes Scholar from Ashoka's undergraduate programme, now works at his alma mater as a teaching fellow and an instructor in the co-curricular programme

Growing up in Mysuru meant I was always interested in theatre, films, art and literature. After graduating from Christ University in Bengaluru I read about Ashoka in an article by Professor Jonathan Gil Harris. Watching Professor Rudrangshu Mukherjee's *Mahabharata* lecture on YouTube and Professor Madhavi Menon's speech on Liberal Arts inspired me to send in an application. In the end it was the financial aid on offer that made my decision possible.

Arriving on campus I was very scared and intimidated, especially by peers who appeared so worldly and knowledgeable. I thought I'd be lost. My immediate thought was, I'm going to be lost amidst this sea of whales and sharks. But then the foundation courses began, and I started to enjoy the slow work of learning.

My biggest takeaway from Ashoka is the rigour and commitment that several of the faculty here modelled for me. When I think of the influences at Ashoka, the things that kept me alive and motivated, I can think of a bunch of faculty, most of them from the English and Creative Writing department, and a small group of friends who continue to be each other's advocates and supporters. A combination of these two inspired an intellectual atmosphere.

The Rhodes Scholarship was a fantastic experience because of the community that one found at Rhodes House. Almost everybody I met there was open to learning and extremely approachable. I learnt that there was more than one way to impact and be impacted by the world.

All the same, I missed the intellectual atmosphere and urgency at Ashoka. I returned as a teaching fellow to both experience that again and to be trained in pedagogy, before I applied for PhDs.

Ashoka has spoiled students so much – its academic rigour and quality – that it wasn't just me feeling that way at Oxford but several students who went to Cambridge, Harvard, Pennsylvania, UPenn, all of us used to ask ourselves and each other: Why aren't we having the kind of education we had at Ashoka?

"Life Lessons via Ashoka"

Rhea Pandey

After a stint with Pinterest, Rhea Pandey (UG 2019) now works with Google as an Account Strategist in Dublin

Mount Carmel ·····➤ Ashoka University ····
➤ UCD Smurfit School, Ireland ···
·····➤ Accenture ····➤ Google

Not following the herd pays off: When I was in 11th and 12th grade at Mount Carmel, there was a craze among students to get into Delhi University (DU). My mother heard about Ashoka University and we decided to take a campus tour. I still remember that hot summer day when we took the shuttle from Jahangirpuri to the Sonipat campus and how a senior gave us a campus tour. We met a few professors and walked past buildings which were still under construction. At first, we were concerned about the fee structure, which seemed a bit exorbitant but we were reassured when we learned about Ashoka's scholarship programme, which assesses needs based on family income.

Diversity Matters: I was impressed by how different Ashoka was from other colleges in India. Its Liberal Arts structure was unlike anything I had seen before. The idea of taking foundational courses along with my major and the diverse, fresh subjects they offered was very appealing. I made friends from all walks of life. After Ashoka I decided to go to Ireland to pursue my master's in Digital Marketing. I eventually landed a job at Accenture.

Entrepreneurship classes helped me ace my job interview: Ashoka gave us the space to build ventures and test their feasibility in the market, which made a huge impact on me. I worked at Accenture for about three years before I joined Google. At my job interview I was able to talk about an initiative I started at Ashoka called "Wearability" under the University's Entrepreneurship Cell. These classes were my favourite, especially with their focus on design thinking and the inspiring examples of real-life entrepreneurs who were doing amazing things outside of tech.

Foundational courses contributed to my ability to pivot and adapt: When you go through so many foundational courses each semester, you learn to pick things up quickly and execute them. This skill was essential in the job market, where there's something new to learn every quarter and you need to multitask and adapt to change in real time.

"The years I spent at Ashoka were the best times of my life"
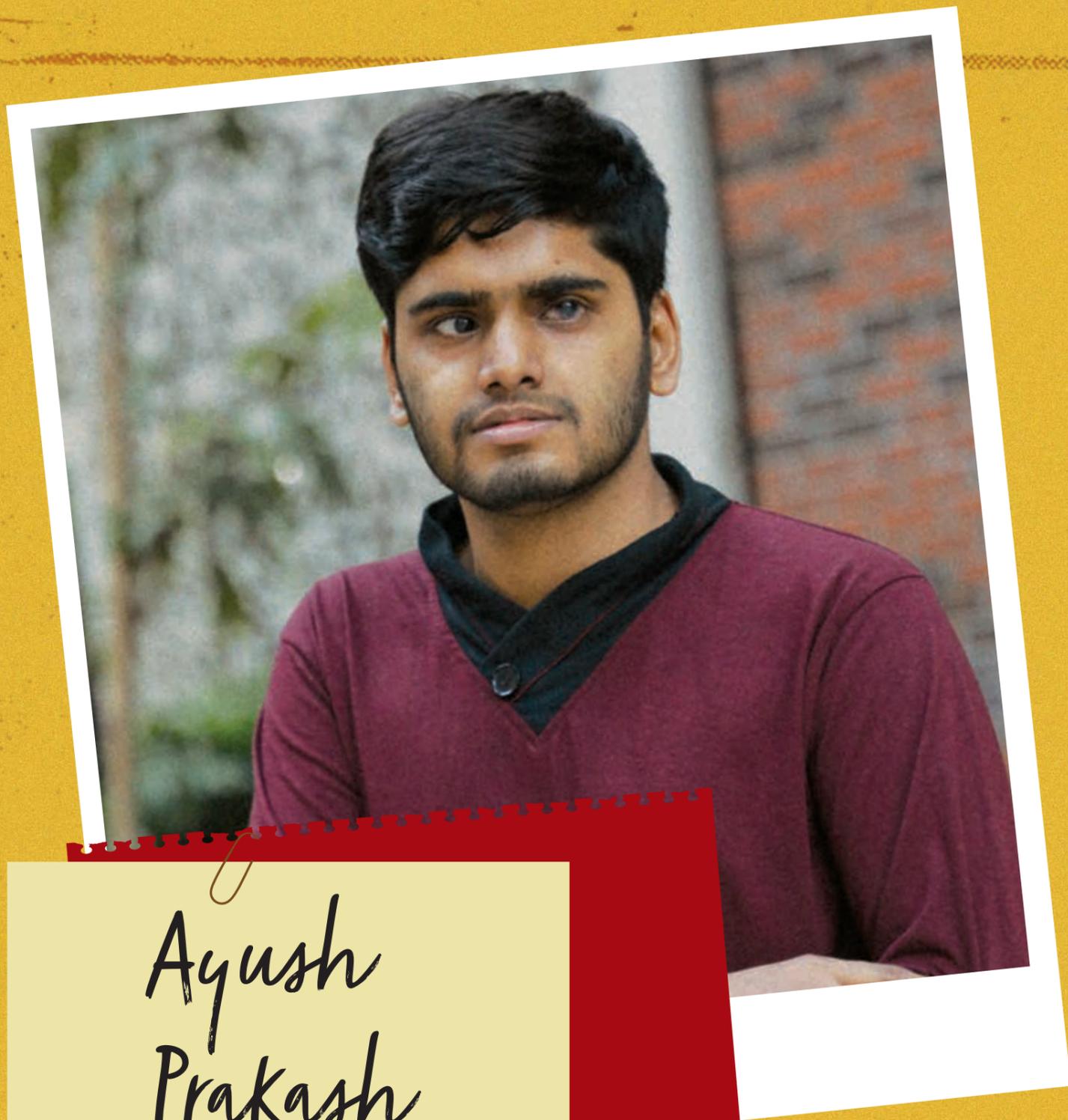
Ayush Prakash

Ayush Prakash (UG 2024) is currently a Management Trainee at Clix Capital

"Due to my visual impairment, I encountered a few challenges along the way, especially regarding accessibility. However, the Office of Learning Support (OLS) was *always there* to provide support. The OLS also helped immensely to ensure I received accessible study material and to convey my needs and requirements to the faculty.

All the professors, teaching fellows and teaching assistants at Ashoka were very supportive and accommodative. *I participated in the placement process* and the experience was a memorable one and it was a great learning experience. The rejection emails I received from different companies were both motivating and disheartening in equal measure. *But thanks to the Career Development Office,* I got through Clix Capital. Their encouragement during the placement process meant a lot to me. Without Ashoka University I wouldn't have had these opportunities."
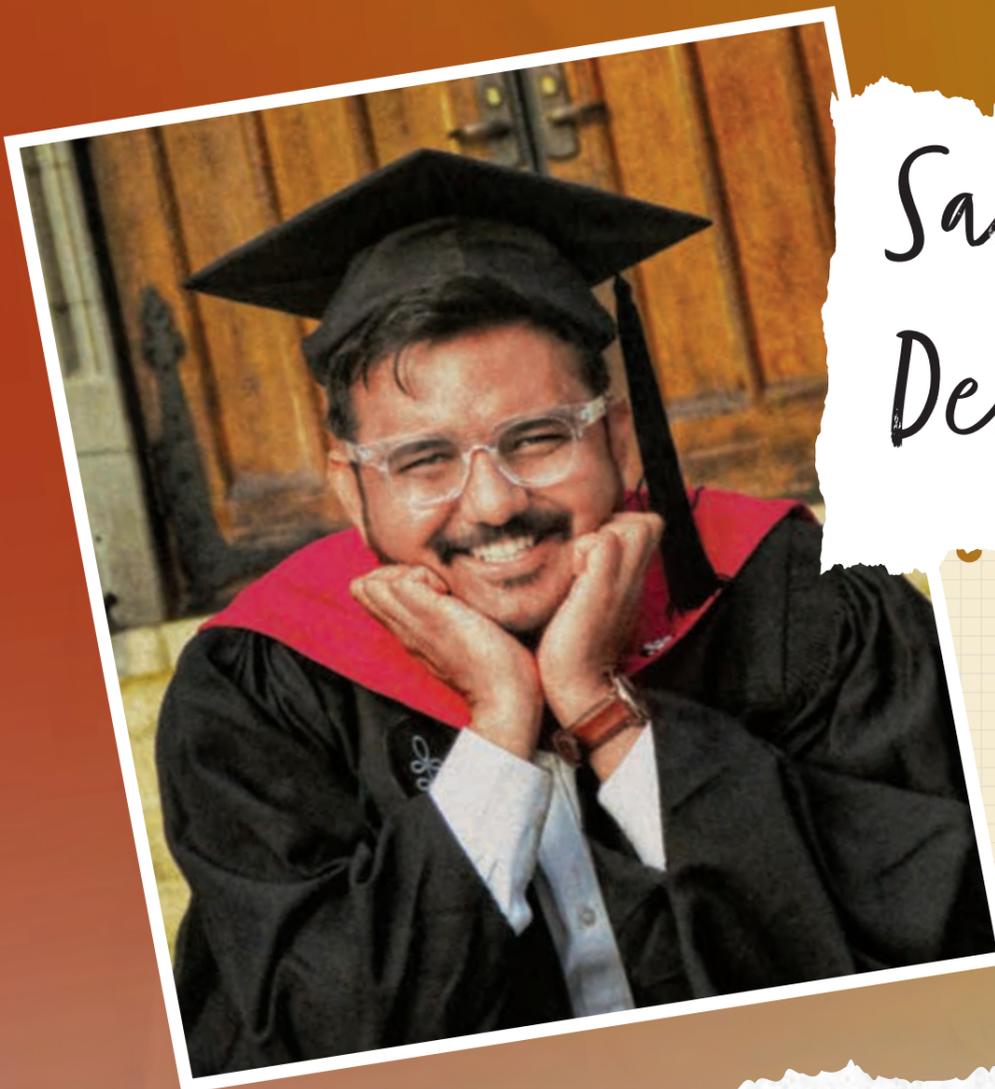
Sanjay Deshpande

"I felt invisible and decided to do something about it"

Sanjay Deshpande (YIF 2015) is the author of *Don't Ask Me How I'm Doing*, a young adult cancer survivor's memoir

Having lived in seven cities across three countries due to his parents' careers, change was a constant in Sanjay's life. "Similar to army kids, I became accustomed to multiple shifts," he says.

"Very early on, I decided it was important to prove myself. I began to focus on my studies and with each achievement noticed that my bullies were silenced. This motivated me further to study harder. I ended up topping in my 10th, 11th and 12th grades," he adds.

St Xavier's
Ashoka University
Harvard University

Like most people in his family, Sanjay was preparing for the IIT-JEE exams but soon realised that Engineering was not for him. He decided to study Mass Communication and Journalism at Mumbai's St Xavier's College and started working in advertising. However, he was quickly disillusioned and was encouraged by a senior to apply to the Young India Fellowship.

When Sanjay first visited the campus, he was shocked to find there was no college yet. Ashoka was in the process of being built. "This was three or four months before the programme was set to start and I was sceptical."

"By the time the orientation programme began, a couple of buildings had been completed, including the administrative block and one of the academic blocks, while the hostels were still under construction," he says.

Ashoka was a pivotal moment in his life. "The confidence and skills I developed at Ashoka enabled me to apply to Harvard where I graduated from, with a 4.0 GPA in 2024," he says. But life had other plans.

When he arrived at Harvard University's campus to start his master's programme in September 2021, Sanjay landed up in the emergency room after a massive seizure. He was diagnosed with an incurable brain cancer and was informed that he had only five years left to live.

"My initial reaction was disbelief. My first thought was that my orientation was the next day and I was about to start my master's at my dream college," he says. Sanjay flew back to India and underwent a complicated 7-hour-long brain surgery followed by months of rehabilitation to regain the use of his left hand and leg. "I searched for support systems for young adults who had survived cancer. I discovered that the ones available were either for those with paediatric or geriatric cancers. I felt invisible and decided to do something about it," he recalls.

Sanjay began speaking to other young cancer survivors in the hope of creating a community. "I submitted a proposal to a friend who was working at a new publishing house. I never imagined I would become an author. However, I started working on this book alongside other co-authors, some of whom have already lost their lives to cancer," he says. This led to the publication of his memoir – *Don't Ask Me How I'm Doing: Life, Death, and Everything in Between* – which has received rave reviews.

"I used to think I could postpone things until my 30s, 40s, or 50s, but now I'm acutely aware of my mortality. I don't take things for granted anymore," he says.

Gurasheesh Paul Singh

Gurasheesh Paul Singh (UG 2017), founder of Zool Energy, is currently pursuing Entrepreneurial Studies at the University of Cambridge

"I can't believe it's been ten years. I think the founding batch experience is something that just can't be replicated. I always knew my calling was in *entrepreneurship*. However, it was a leakage in a lab tank that led to me finding purpose and direction. With no engineering support available, I stepped in and solved the problem. Professor Bittu, an Associate Professor of Biology and Psychology at the University, then encouraged me to work with the team at the Neuroscience Lab. There, I got to work with slicing living nerve cells in microscopic surgical procedures, deep rainforest field work and a vast variety of tech. Most of all, it was an *incredibly* wholesome and supportive environment. In those four years, I had the opportunity to transform from an amateur technologist into someone who had the confidence of taking a *technology solution* from blueprints to implementation. Soon I started getting clients from outside the Ashoka ecosystem. The platform that Professor Bittu provided was definitely critical to what I am doing today. It has validated my belief that I could create technology without being an engineer or having a formal Science education.

What advice would I give to Ashokans? I'd say: Keep an open mind. You've got a *wonderful opportunity*. Explore and talk to people and really think about what effect you can have. Each one of us has the opportunity to define what being an Ashokan means."

Sriharsha Masabathula

A Public Policy and International Development professional, Sriharsha Masabathula (YIF 2014) works with the World Economic Forum in Geneva

Ohio Wesleyan University, USA

Ashoka University ···> UNESCO Myanmar

University of Oxford ···> Yenching Academy of Peking University, Beijing

UNESCO Cambodia ···> World Economic Forum

At the end of the day, it is the experience that matters: As a young person fresh out of an undergraduate program in the USA, I was naturally looking for my next professional endeavour and trying to figure out a career path. When I joined the Young India Fellowship (YIF) at Ashoka, it was a relatively new programme, but I was convinced that regardless of the outcome, I would have a great experience. And that turned out to be true.

Our cohort was brilliant, with 100 highly talented and diverse individuals. YIF allowed me to experience Liberal Arts in the Indian context, filling a significant gap coming from the American higher education system. The course truly delivered on its promise of quality. We had access to some of the best faculty and the curriculum for each course was meticulously curated by the professors themselves.

A Liberal Arts education sensitises you to new perspectives: YIF provided interesting deep dives into new ways of thinking. That's the beauty of a Liberal Arts education – it sensitises you to new perspectives that you can later apply in your own field.

For instance, Art Appreciation was a course that had a lasting impact. Now that I live in Europe and have the chance of visiting numerous museums with historical art pieces, I can truly appreciate the significance of works like *Guernica* because I learned about them during the Fellowship. It's a very different experience going to a museum with that knowledge, rather than just being a tourist admiring a painting.

Knowledge, whether it is active or passive, stays with you.

Education is a form of national service: YIF should continue doing what it's doing because the impact, in a very short time, has been widespread. Globally, whether at the World Economic Forum or other places, I constantly encounter Ashoka graduates or Young India Fellows. The University is contributing to nation-building, as there is a great need for top-quality higher education institutions in India. A few years down the line, students shouldn't need to go overseas to access world-class Liberal Arts education – we need to create those opportunities within India. Ashoka is paving the way to make that a reality.
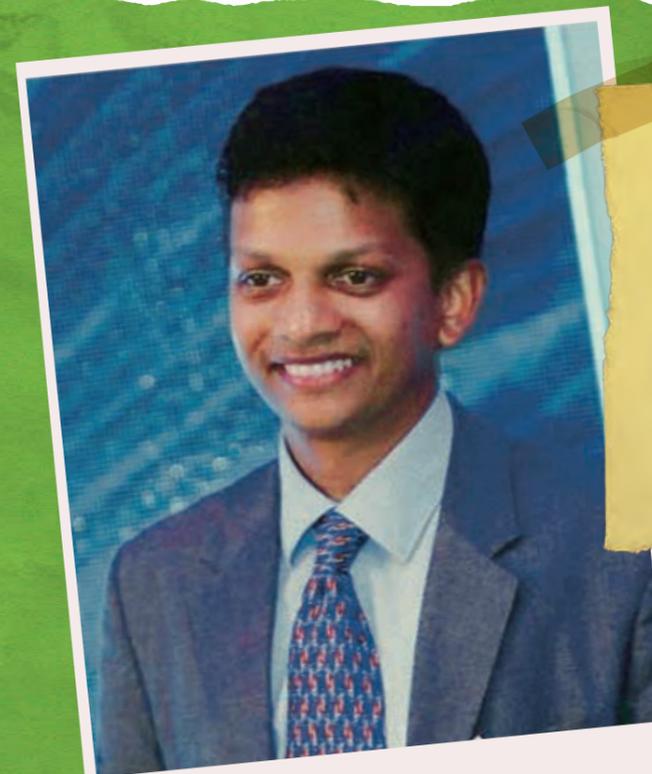
"What the University is doing is a great service to India"
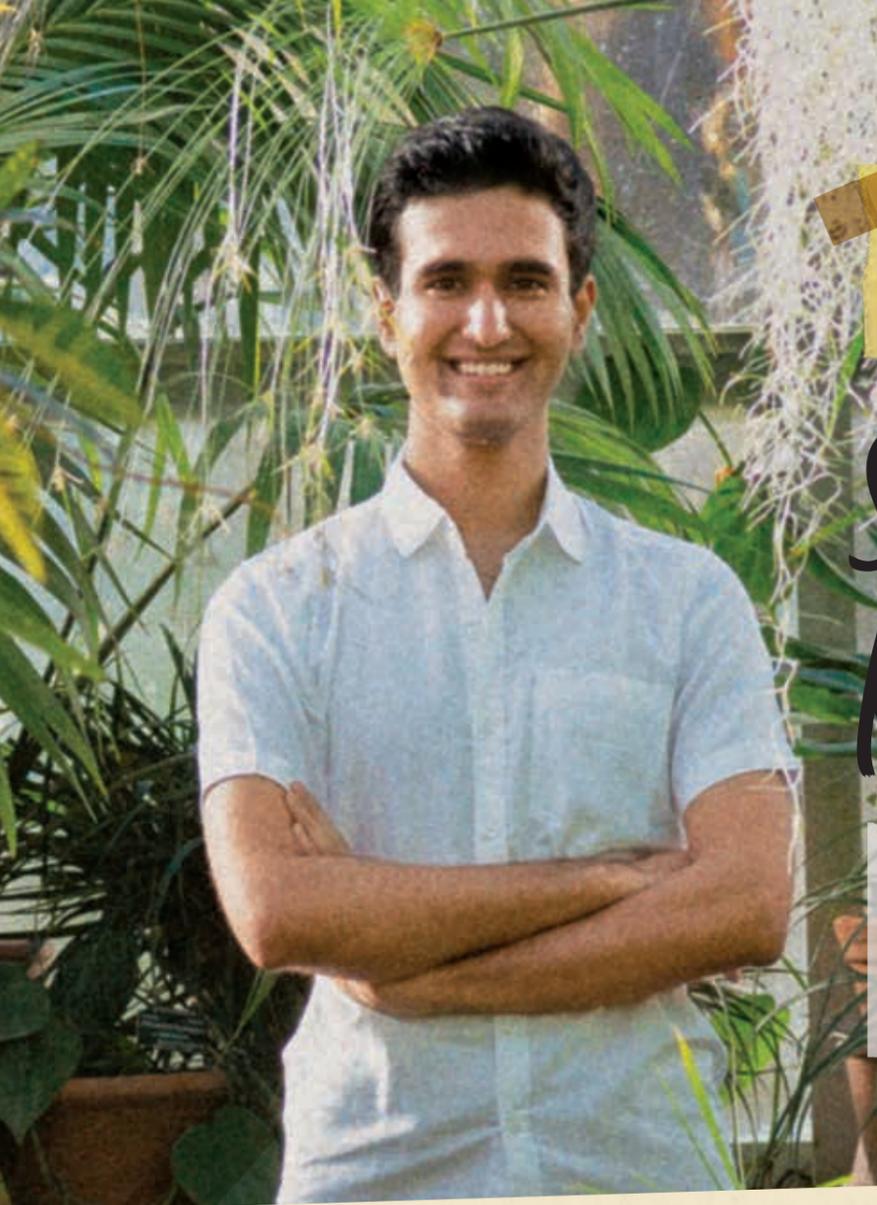
Green Warrior

Soham Kacker

Vasant Valley School

Ashoka University

University of Oxford

Soham Kacker (UG 2022) is building a career in plant ecology and conservation and is the author of *A Photographic Field Guide to the Trees and Shrubs of Mukteshwar, Uttarakhand*

Growing up in Delhi, Soham Kacker was always interested in Biology and the environment. "After school I wanted to study Plant Science but because I felt that my interests weren't entirely technical, I wanted an environment that would provide a little more freedom to explore courses from other disciplines. I chose Ashoka so that I could pursue other interests and not be in an overly technical, siloed environment," he says.

Over the four years that Soham was at Ashoka, the institute grew as did his relationship with it. "When I arrived on campus I was quite narrowly

focused on Ecology and the more scientific aspects of conservation and Plant Science. The foundation courses turned out to be an unexpected surprise because I came in thinking that they were just boxes that needed to be ticked, but I ended up really enjoying them. Some of the professors who taught those courses, like Madhavi Menon and Alex Watson, had a deep impact on me," he recalls.

Soham arrived at Ashoka with a lot more certainty than when he left. "When I came in I had decided that I wanted to do Ecology but when I left Ashoka I was significantly more confused, because I'd been introduced to all these wonderful things like Environmental Studies and Indology and Social Sciences," he says.

"My ASP (Ashoka Scholars Programme) thesis was about forest regeneration in Uttarakhand after the forest fires. I studied how different forest communities recover after fires and documented how forest fires, being a measure of human disturbance, impacted the species composition of a landscape."

During his ASP thesis, he also spent time in the forests of Mukteshwar and became fascinated by the flora of the region, which gave birth to *A Photographic Field Guide to the Trees and Shrubs of Mukteshwar, Uttarakhand*, which was published in January 2024.

Soham headed to Oxford for his master's right after Ashoka. "After graduation I plan to take up a role in Sri Lanka with a private architectural trust centred on an estate on the southwest coast. The trust has an intersectional approach to Ecology, which combines the environmental aspects with allied disciplines such as art, design and architecture," he says.

Kay O'Neill

Kay O'Neill (YIF 2018) is a Communications and Events Manager at the Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

"After completing an undergraduate degree in Law and French Law in Ireland, I felt out of place in the legal profession and was keen to *explore other avenues*. I stumbled across YIF, and after doing some research and speaking to YIF alumni, I knew Ashoka was the right place to study Liberal Arts. I arrived at Sonipat from Ireland as a young Irish fellow and Ashoka University gave me a warm welcome.

Studying a diverse range of subjects with some of the best professors in the world was an *enriching experience*. Dwight Jaggard's course, 'The Foundations of Leadership' was instrumental in crafting my leadership skills and I was lucky to be able to later work with him as a teaching assistant.

I now work as a Communications and Events Manager with the London School of Economics and Political Science. I credit YIF and Ashoka for providing me with a *fantastic academic experience*. I met some wonderful people there, some of whom have become friends and family for life. The Ashoka alumni community is a global force! I meet them frequently in London and Europe, as well as one of Ashoka's founders, Pramath Raj Sinha whenever he visits my city. YIF is an experience that I will cherish forever."

National Public School
····➤ Ashoka University
····➤ University of Twente
····➤ CHA4OS Theory
····➤ Erasmus Social Design Hub

"Do work that you care about on a fundamental level"

Chetana Pai

Chetana Pai (UG 2018) is a social designer and workshop facilitator who works at the Erasmus Social Design Hub (ESDH) with an interdisciplinary team of social, scientific, design and visual ethnographic researchers in Rotterdam, South Holland

I first heard about Ashoka as this university that had come up in the middle of nowhere, in Sonipat, a place I had never heard of as I grew up in Bengaluru. The clincher for me was that I could study Computer Science in a non-engineering environment. I found academic life at Ashoka interesting but struggled quite a bit figuring out what I wanted to do with my life. Then one summer at a workshop in Bengaluru I met someone who was a creative technologist and had designed a live composition dance technology system. I was intrigued. At that time the only university in the world that had a degree called Creative Technology was in the Netherlands so that's where I applied for my master's. I studied interaction technology which explored the development and analysis of interactions between people and any kind of technology.

I'm based in Rotterdam now and have worked for the past few years as a freelancer taking on projects that include workshop design and facilitation and podcast production. I also work on programme curation for a Philosophy technology platform and in the cultural arts sector in the Netherlands. My projects are usually related to community mapping, collecting stories from communities and experimenting with mediums to find interesting ways to platform and share them using sound, podcasts and maps.

The question I'm interested in addressing through my work in social design is: how can we facilitate more collaboration and connection between people in local communities? And from there, how do we support and make sure that bottom-up initiatives that emerge from this collaboration and connection are sustainable in the long run? Social design is a people-centred approach to dealing with complex issues. What I like about it is the emphasis on making sure all the stakeholders are involved throughout the whole design process and are not simply seen as clients or users.

Last February I started working as a Junior Researcher at the Erasmus Social Design Hub. The project I'm working on now is with the local governments of three small towns to co-create interventions between the government and residents in order to help make sustainable options more accessible to the public. What I enjoy in this work is finding ways to get different groups of people to come together to do something that's interesting and useful to all of them and exploring how to make academic research more accessible to a wider audience. In 2025, I will be switching to a new project with the Resilient Delta Initiative centred around knowledge integration.

If I could impart any advice to students at Ashoka it would be to do work that you care about on a fundamental level and to choose a career that is interesting to you, even if that means creating the job you want because it doesn't exist yet. Making a difference has always mattered to me and I think it is possible to do good, interesting work that does that.

Making a difference has always *mattered to me*

Aman Kaleem

- Jamia Millia Islamia
- Ashoka University
- Kahaani Wale
- Harvard University

Aman Kaleem (YIF 2013) is a filmmaker and VR artist based in India and the CEO of Kahaani Wale, a media tech company that focuses on social impact communication. Aman went on to complete a master's in Design Engineering at Harvard University and now works at the intersection of technology and art at Harvard and MIT. Her sci-fi film *Girls* from the MIT Media Lab, which received international acclaim and a slew of awards, is notable for its pioneering use of AI within a gaming engine to create photorealistic environments and characters

Incorporeal materials can tell a story: My early love for reading and writing naturally evolved into a passion for filmmaking while my exposure to world cinema at film school deepened my appreciation for the craft. This journey sparked my interest in how images are created and how they evoke sentiment. Now, I use incorporeal materials such as deep learning algorithms, human movement kinetics, the interplay of light and shadow and the intricacies of machine learning to tell stories of the human mind and body.

Ashoka offers a unique value proposition: I was drawn to Ashoka as I was interested in interdisciplinary studies. I had done films, had a background in literature and was deeply interested in technology. Ashoka offered a unique value proposition where I could explore all these aspects without losing depth. Additionally, the faculty added significant value to my decision. As a young artist figuring out my path, it was a great launching pad. It gave me the space to cultivate that inner narrative, which became the foundation of my work. Discussions with the faculty significantly influenced me by strengthening my ideas and giving me the ability to articulate myself effectively. They empowered me to fearlessly hold my position.

Critical thinking has a significant impact on artistic practice: When I joined Ashoka, my first class was taught by Professor André Beteille, and it was about caste. This had a great impression on me, as he was not just a phenomenal academician but also a great teacher. I distinctly remember being in constant conversation with the faculty about ideas of freedom, the nation-state, the role of government, the abstraction of art and the assertion of power. Ashoka also provided me with life-long friends and peers who have played a significant role in shaping my life.

Creativity is deeply interwoven with the lived experiences of an artist: It is not a singular, monolithic force that suddenly appears; rather, it is the result of continuous effort toward honing one's voice and craft. As an academic experience, Ashoka was profoundly enriching and helped me solidify my creative voice. The framework I developed at Ashoka has significantly influenced the positionality of my work.

Riya Behl

Riya Behl (UG 2019) is the founder of the Zinedabaad collective and former editor at PARI

"As part of the third undergraduate batch at Ashoka, I knew nearly all my seniors and shared a close relationship with most of our faculty. Such *freedom in expression and a sense of belonging* led me to explore how I would create a space for myself in the world.

In my first semester, I chose to make a zine for Great Books with Professor Madhavi Menon who encouraged me to *express myself creatively.* This support continued with courses I took later on, with Professors Tisha Srivastav, Kathryn Hardy and Rinki Sarkar. They played a strong role in shaping my choices at and after college.

We started our Instagram page, @zinedabaad, because people had made such beautiful things and we wanted a place to document them. Four months later, in June 2020, the US Library of Congress selected our Instagram account for inclusion in its web archives. In 2024, Oxfam International's Gender Rights and Justice team commissioned us to make a booklet that was circulated in 85 countries and utilised for their *advocacy efforts* at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York."

Afterword

This book is a reminder to everyone involved in building Ashoka that this journey – though audacious – has been nothing short of pathbreaking. In the last decade, Ashoka has had the privilege of teaching and learning from over 5,600 brilliant minds – leaving a mark in various fields from corporate to development and beyond.

Ashoka's alumni have grown beyond the University to impact the world. While learning from the best minds in the country, they have also shaped the culture on and off campus. It is possibly for this reason that the alumni community is such a tight knit group. We hear it often when we meet them.

Throughout the pages of this book, you would have read stories of service, innovation and triumph. From the entrepreneur who is creating opportunities for young people in the North East, to the conservation and ecology enthusiast who has published a photographic field guide on Mukteshwar; from the educator who has shaped countless young minds to the award winning filmmaker who uses technology to tell stories — each alumnus is a torchbearer of the values that they helped create on campus.

This volume is as much a celebration of a decade of Ashoka as it is an invitation to reflect on the impact that the alumni community has already created. Undoubtedly, the ripple effect of their work will be felt for generations to come.

To our alumni, thank you.

Thank you for your faith, your contribution and your continued support to our shared goals. The future of Ashoka is brighter because of you – each one of you. We look forward to knowing and sharing many more wonderful stories in the years to come.

— *Venkat Eshwara*
**Pro Vice-Chancellor
(Development, Placements, Alumni
Relations and Strategic Communications),
Ashoka University**

— *Anu Singh*
**Director
(Alumni Relations
and Parents Office),
Ashoka University**
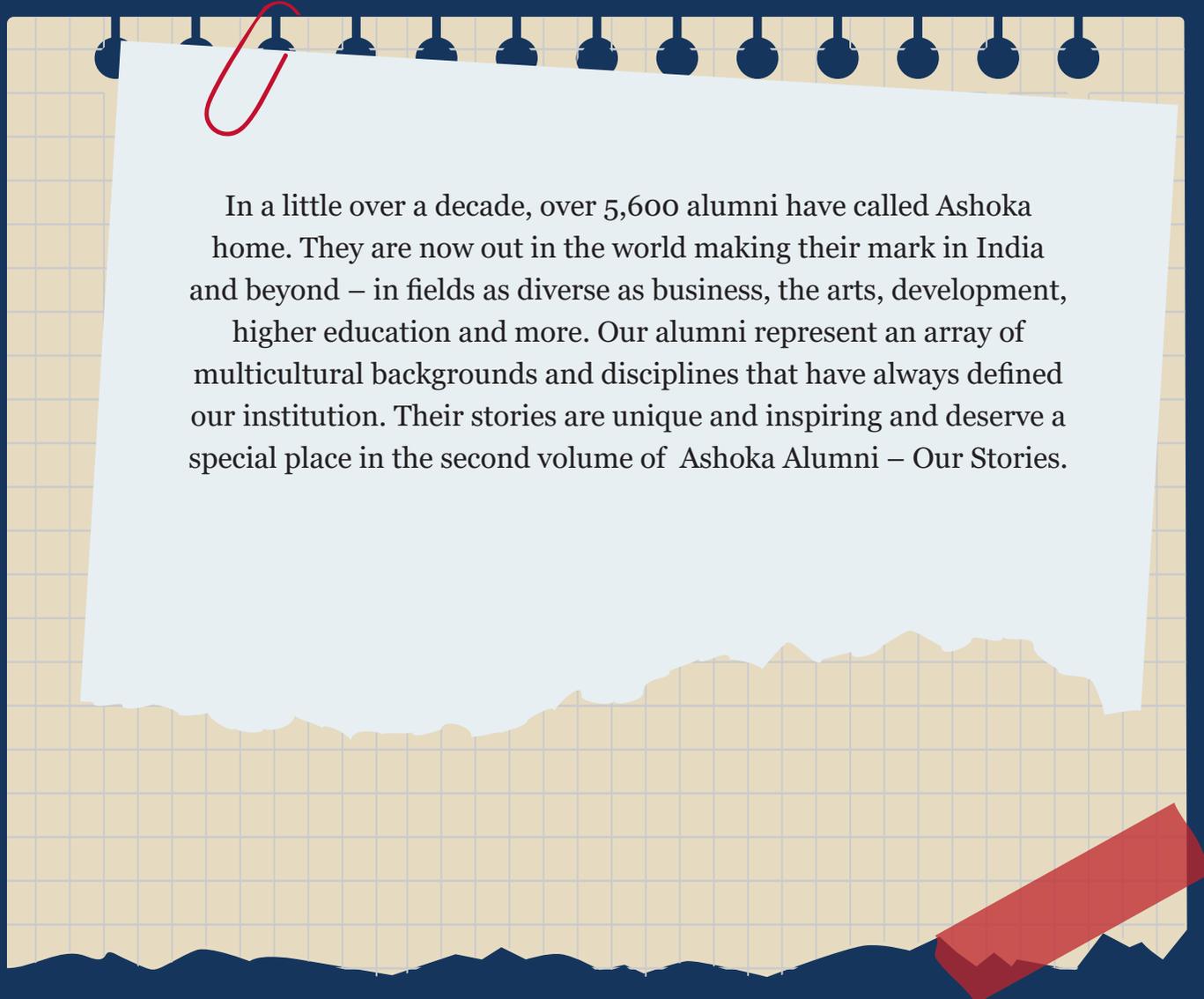
In a little over a decade, over 5,600 alumni have called Ashoka home. They are now out in the world making their mark in India and beyond – in fields as diverse as business, the arts, development, higher education and more. Our alumni represent an array of multicultural backgrounds and disciplines that have always defined our institution. Their stories are unique and inspiring and deserve a special place in the second volume of Ashoka Alumni – Our Stories.

ASHOKA UNIVERSITY
10 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE