LEADERSHIP BY DESIGN

INSIDE THE GANDHI FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As India progresses, it continues tackling critical developmental issues, from addressing unequal access to quality education and healthcare to improving infrastructure, water, and sanitation facilities to meeting the country's demand for job creation and skilling workforce, among many other competing needs. Within this context, India's growing youth population holds immense potential to drive social transformation.

The Gandhi Fellowship, launched by the Piramal Foundation in 2008, invests in youth leadership. The two-year program empowers young graduates and postgraduates to contribute to nation-building and understand social impact. By immersing young Fellows from diverse backgrounds into underserved regions of the country, the fellowship combines experiential learning with structured reflection to cultivate essential leadership skills for the social sector.

India has witnessed a proliferation of many such programs in the past decade, particularly in the social sector. Through this case study, CAPI seeks to document and analyze the key design elements of the fellowship program that cultivate leadership skills in youth.

Part I introduces the Fellowship's vision, structure, and operational model. The program is designed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, placing Fellows in public systems such as school education or primary health care to address critical bottlenecks. Supported by a robust funding model and a scalable design, the Fellowship operates across 170 districts in 27 states and emphasizes dual goals: leadership development and public system improvements.

Part II explores the leadership framework that underpins the Gandhi Fellowship program. Fellows engage in experiential learning by tackling real-world issues in education, healthcare, and other sectors. Reflective practices such as daily debriefs and Vipassana meditation build self-awareness and emotional intelligence. At the same time, the program emphasizes diversity and peer learning among participants from varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Part III examines the Fellowship's transformative impact and identifies key considerations for designing such programs. At an individual level, over 2,700 alumni have emerged, founding social enterprises to spearhead initiatives and verticals in leading non-profits in India. At the community level, initiatives by young fellows enable improved outcomes in education, health, and tribal inclusion. However, considerations with respect to balancing Fellow leadership development with community impact and measuring long-term outcomes remain.

Part IV outlines actionable insights for donors and stakeholders. Key strategies include articulating a clear vision, deepening community engagement, prioritizing safety and inclusivity, and balancing immediate impact and long-term leadership development. These approaches highlight the importance of investment in programs that empower youth to address complex societal challenges.

The Gandhi Fellowship exemplifies how thoughtfully designed initiatives can harness the energy of young leaders to create systemic change. By integrating leadership development with real-world problem-solving, the program offers a replicable model to enable young changemakers and nation-builders for years to come.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, India—which has the world's second-largest school system after China, educating 267 million students annually in 47 languages across 28 states[1] —has seen rapid improvements in education[2]. Primary school enrollment is now nearly universal, with the attendance gap between boys and girls steadily shrinking. Enrollment in secondary schools surged from 45% in 2000 to 79% in 2022[3]. Additionally, the national budget for education has grown by 28% since 2018[4].

Yet, gaps remain. Unequal access to quality education, an acute shortage of teachers, outdated curricula, and persistent funding troubles plague the system[5,6]. Moreover, a lack of relevant skills and employment opportunities restrict many young people from pursuing their desired professional paths, leaving their talents and aspirations unfulfilled. A mere 3% of the population is formally skilled[7], and many graduates face unemployment or underemployment due to a mismatch between educational curricula and market demands[8,9]. Around 54.1% of graduates in India lack the skills necessary for employment in any industry[10].

Over the years, both the Government of India and the private sector have initiated many social innovations and programs to bridge these gaps. One such initiative is the Gandhi Fellowship program, launched in 2008 by philanthropist Ajay Piramal through the Piramal Foundation.

The vision for this program began to take shape in 2002, when Aditya Natraj, a chartered accountant, decided to leave his corporate career and join Pratham, an education nonprofit based in Gujarat. He arrived in Kachchh district after a massive earthquake had ravaged the state, leaving schools in a dismal state and without teachers. Even beyond the disaster's immediate impact, the nationwide education system was in poor shape, with around 80 million children dropping out of school annually[11]. Natraj already knew that not all schools or students enjoy the same privileges. His father and grandfather, like many Indians, had to overcome substantial obstacles to pursue higher education. During his time in Gujarat, he recognized that empowering school principals and leadership could create a multiplier effect, driving positive change in education.

Additionally, the lack of opportunities for young people presents a significant challenge in India, where over a quarter of the population is aged 15–29[12]. Many young Indians are excluded from decision-making processes and remain underrepresented in political spaces, such as the Lok Sabha[13,14,15].Although the national budget offers some resources for youth

development[16], high rates of unemployment among those under 30 have compelled the government to provide additional support through social protection schemes, such as Start Up India[i], Skill India[ii], the National Career Service (NCS)[iii], Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)[iv], and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY)[v]. The most recent effort, as part of the Finance Bill, 2024, includes a scheme to provide internship opportunities to 10 million youth from non-elite colleges and backgrounds in the country's top 500 corporations[17].

The need for both educational reform and youth development opportunities was clear; after a few years at Pratham, Natraj resolved to tackle these issues head-on. He believed that India could harness the innovation and energy of youth leaders to address its educational and developmental challenges. Reflecting on this, he tells the Centre for Asian Philanthropy India (CAPI), "In the early 2000s […] the institutions

producing leaders were just not keeping pace with our challenges. There was also a misconception that one must garner a cumulative set of experience[s] and wisdom before working in the social impact space. I wanted to address both issues by working with young people who, I believe, can be remarkably effective regardless of their backgrounds, if they receive the right tools and training."

In 2007, Natraj met Ajay Piramal, a philanthropist and business leader who grew his family's textile business into a multifaceted empire—the Piramal Group. Piramal felt a profound connection with Natraj's vision. He tells CAPI, "I was myself thrust into a leadership position at a young age—I had to independently run my father's company after he passed and take care of my family. That was the foundation of my own life—being given responsibility beyond my years. So, when I met Aditya and heard his vision to create a cadre of youth leaders, I was immediately interested."

i   Launched in 2016, Startup India is a government initiative that encourages entrepreneurship by providing financial and regulatory support to startups, improving the ease of doing business and facilitating access to funding and mentorship. Refer to https://www.startupindia.gov.in/.

ii   Introduced in 2015, the Skill India initiative seeks to empower youth by providing skills training across various industries. It aims to equip millions with market-relevant skills, helping them secure better employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. Skill India Digital Hub (SIDH) (n.d.) Upskilling, Reskilling, Career Growth and Lifelong Learning. Refer to https://www.skillindiadigital.gov.in/home.

iii NCS is a government portal that connects jobseekers, employers, and training providers. Launched in 2015, it provides career counseling, job matching services, and information on various skill development programs to bridge the employment gap. Ministry of Labour & Employment (n.d.). National Career Service. Refer to https://www.ncs.gov.in/.

iv   A flagship scheme under Skill India, PMKVY was launched in 2015 to offer short-term skill development programs to youth. It aims to improve employability by offering industry-relevant training, certification, and placement opportunities. Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (n.d.). Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana 2.0 (PMKVY 2.0) 2016–20. Refer to https://www.msde.gov.in/en/schemes-initiatives/schemes-initiatives-through-nsdc/pradhan-mantri-kaushal-vikas-yojana-pmkvy.

v   Part of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), DDU-GKY focuses on skills training for rural youth aged 15–35. Launched in 2014, it aims to enhance employment opportunities in both domestic and international job markets for economically disadvantaged groups. Ministry of Rural Development (2021). Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY): RTI Disclosures, November 2021. Refer to https://rural.gov.in/sites/default/files/RTI_DDUGKY_05112021.pdf.

Natraj believed that effective leadership could transform government schools in India and, by extension, improve the lives of millions of children. For Piramal, the program resonated with his own value system of giving back to the nation. He notes, "We are contributing to the country's development by inculcating the idea of 'Sewa Bhaav'—[giving] back to society. Young people that we take on have built the skills of resilience and grit and inculcated a commitment to bring about social change."

With Piramal's support, Natraj and the Piramal Foundation launched the Gandhi Fellowship program in 2008. Starting with an initial cohort of 11 Fellows in Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu district, the program now operates in nearly 170 districts in 27 of India's 28 states, with more than 2,200 Fellows.

Operating with the dual mission of achieving societal change and developing youth leadership, the Gandhi Fellowship presents a promising model. Its success has inspired a wave of youth leadership programs in India[18], each striving to equip young people with the skills and experiences needed to address India's social challenges.

Together, these programs hold immense potential. Yet, the landscape of youth leadership remains under-examined. Questions regarding which are the most

effective program models, theories of change, and strategies remain unasked and unanswered. These questions present a valuable opportunity to capture lessons learned in the realm of fellowships for youth and others. The Centre for Asian Philanthropy India **(CAPI)** seeks to bridge the knowledge gap around fellowships in India through this case study on the Gandhi Fellowship. By delving into the Fellowship design, implementation, and outcomes, we aim to illustrate the key elements of its success as well as considerations for other donors.

This report is organized into four key sections, each exploring distinct aspects of the Gandhi Fellowship and its broader implications for youth leadership development. **Part I** explores five critical elements that contribute to the program's success and approach to developing a cadre of youth leaders. **Part II** provides an in-depth look at the Fellowship's model, organizational structure, program flow, and funding mechanisms. **Part III** examines the program's influence at the individual and societal levels while acknowledging areas for improvement. Finally, **Part IV** offers actionable insights and lessons learned from the Gandhi Fellowship that may be useful to donors and other stakeholders interested in designing youth leadership development initiatives in the social sector.

THE GANDHI FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM AND STRUCTURE

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Gandhi Fellowship (GF) began as a pilot initiative funded and supported by the Piramal Foundation in Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu district. The initial cohort consisted of just 11 Fellows. Today, it has a nationwide presence, operating in nearly 170 districts across 27 states. With over 500 Fellows in each two-year cohort and an alumni network exceeding 2600 Fellows, it is one of India's largest initiatives focused on youth leadership. The GF aims to achieve social impact through youth development. Its theory of change is built on creating a virtuous cycle of facilitating leadership and transformation among young people in India by helping them bring about social change, which in turn further hones their leadership skills and passion to create broader societal impact.

Fellows, primarily recent university graduates, are recruited from various backgrounds and placed in various parts of the country for a duration of two years. They work alongside key stakeholders— such as school principals, teachers, healthcare workers, and block and district officials—to identify and address systemic challenged . Within the government education system, these might include student absenteeism, the absence of libraries, or a lack of access to digital tools such as computer labs. With support from the Piramal Foundation, the local community, and the local administration, Fellows design and implement targeted interventions—for example, making services more accessible, efficient, or inclusive. They gradually take on more responsibility, applying their growing knowledge to lead interventions independently. In this way, the program combines autonomy with structure.

Fellows work alongside other young people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and integrate with the community by living in close quarters. Through experimentation, risk-taking, and negotiation with diverse stakeholders, Fellows cultivate leadership skills. Moreover, the program emphasizes inner and lasting transformation through processes such as meditation and guided self-reflection.

Fellows each receive a monthly stipend of approximately ₹ 25,000 (US$300) to cover their living expenses, alongside additional support for travel, laptops or tablets, and medical insurance. A portion of the stipend is held back by the management as a reserve amount and disbursed upon successful completion of the Fellowship. This is meant to encourage ownership and financial responsibility among the Fellows and provide them with a lumpsum amount to help with their goals after the program.

Critically, by providing real-world experiences and the opportunity to cultivate leadership skills, the program is designed to bridge the gap between theory and the practice of achieving social change for youth. Today, the Fellowship has expanded from focusing on education to other focus areas of the Piramal Foundation, including health, digital inclusion, and tribal affairs.

FELLOWSHIP STRUCTURE

1st Year of Fellowship	Semester 1						Semester 2					
	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Induction & system immersion	■											
Field support - 120 days every semester		■		■	■	■	■		■	■	■	
Community immersion - 30 days every semester			■					■				
Public systems project - 120 days every semester				■	■	◧			■	■		
Debrief (reflection)	■	■		■	■	■	■		■	■	■	
Leadership curriculum - 1-2 hours per week	‖	‖	‖	‖	‖		‖	‖	‖	‖	‖	
Boot camps - 5-10 days at the end of each semester						◧					◧	
Learning consolidation (evaluation)			◧			◧		◧				◧
Wellness curriculum - 10 day Vipassana end of the year	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	★

Fig. 1 | Calendar view of the first year of the Gandhi Fellowship

The 23 months of the program are divided into four semesters of approximately six months each.

Orientation: At the beginning of the program, Fellows attend an orientation to learn the program's objectives and structure. This includes visits to government-run schools, primary healthcare centers, and government offices, such as gram panchayats and block development offices, to gain a ground-level understanding of public systems in India. During this time, they are also introduced to safety protocols and a wellness curriculum, which includes activities such as frisbee and yoga, which they are encouraged to incorporate into their daily lives.

Following the orientation, Fellows receive a **'leadership curriculum'**: a set of learning materials developed by the Piramal Foundation. This self-paced curriculum includes modules on public policy analysis, strategic leadership, social innovation, and more. The Fellows will need to invest an average of one to two learning hours per week to cover this curriculum. Fellows engage with the material through interactive activities such as group discussions, case studies, and practical assignments, fostering a dynamic and engaging learning environment.

Semester 1 (July–December): After the initial orientation, each Fellow is assigned to a specific district where they remain for the duration of the program. This marks the beginning of an intensive immersion into the realities of community dynamics and public systems.

During the next four to five months, Fellows engage in three key processes: **field support interventions, community immersions, and public system projects.** Their days are typically divided between mornings spent working within public institutions such as schools and healthcare centers and collaborating with government stakeholders and afternoons dedicated to community-based projects, fostering direct engagement with local populations. This hands-on experience provides valuable insights into challenges and opportunities for social change. To further enhance their learning, Fellows participate in daily debriefing sessions with their peers and Project Leads, enabling reflection, knowledge sharing, and collaborative problem-solving (more on this in Part 2 of this report).

- Towards the end of the semester, Fellows participate in a **learning consolidation** process to take stock of their progress. Evaluations and structured feedback occur through multiple channels, including self-assessments, peer reviews, and feedback from mentors and program leaders within the Piramal Foundation.

- The semester culminates in a five-to-seven-day **bootcamp** to prepare Fellows for the next semester. These **bootcamps** are knowledge-building sessions that feature talks by experts, leaders, social entrepreneurs, and senior public officials. They help provide Fellows with diverse perspectives on social change and public policy.

Following Semesters: The remaining three semesters follow a similar structure. The **second semester** (January to June) includes an intensive immersion in a **Vipassana** meditation course, and the **third semester** (July to December) introduces them to larger-scale projects that require community collaboration.

The **fourth and final semester** (January–May) consolidates all learning, preparing Fellows for future careers as leaders in social change. The focus is then on documenting impact, replicating successful strategies, and scaling projects to multiple locations or tackling broader systemic issues. The program concludes with a **convocation ceremony**, celebrating Fellows' achievements over the two years.

Field Support

Daily for 4-5 months each semester

Community Immersion (CI)

Once every semester for 30 days

Public Systems Project (PSP)

Once every semester for 60-90 days

Debrief

Reflective practice with peers & individually X daily practice

Wellness Curriculum

Physical exercise X daily practice
Journalling (fellow folio) X daily practice
Vipassana X 10 days course at the end of first year
Meditation practice X daily practice

Leadership Curriculum & Boot Camps

Self paced learning modules X one-two hours weekly
Boot camps X once every semester

Learning Consolidation

One-on-one with program leader X monthly
Process evaluation X once any process concludes, i.e., after every CI & PSP
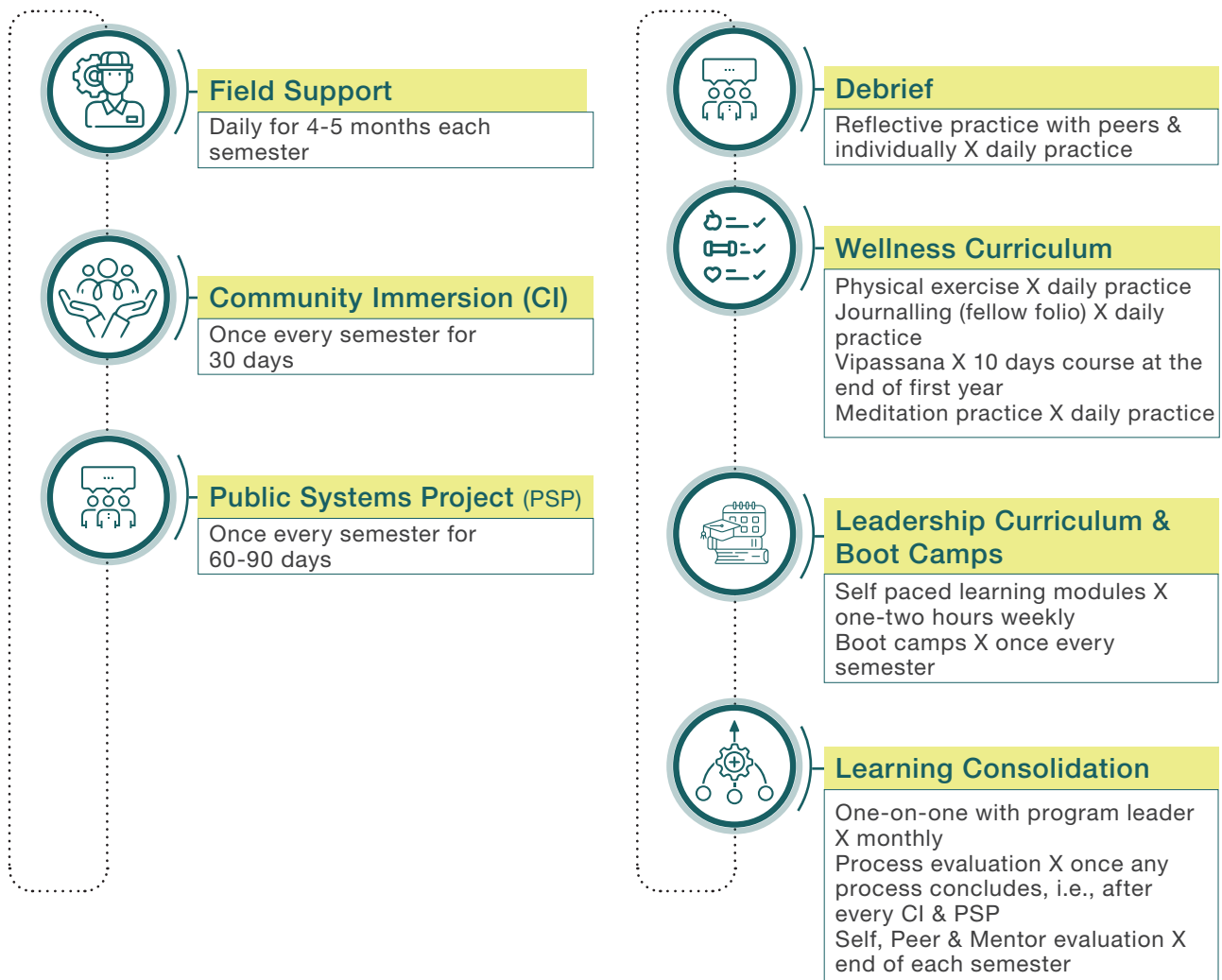Self, Peer & Mentor evaluation X end of each semester

Fig. 2 | Key processes of the Fellowship that enable youth leadership for social impact[vi]

vi   Data provided to CAPI by the Piramal Foundation as of March 2024.

The GF intentionally escalates the complexity of tasks over the two-year program, preparing Fellows to lead bolder initiatives. Fiona Fernandes, Senior Program Director, Design Team, shares that new entrants are eager to transform communities, their initial enthusiasm is soon tempered by the realities of resistance and setbacks from the community and government officials. She adds, "Over time, Fellows learn that social change is painful and not always visible. There is no easy success. However, by the second year, Fellows are ready to tackle more complex challenges. This gradual increase in challenge complexity cultivates essential leadership traits like resilience and risk-taking."

To counter potential discouragement, the program emphasizes small, achievable goals to cultivate a sense of accomplishment. For instance, a Fellow tasked with setting up functional libraries in public schools might begin by encouraging teachers to support an existing but underused library, transforming it into an active center for student learning. Resistance from school staff, such as reluctance to unlock and use the library, becomes an opportunity for the Fellow to help educators see the library's value and enable students to access its resources. These tailored, small goals help Fellows feel the impact of their efforts.

Through this multifaceted approach of curriculum-based learning, immersive experiences, continuous feedback, and escalating challenges, the GF program equips Fellows with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resilience to become effective leaders and changemakers.

FUNDING AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Piramal Foundation, led by Chairman Ajay Piramal and CEO Aditya Nataraj, is the implementing organization and founding donor of the GF. The Foundation covers program expenses and actively supports new initiatives, strategic partnerships, research, and organizational development, ensuring the Fellowship's financial sustainability. In addition, 40% of its funds are sourced from various independent domestic and foreign donors, including Porticus, UBS Optimus Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, and Co-Impact. This diversified funding strategy enables the Fellowship to sustain and expand its impact on public systems across India.

Over time, the Piramal Foundation's areas of work have expanded to include certain "big-bet verticals" such as health, tribal affairs, and digital inclusion.[19,20] The GF has also expanded into these areas, with Fellows now working in these sectors alongside education.

The Piramal Foundation's Core Team is at the helm of the GF. It is responsible for the overall execution, approach, and strategy of

the Fellowship. The **Operations Team**, also part of the Piramal Foundation, oversees Fellowship activities. This team provides strategic oversight, mentorship, and continuous monitoring and evaluation of the Fellows' progress. The Operations Team is structured hierarchically:

Additionally, the Fellowship benefits from the expertise of teams focusing on design, marketing, government relations, alumni relations, donor management, and support functions such as finance, IT, and HR.

Program Directors

Oversee a particular state and all activities within this geographic region

Program Managers

Manage multiple districts within a state

Program Leaders

Mentor a group of 5-10 fellows at the block or district level

Fellows

Work directly with public institutions, addressing community-specific challenges.

Fig. 3 | Organisational Structure of Operations Team of the GF

PART 2

THE GANDHI FELLOWSHIP AND LEADERSHIP ACTION

The structure of the Gandhi Fellowship (GF), as outlined in **Part I**, has contributed to its success in developing youth leadership and has inspired many similar youth leadership programs. But what sets the GF apart as a compelling example of effective leadership development that empowers youth individuals to become catalysts for social change?

CAPI has identified **two organizational practices and three key aspects of the program's approach and design** that form the heart and soul of the program.

The first significant organizational practice is the GF's **clear and focused vision** of creating a strong cohort of nation-builders capable of driving socioeconomic change. This enables it to strategically align activities and goals to develop future leaders committed to driving positive societal impact. This vision underlies its ambition to scale the program nationally and build a diverse cohort of Fellows.

Second, the program emphasizes **experiential learning** wherein Fellows are immersed in local communities so that they can learn how to address real-world challenges.

Essential to the program's design are the following key aspects: First, it combines **action with reflection**. The program encourages Fellows to critically assess their experiences, promoting deeper learning and self-awareness. Next, **diversity** within the cohorts promotes cross-cultural understanding and peer-to-peer learning. Finally, the GF operates as **a learning organization**, continuously refining its methods through iterative implementation.

These elements, as identified by CAPI, are integral to the GF's ability to develop new generations of leaders equipped to tackle complex societal challenges and foster lasting, positive change across India.

CLEAR VISION

Swami Vivekananda believed that a thousand energetic young individuals had the potential to transform India[21]. The GF's driving philosophy is that a small group of dedicated young people can create a ripple effect of positive change. **The GF aims to develop a generation of nation-builders—a cohort of 10,000 young leaders—who can lead social change by 2030.**[22]

At the outset, Piramal Foundation asked itself two critical questions: What does youth leadership mean? And where does it see these leaders 10 years after completion of the Gandhi Fellowship? According to Tripti Vyas, Director of Talent & Design at the Piramal Foundation, "We conceptualized the idea of **'nation-builders'**, defining them as 'committed youth, focused on developing leadership skills to drive positive, large-scale, and lasting change in society.' Our vision was to redefine a nation-builder for the 21st century: one who solves systemic

challenges empathetically and transforms the system rather than merely complaining about it."

These goals drive the GF's strategies and outcomes. The core team developed the Nation Builders Framework through extensive research, experimentation, and multiple iterations. The curriculum drew from best practices in global leadership and entrepreneurship programs, including EdFuel[23] and the Amani Institute[24], adapting them to the Indian context[25].

Currently, in its fourth iteration, the Nation Building Framework outlines the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that Gandhi Fellows require to become effective nation-builders. These include self-awareness, excellence, collaborative ability, risk-taking, and entrepreneurial ability. It also includes a component titled 'influencing without authority,' since sustained change requires stakeholder buy-in along with the articulation of one's goals to maintain passion and build trust.

Maintaining the Vision at Scale

The GF was designed for scale from the outset. As mentioned earlier, the Fellowship aims to create 10,000 nation-builders by 2030 and transform public systems in India to impact one million lives. "Our journey with the Gandhi Fellowship has always been about more than just incremental change," states Mr Ajay Piramal.

"We need innovative solutions tailored to India's unique challenges, and scale is essential to making a real difference. By empowering young leaders and equipping them with the tools to innovate, we aim to address the nation's most pressing issues on a large scale."

This is achieved by incorporating flexibility into the program structure. While the Fellowship's overall design is guided by its larger vision, the on-ground operations staff of the Piramal Foundation have adapted it to local contexts to ensure that each Fellow's unique needs, along with the needs of the communities with whom they work, are effectively met. Behind the scenes, the team responsible for the GF's overall design provides guidance and learns from the operations team, enabling effective implementation and allowing the program to grow (see Part I for the organizational and operating structure of the Piramal Foundation).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

India's traditional education system focuses on theoretical knowledge, often at the cost of practical, hands-on learning. As a result, graduates may be technically qualified in their fields and have a keen desire to contribute to nation-building, but they have little experience in navigating real-world challenges. The GF is designed to bridge this gap by providing experiential learning.

Aditya Nataraj, CEO of the Piramal Foundation, emphasizes the importance of learning by doing, highlighting the Piramal Foundation's commitment to empowering youth to maketheir own choices. He says **"When they [Gandhi Fellows] fall, we believe in helping them stand up again. Our job is to allow our Fellows to make their own mistakes and learn from them."** Experiential learning involves trial and error, the appreciation of failure, reflection, and trying new ways to succeed. Throughout the duration of the GF, Fellows have practical experiences that hone their critical thinking, leadership, and problem-solving skills. These are structured as three key processes.

The first of these is known as **field support**; it is the deepest experiential learning process of the GF, spanning its whole duration. Fellows begin the program by immersing themselves in a specific public system, such as education, health, or digital inclusion. They then study the key policies and frameworks that govern its functioning. They also visit government institutions, such as schools and health centers, to observe how these policies are implemented in practice.

With this foundation, each Fellow is assigned a specific district where they are based for the rest of the Fellowship. Here, they work alongside local government stakeholders—such as school principals, teachers, healthcare workers, and block officials—to identify specific problems. These could include student absenteeism, the lack of libraries, or the lack of access to digital tools such as computer labs.

Alongside their stakeholders, Fellows then design and implement targeted interventions—for example, to make services more accessible, efficient, or inclusive. They gradually take on more responsibility, applying their growing knowledge to lead interventions independently. Through experimentation, risk-taking, and negotiating with diverse stakeholders, Fellows cultivate leadership skills while gaining a nuanced understanding of the processes involved in driving social change.

Once Fellows gain insight into the public system, they immerse themselves in the community to understand its challenges. During this phase, they identify and request a local family in the district to host them for 21–30 days at a time. This **community immersion** occurs once during each semester of the GF and enables Fellows to witness community-specific inequities, injustices, and power dynamics firsthand. Living under similar conditions and taking

on labor-intensive jobs, Fellows build empathy, resilience, and self-reliance.

Fellows organize small discussions to address local issues, develop their listening skills, and gain a deeper understanding of community dynamics. They collaborate with public officials to facilitate community engagement and drive collective action toward addressing village-level problems. Through these experiences, Fellows develop critical skills in community mobilization, stakeholder engagement, negotiation, cultural adaptation, and influencing without authority—essential abilities to drive social change.

Finally, through a **public systems project**, Fellows independently pilot solutions to address a specific challenge within the public system or the community they are living in. This process allows them to innovate and problem-solve by applying their learning in practical contexts. Running parallel to field support, the public systems project varies in duration based on the Fellow's chosen area of intervention and the

complexity of the project.

The GF team supports Fellows with strategic planning and ensures that their projects align with each community's specific needs. For example, a Fellow might design and implement an adult learning program to improve literacy in the village with support from schoolteachers and volunteers. Alternatively, they might focus on streamlining patient management systems in healthcare facilities, increasing awareness of menstrual health and hygiene among adolescent girls in the village, or promoting sustainable agricultural practices in tribal areas.

Throughout this process, they experiment and collaborate closely with local government officials, community leaders, volunteers, and other stakeholders to establish sustainable solutions beyond the Fellowship. These projects often serve as pilot initiatives, allowing Fellows to contribute to social change while gaining invaluable experience in executing community solutions.

ACTION AND REFLECTION

While experiential learning and action are important steps, at the heart of the GF is an emphasis on inner transformation and self-awareness, cultivated through structured processes.

Fellows engage in daily **"debrief sessions"**—reflective discussions conducted by a program leader at the end of each day—in circles of five to seven members. They are encouraged to share the experiences, challenges, achievements, and emotional highs and lows that occurred during the day. The program leader provides prompts to guide reflection and help Fellows identify areas for personal growth. These structured debrief sessions are designed to facilitate more than a mere recollection of the day's events; they are dedicated to introspection.

For instance, a Fellow working to improve educational outcomes might have encountered resistance from a schoolteacher reluctant to adopt new teaching methods. During the debriefing, the Fellow might realize that this resistance stems from the teacher's lack of confidence in their ability to deploy these new methods. With this insight, the Fellow might choose to engage with the teacher differently—such as through a series of one-on-one interactions and workshops—to provide support and build trust.

By sharing their experiences, Fellows often discover commonalities in the challenges they and their peers face. This process fosters a spirit of collaboration and a sense of camaraderie within the cohort.

"Vipassana" translates to "see things as they are." Fellows engage in this ancient practice through a 10-day intense 'Noble Silence' meditation course. Vipassana is a journey into self-observation and introspection and provides a powerful tool to enhance self-awareness and self-regulation.

During Vipassana, Fellows disconnect from the external world to focus solely on their internal mind and body processes. For instance, a Fellow might enter Vipassana struggling with impatience and a lack of focus, which hinders their ability to work effectively with community members. However, through Vipassana, they learn to observe these emotional reactions without judgment, gaining better control over their responses. This inner transformation translates into a more patient, empathetic, and effective approach to work, significantly enhancing their ability to drive social change.

The Fellowship also promotes daily wellness practices, such as physical exercise, meditation, and journaling, to help maintain a balanced and positive mindset. These practices foster emotional intelligence and promote collective action and peer learning among diverse groups of Fellows. The GF's integration of self-awareness through action and reflection is a key element of leadership development.

ANUSHKA PANDEY

BATCH 14, 2021-2023

Anushka Pandey, a Fellow from Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, aspired to a career in banking. However, a chance encounter with a GF alumni ignited something deeper, and she joined the program looking to make a difference. Still, she had reservations: "[At first], I was dismayed when I was posted to Bihar, about which I was initially prejudiced, but my experience there turned those assumptions around," Anushka recalls. Living in rural Bihar, away from the comforts of her home, Anushka had to navigate day-to-day realities that were unfamiliar and often difficult. She learned to cook, work with limited resources, and immerse herself in the community. What had first felt overwhelming became a catalyst for personal growth, and she discovered a region filled with warmth and a community that transformed her.

During Anushka's field support, she identified gaps in the government healthcare delivery system. One of her key responsibilities was training frontline health workers—Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANM) and their supervisory officers—to use the ANMOL (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife OnLine) mobile application to facilitate timely and quality service delivery. Many government health workers had never used such tools; and their initial resistance was palpable. However, Anushka was patient and helped them adapt to the platform.

Subsequently, she took on the challenge of reviving a defunct primary health center (PHC) in Bibiganj village, Aaraha district, Bihar. Without the PHC, villagers had to travel long distances to the district hospital to access basic healthcare. During her field visits, Anushka learned that the Community Health Officers (CHO) faced difficulties connecting with the community and felt unsafe at the PHC, which had been previously vandalized and misused.

To address these issues, Anushka facilitated a dialogue between the residents of the village and the CHO, bridging the communication gap between them. Before Anushka's intervention, the CHO lived outside the village, which hindered her ability to provide regular healthcare services. With support from local leaders,

Anushka during her community immersion.

Anushka led a community fundraising initiative that resulted in practical improvements at the PHC, such as the installation of a fan and a clean and functional toilet, and the repair of the repair of essential infrastructure, including. Thereafter, the PHC became operational, offering reliable healthcare services to the villagers. The CHO, in turn, demonstrated her commitment by relocating to the village, ensuring accessible healthcare for residents. Through this experience, Anushka recognized the power of grassroots change and her ability to drive it.

The debriefing sessions and leadership training helped her understand that authentic leadership is not about directing others—it is about listening and building trust. Whether facilitating discussions between healthcare workers and government officials or resolving conflicts within the community, Anushka learned that empathy and communication are the cornerstones of effective leadership.

In retrospect, Anushka describes her time with the GF as life changing. "I learned to lead, to advocate for others, and to persist even when the road seemed impossible." Her community work in Bihar transformed her into a confident leader. Anushka currently works as a Program Associate with Dani Sports Foundation, a nonprofit formed to improve physical literacy and achieve sporting excellence in India.

DIVERSITY OF THE COHORT

An integral part of the GF is the heterogeneity of each cohort. Fellows are selected from a wide range of backgrounds, including students from top-tier universities in metropolitan cities as well as from regional colleges in Tier 2 and 3 cities and remote areas across the country. Fellows with a range of academic backgrounds, such as engineering, science, commerce, arts, and other domains, come together to collaborate and exchange skills and ideas. The design of the program ensures that a variety of voices contribute to the collective learning journey of the Fellows.

Today, the GF recruits over 800 individuals annually from across the country, including from the northeastern states and Kashmir. These individuals are placed in regions different from their home states—a strategy designed to challenge them to emerge from their comfort zones. Typically grouped into teams of five or six, Fellows learn to appreciate a variety of socioeconomic, cultural, religious, language, and academic backgrounds besides belief systems. The emphasis on collaboration equips them to lead with empathy and inclusivity. The daily interactions among the Fellows, who live and work closely together, naturally develop into support systems.

Vivek Sharma, Founder-Director, the Gandhi Fellowship Program, explained how the program melts class barriers. The GF might place an urban-educated Fellow from a higher middle-class background in a remote district, where theoretical knowledge and the exclusive use of English might not always be effective. By living and working alongside peers from rural backgrounds, who have a better understanding of local customs, the Fellows often achieve better results. As a collective, they collaborate to design constructive solutions. This teamwork leads to wider real-world exposure for both and fosters life-long friendships. Transforming India requires a commitment from versatile sets of youth: each bringing different approaches to the same challenges. CAPI also noted that language does not seem to pose a significant issue; many Fellows and alumni shared that within weeks, they were able to grasp the local dialects from interacting with their peers and the local community.

LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The GF and the Piramal Foundation are designed to be nimble, adaptable, and responsive to the evolving needs of youth and the changing times . This distinctive approach, coupled with the adoption of organizational-level learning practices, has allowed the GF to successfully operate one of India's most extensive fellowship programs across diverse sectors over many years.

The Piramal Foundation has ingrained daily reflection into its culture, fostering a dynamic learning environment where all staff, from leadership to associates, engage in continuous improvement. Trupti Vyas, Director Talent & Design at the Piramal Foundation tells CAPI, "Regular reflection sessions break down hierarchies, encourage open dialogue, and promote collaborative problem-solving." These sessions spark creativity and reflect the vital role of growth and adaptability to the Piramal Foundation and the Gandhi Fellowship.

Each edition of the Fellowship builds upon the last, incorporating feedback from Fellows, the community, and operational teams. This iterative approach helps ensure relevance and effectiveness.

For instance, the program's first five cohorts (2008–2014) had only one community immersion experience over two years. However, upon reflection, the core team recognized that the immersion was a profound learning opportunity, offering a steep learning curve for Fellows. Consequently, they increased community immersion experiences to two in the sixth cohort (2013–2015) and to four by the seventh cohort (2014–16), which ran one

per semester, each with distinct goals for community mobilization.

The GF's marketing and recruitment strategy has also pivoted over time. Initially, when the program was launched in 2008, the outreach strategy to recruit candidates rested on appealing to the youth's altruistic instincts and encouraging them to spend two years giving back to society. Although initially successful, over time, the marketing team of the GF found that this appeal was limited.

By 2018, the recruitment strategy shifted to emphasize the practical benefits of the Fellowship, particularly the to develop essential 21st-century skills. This new pitch highlighted the practical aspects of the GF, including the tools provided to develop empathy, critical thinking, adaptability, and other skills not typically imbibed in traditional academic settings. The messaging is now centered on the value of experiential learning. These elements were promoted as unique experiences to prepare the youth for the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

COVID-19 prompted further adaptations, emphasizing the need for resilience. Recognizing the necessity to prepare fellows for a "Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous world," the Piramal Foundation marketing and recruitment strategy currently emphasizes social entrepreneurship and careers in social impact[26,27]. This repositioning aims to attract a wider range of applicants by focusing on the personal and professional growth opportunities the GF provides, in addition to a sense of giving back to society.

SHRADDHA PATEL

BATCH 16, 2023-2025

Shraddha Patel is currently a Fellow with the GF program. Hailing from Khandwa, Madhya Pradesh, Shraddha grew up in a family of doctors and pursued a master's in social work in Indore. Assigned to the Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan, she began her field support process by learning about India's education policies and systems. Drawn to the importance of socio-emotional and ethical learning (SEEL), she visited several schools, engaging with school principals and teachers.

Shraddha had to first demonstrate the value of SEEL education to the school staff and gain their trust as an outsider. "It was quite challenging," Shraddha recalls. "As a young person with no formal authority, I had to rely entirely on the strength of my ideas and my ability to communicate effectively to convince the schoolteachers and principals that SEEL is very important to a child's overall development. There were moments of doubt, but I persisted." Shraddha found that building personal relationships and demonstrating genuine commitment to the community were crucial. "I spent a lot of time listening to the teachers' concerns and understanding their perspectives," she explains. "This helped me tailor my approach and show that I was invested in their success

as much as mine." Through tactful negotiation, continuous communication, and demonstrating SEEL concepts in classrooms, Shraddha gained support from her stakeholders.

Within a few months, Shraddha successfully navigated the public education system to demonstrate the benefits of SEEL. By 2024, she has facilitated the adoption of SEEL across 15 primary schools in Jhunjhunu. Her efforts to promote SEEL have created a ripple effect, with teachers embracing the idea that education is more than just academics—it involves developing the whole person and fostering an environment where young people feel safe to express themselves and learn emotional management skills.

Reflecting on her personal growth, Shraddha shared with CAPI about her growth from being a shy individual when she joined the program to becoming a confident person able to engage with a wide range of people and mobilize them to create social change. "Now, I can confidently lead discussions that drive action. I have grown in ways I never imagined," she says. "The Fellowship has made me realize my leadership strength and capacity."

Her community immersion experience

Shraddha in her school where she implements Socio-emotional Ethical Learning with Adolescents.

also impacted her perspective on manual labor. She earned only ₹150 (US$1.80) per day while working on a farm during the harvest season. She told the CAPI team that this helped her develop immense respect for the farming community and the severe conditions they work in. It also made her aware of the full extent of her privilege as a well-educated, upper-caste individual.

Another community immersion led to unexpected initiatives. While residing with an 'Anganwadi Sevika,' or a community health worker, Shraddha learned that villagers were burning contraceptives distributed under government family planning schemes. Public health efforts were hindered by the stigma around sexual and reproductive issues and deep-rooted gender disparities.

Navigating a complex region with entrenched gender roles was challenging, but she approached each situation with empathy and patience. She began to address the sensitive topic of condom uptake—rarely discussed openly,

especially by women. "I knew it would spark uncomfortable conversations," Shraddha says. Through open dialogues, she challenged long-standing taboos in a community unaccustomed to seeing young women take such bold steps. She credits this experience with shaping her leadership style—one that values listening, understanding, and guiding others toward change rather than imposing it.

The once quiet and soft-spoken girl from Khandwa has now found her voice in the heart of Rajasthan's villages. Engaging with communities, facilitating discussions in schools, and navigating deeply personal and culturally sensitive topics have allowed her to build self-esteem and resilience.

Shraddha feels a deep sense of pride in her accomplishments. "I've not only built confidence, but I've also found my voice as a leader," she tells CAPI. "The Gandhi Fellowship has pushed me to confront uncomfortable realities and inspired me to become an advocate for those whose voices are often silenced."

PART 3

IMPACT AND CONSIDERATIONS

This section explores the individual and societal impact of the Gandhi Fellowship (GF). By examining both its successes and limitations, we offer useful insights into the potential and challenges of youth-led development initiatives, highlighting pathways to maximize impact and improve the quality of the Fellowship experience. We also present important considerations for donors and other stakeholders involved in similar programs in India.

IMPACT AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

The GF is a transformative journey for participants, impacting both their personal and professional lives. It is based on a robust model that aims to transform today's youth into the leaders of tomorrow. his model has grown significantly, expanding in scale and scope, with the program increasing cohort sizes and extending its reach across multiple states. From the first cohort of 11 Fellows in a single district in Rajasthan, it has expanded to 27 states and two union territories, with a vibrant alumni community of over 2,700 young leaders, many of whom continue to spearhead social initiatives and enterprises.

Significantly, CAPI's findings reveal that the

Fellows are not simply seen as instruments to achieve the Fellowship's goals; rather, they are viewed as emerging leaders essential for achieving long-term systemic change. "The Gandhi Fellowship has always aimed to give young people the critical experience and confidence to make a change. It is designed to provide them with real-world challenges and opportunities to develop their leadership skills," says Aditya Natraj.

The resounding endorsements from various Fellows and alumni are a testament to the impact of the GF on the lives of several young people.

"The Fellowship experience was truly life-altering; The impact is so profound and personally transformative that there was a life before and after the Fellowship for me."

Kshitij Patil, Batch 3 (2010–12)[vii]

"This [is] the most unique experience I have ever had. The two years during the Fellowship significantly impacted my personal and professional life. Whether in terms of personality, leadership, [or] how I confront and manage personal relationships, I continue to carry the lessons from the program [to] everything I do today."

Divya Jain, Batch 2 (2009–11)[viii]

"The experience embedded in me a deep commitment to work towards social and developmental impact. Initially, it was too abstract. But then, after a few weeks, there was a shift—the Fellowship process instilled in us a strong belief that we are the next generation of nation-builders. On a personal level, [the] Gandhi Fellowship was a journey of navigating [much] self-doubt. You gradually become comfortable with yourself and know what you can be, given how you are and who you are."

Ritwik Chatterjee, Batch 3 (2010–12)[ix]

"The Fellowship puts you on an important journey of self-reflection and personal growth. It is a very intense experience that teaches you influence without authority"

Preyansi Mani, Batch 1 (2008–10)[x]

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vii   Kshitij Patil established a social enterprise called Art of Play with two other alumni that focuses on sports education. He has now transitioned to the role of Vice President of Dani Sports Foundation, which integrated Art of Play into its operations. Kshitij has also initiated a sports fellowship program called "Sports for Transformation Fellowship" to equip young people with the skills to develop the sports ecosystem in India and abroad.

viii   Divya Jain was most recently working with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in New Delhi.

ix   Ritwik works with Sattva, a social impact consulting firm.

x   Preyansi works with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), a German development agency.

Many Fellows have gone on to develop innovative solutions to local challenges, contributing to the broader field of social innovation. One notable example is Gitanjali Babbar, a Batch 1 Fellow (2008–2010), who founded the nonprofit Kat-Katha in 2011 to combat the forced sex trade at GB Road, New Delhi. The organization has earned accolades and a strong reputation for its impactful work in anti-human trafficking. Also, women comprise a majority of the Gandhi Fellowship program.

Another example is Saransh Vaswani and Abhishek Choudhary from Batch 3 (2010–12), who co-founded Saajha, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering parents to become active partners in their children's education by building a supportive, community-driven school management committee. Their initiatives have led to systemic changes in public education, impacting a million families across India and integrating parents into the education process. Their achievements include their recognition as a Young India Fellow, Echoing Green Fellow, Ashoka Fellow, and SPC-Agency Fund Social Impact Fellow.

Other GF alumni have pursued careers in government bodies, nonprofit organizations, and corporate entities, where they continue to spearhead initiatives in agriculture, education, livelihoods, health, digital inclusion, social protection, gender equity, and human rights.

ASHA SCARIA

BATCH 09, 2016-2018

Asha Scaria, from Kerala's Kottayam district and a Mathematics graduate from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, found herself in unfamiliar territory as a Gandhi Fellow in tribal Rajasthan. Her placement in Dungarpur meant working with government schools across villages, where she initially struggled with the local language and understanding grassroots realities.

"At the end of my first year, I was frustrated and couldn't see the meaning of my work," Asha shares. The systemic gaps in education and limited livelihood opportunities seemed vastly challenging. Yet, she realized that perhaps her very presence in the villages was contributing to social change. Motivated by this realization, she decided to complete the 23-month program, determined to make a difference, now more aware of her privileged background.

For her public systems project, Asha focused on improving income opportunities for women. She recognized that local skilling programs, such as tailoring, only trained women in basic stitching, which did not fully equip them to produce market-ready goods. Identifying this gap, she sought ways to address it and met Neelam, a local tailor eager to learn. Together, they laid the groundwork for Swara: Voice of Women, a social enterprise designed to bring Dungarpur's crafts to a broader market, and launched as an ethical fashion brand in 2018.

Swara's goal was to provide a sustainable income and fair wages for female tailors while enhancing their skills to help them navigate larger markets. With encouragement from her Fellow peers and the wider GF network, Asha launched Swara as a direct-to-consumer brand, using Instagram to tell the stories behind each handcrafted piece. "I never did anything alone during the Fellowship, what worked for me was that I asked for help without hesitation and my peers supported me," she recalls.

Over time, Swara has grown beyond ethical fashion, expanding to support small, women-led social enterprises. Recently, Asha launched CraftHER, an experiential program in partnership with the Laidlaw Foundation, connecting

Asha with the first cohort of CraftHER

students with artisans in Kerala for co-learning and sustainable craft workshops. Through CraftHER, Asha is refining Swara's approach to supporting local enterprises, focusing on immersive, real-world learning for artisans and students alike.

Asha's work with Swara earned her scholarships from Laidlaw and Skoll Foundation in 2021 to pursue an MBA at Saïd Business School, Oxford. She envisions a future where Indian artisanal crafts gain global recognition, with Swara serving as a platform for both women's empowerment and the promotion of Indian heritage on the international stage.

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Starting their own non-profits or for-profit social enterprises.

SOCIAL INTRAPRENEURSHIP

Leading verticals and initiatives within established non-profit organisations or the government.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Pursuing higher education within India and abroad.

ALUMNI CAREER TRACKS

Alumni's work across the different thematic domains in social sector and in different functional ecosystems.

THEMATIC DOMAINS

EDUCATION LIVELIHOOD AGRICULTURE YOUTH & SKILL DEV WASTE MANAGEMENT ENVIRONMENT HEALTH

FUNCTIONAL ECOSYSTEMS

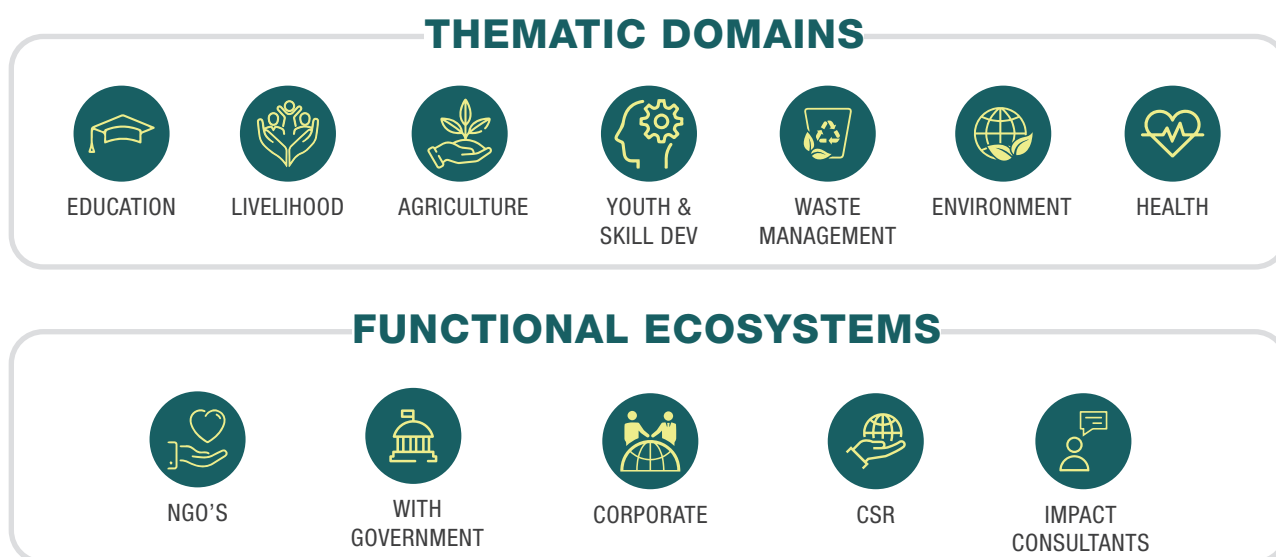NGO'S WITH GOVERNMENT CORPORATE CSR IMPACT CONSULTANTS

Fig. 4 | Career pathways of the GF alumni community[xi]

The Piramal Foundation remains connected with the GF alumni and maintain a database of their career paths. According to the Foundation's records, alumni largely pursue three tracks: social entrepreneurs, who establish their own social enterprise or nonprofit; social intrapreneurs, who work within existing nonprofits or social enterprises; and alumni pursuing higher education overseas (see Figure 4).

A significant number of alumni are driving initiatives across nonprofits, corporate social responsibility, government, and social impact consulting, holding roles at the executive, managerial, and senior leadership levels. Many continue to work in underserved regions, advancing social change at district, state, and national levels.

Mapping the career trajectories of Fellows post-fellowship is a valuable exercise. Identifying divergences based on demographics and analyzing the trends could enable the Fellowship to design targeted support structures, ensuring fellows from diverse backgrounds can access opportunities in areas where they may be underrepresented.

BROADER SOCIETAL IMPACT

In addition to its mission to transform youth into leaders, the GF also aims to create systemic social change. Since its inception, the program has grown from its early focus on one district to several areas across India.

Newer initiatives within the GF now target change at various levels of government. For instance, in 2016, the **District Transformation Program (DTP)**, introduced by the Piramal Foundation, focused on district-wide educational reforms in two states, which was later expanded to five more. In 2019, the **State Transformation Program (STP)** was launched to develop skilled educators, backed by 80 Fellows in four states. The STP enabled state-level education officials to implement workflow automation, professional development, and data-driven reforms.

By 2021, the GF had **expanded its vision beyond education to drive systemic change across other critical sectors**, such as public health, tribal health, digital inclusion, inclusion of children with disabilities, and multidimensional poverty through its Aspirational Bharat Collaborative[xiii].

Despite the program's expansion in terms of geography and social issues, establishing sustainable community impact remains a challenge. While Fellows' public systems projects yield tangible results within their communities, comprehensive data on long-term social impact is lacking. Gathering more evidence on learning or health outcomes would be instrumental for potential funders and stakeholders interested in replicating or supporting similar initiatives. Naturally, given India's vast scale, systemic change is inherently slow. However, enhancing transparency in data and measurement methods would be beneficial for both internal evaluation and external stakeholders seeking to learn from the program's experiences.

CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

The GF's dual mission and ambitious expansion across diverse sectors and states pose several interrelated operational and logistical complexities.

Competing goals

While the GF program is recognized for its focus on creating youth leaders, its broader goal is to drive systemic change. This presents a central tension common to all social impact-focused fellowships in general—balancing the interests of the Fellows with those of the communities they serve. For the GF, this may be a particularly pronounced in regions where successive cohorts of Fellows are placed year after year. In such cases, the learning opportunities for Fellows may outweigh any long-term benefits for the communities within which they are placed. When

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xi   Aspirational districts—the 112 most underdeveloped districts identified by the Indian government—require targeted interventions to improve key development indicators. The Aspirational Bharat Collaborative, a partnership between NITI Aayog and the Piramal Foundation, focuses on supporting district administrations in 150+ districts to address socioeconomic challenges through last-mile convergence and hyper-local collaboration with civil society and the government.

questioned about this, Aditya Nataraj stated, "The theory of change and the vision for the Gandhi Fellowship is built on a process of change. Helping to bring about a transformation within a community changes the Fellow, and these goals do not have to be mutually exclusive."

While the GF strives to achieve a harmonious integration of these goals, challenges inevitably arise. One such challenge is the differing priorities between some donors and the implementing staff. Some donors seek quantifiable, short-term results, while the program's leadership development objectives are inherently long-term, making them harder to quantify. This mismatch can create tension between prioritizing immediate project deliverables and investing in the personal development of Fellows, leading to misaligned efforts and a potential dilution of the program's overall impact.

This tension highlights the importance of framing fellowship programs like the GF as platforms for cultivating future change-makers rather than merely tools to achieve short-term project goals. Balancing immediate community impact and the long-term investment in Fellows' personal and leadership growth is crucial. By prioritizing ethical practices, Fellows' safety, fair compensation, and adherence to labor laws, such fellowship programs can ensure a positive and empowering experience for both Fellows and their communities. This approach fosters sustainable change and avoids potential pitfalls associated with short-term, transactional views.

Quality of Fellows' experience

Ensuring a consistently high-quality experience for all Fellows across the vast geographic expanse of India also poses various challenges.

Firstly, as the GF expands, the use of digital tools such as Zoom has become more important. For example, debrief sessions are often conducted online rather than in person. However, virtual interactions, accelerated by the pandemic, may dilute Fellows' sense of community. Reliance on digital communication can exacerbate feelings of isolation among Fellows placed in areas with limited peer support. Praveen Panchal, Program Manager, Rajasthan, explains, "When the Fellowship first started, there were no smartphones. Fellows in small villages had no choice but to build relationships and connected with each other. Today, however, a Fellow can choose to spend all his or her time on their phones, instead of making the best of the environment they are in, and the people they are with." Moreover, following the pandemic, Fellows now receive a higher stipend to find housing and live independently instead of with peers, which impacts the experience of living and working in close quarters with a diverse cohort. Evaluating the impact of these changes on the overall Fellowship experience could help understand their effects on participant satisfaction, community engagement, and program outcomes.

Secondly, Fellows living and traveling in unfamiliar areas may face risks due to limited knowledge of the local language and culture. They may encounter unwanted attention, harassment, theft, or, in some cases, physical or sexual assault. During the GF's formal orientation, Fellows are briefed on cultural and safety considerations and provided with guidance on emergency measures. However, the current safety protocols within the program appear to be semi-formal, relying largely on the Fellows' ability to manage risks independently and seek assistance from their project leaders, managers, and peers during conflicts or emergencies. Given the remote and often isolated locations where they are placed, it is critical to formalize comprehensive safety, reporting, and response protocols within the program structure.

Another consideration is supporting the mental health of Fellows, given the intense, introspective, and often emotionally challenging nature of the GF. Alumni have highlighted that the program can sometimes bring unresolved personal trauma to the surface, underscoring the need for the provision of professional mental health resources for the Fellows. While peer networks and program leaders can offer valuable support, professional services provide a safety net, offering Fellows a confidential space from an external perspective to help them process,

contextualize, and consolidate their experiences while safeguarding their well-being throughout the program. Finally, despite a high standard of regional and class diversity, the inclusion of people with disabilities remains a significant challenge. The physically demanding nature of the Fellowship, especially in remote areas with limited facilities and significant infrastructural gaps, presents accessibility issues. Addressing these challenges will require completely different structures, processes, and models to ensure that all potential Fellows, regardless of physical ability, can participate and thrive in the program.

PART 4

STRATEGIES FOR DONORS

Striking the right balance between serving the community and fostering the growth of Fellows requires a thoughtfully designed program that integrates practical experience with opportunities for reflection and iteration. It also necessitates a long-term view that promotes calculated risk-taking, values learning from failures, and empowers Fellows to take ownership of their learning journeys.

The Gandhi Fellowship (GF) demonstrates such elements in its curriculum-based approach. Fellows have clearly defined learning objectives, regular feedback loops, and opportunities for reflection and experimentation. Mentorship opportunities and workshops—such as the boot camps—equip Fellows with essential skills, while field support activities align their efforts with the program's broader organizational

goals of public systems change. Community-focused initiatives, such as public systems projects, provide Fellows with a platform to independently test new ideas based on the problems that they identify in their assigned communities.

For donors interested in investing in youth leadership programs and fellowships, this program offers critical considerations to maximize the effectiveness of their contributions:

Well-articulated vision

A clearly defined, compelling vision is the foundation of a successful fellowship program. This vision provides a guiding framework for designing the program's structure, curriculum, participant selection, and community engagement. A strong vision not only attracts and motivates participants but also serves as a unifying force, ensuring that all efforts are aligned toward achieving a common goal.

Program adaptability

Fellowship programs must evolve with the changing needs of participants and the communities they serve. This requires a willingness to experiment, learn from setbacks, and continuously refine program components.

Mutually beneficial community engagement

A symbiotic relationship between the community and Fellows is crucial. Programs should foster meaningful partnerships where Fellows apply their skills and knowledge to address real-world challenges, while communities provide valuable learning opportunities and a platform for impactful contributions.

Experimentation and failure

Creating safe spaces for the youth to experiment and engage in self-discovery fosters a growth mindset and empowers young leaders to embrace challenges, take risks, and learn from failures to help cultivate resilience, adaptability, and a strong sense of purpose.

Diversity

Recruiting a diverse cohort of Fellows from various backgrounds and economic groups enriches the learning experience by promoting empathy, and it exposes Fellows to a wide range of perspectives.

Safety protocols

Robust safety protocols and support mechanisms are essential, particularly for programs set in challenging environments. Prioritizing the physical and emotional well-being of participants allows Fellows to focus on their projects and contribute effectively without undue risk.

Patient capital

Nurturing effective leaders requires patience and real-world experience; this is a transformative experience for individuals. Fellowships should be designed with sufficient time for fellows to learn from challenges and successes. This will enable growth, resilience, and critical thinking. Additionally, implementing lasting socioeconomic change is an intensive effort that often includes bringing about behavioral change in communities over time.

The journey of youth fellowships in India, exemplified by the Gandhi Fellowship, underscores the transformative potential of investing in young leaders. As India advances on its path toward sustainable development, empowering its youth through well-designed fellowship programs is not just an investment in individuals but a commitment to a brighter future. By learning from the GF and prioritizing the considerations outlined in this report, donors can contribute to a thriving ecosystem of youth-led initiatives, fostering a more equitable, just, and prosperous society for all.

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

	INTERVIEWEE	STAKEHOLDER	ORGANIZATION & DESIGNATION
1	Ajay Piramal	Philanthropist	Chairman Piramal Foundation
2	Aditya Natraj	Founder	CEO, Piramal Foundation
3	Vivek Sharma	Founder	Founder-Director Gandhi Fellowship Program
4	Tripti Vyas	Leadership	Director Talent & Design at the Piramal Foundation
5	Rohit Talwar	Leadership	Core Team Member, Piramal Foundation
6	Debanjan Roy	Leadership	Core Team Member, Piramal Foundation
7	Fiona Fernandes	Program Staff	Program Director, Design team, Piramal Foundation
8	Praveen Panchal	Program Staff	Program Manager - Rajasthan, Piramal Foundation
9	Sher Singh	Program Staff	Program Leader, Piramal Foundation
10	Mahesh Kumar	Program Staff	Program Leader, Piramal Foundation
11	Goldy Negi	Program Staff	Program Leader, Piramal Foundation
12	Hitesh Kumar	Program Staff	Program Leader, Piramal Foundation
13	Preyasi Mani	Alumni, Batch 1	Education & Youth Advisor, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
14	Divya Jain	Alumni, Batch 2	Program Manager, UNDP
15	Kshitij Patil	Alumni, Batch 3	Vice President of ELMS Sports Foundation
16	Ritwik Chatterjee	Alumni, Batch 3	Engagement Manager, Sattva
17	Asha Scaria Vettoor	Alumni, Batch 9	Founder, Swara: Voice of Women
18	Anushka Pandey	Alumni, Batch 14	Program Associate, ELMS Sports Foundation
19	Pragati Singh	Current Fellow	Batch 15 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
20	Monali Meshram	Current Fellow	Batch 15 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
21	Saniya Kumari	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
22	Shraddha Patel	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
23	Abhinandan Kumar	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
24	Ayush Raj	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation

	INTERVIEWEE	STAKEHOLDER	ORGANIZATION & DESIGNATION
25	Aksheeta Malik	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
26	Akshay Walke	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
27	Beauti Debi	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
28	Harsh Khandelwal	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
29	Kapil Rai	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
30	Laxmi Malara	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
31	Minal Puroshatam	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
32	Mahima	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
33	Parveena Narayanan	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
34	Runti Ghosh	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
35	Ribhav Karn	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
36	Sahed Ali	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
37	Saurabh Soni	Current Fellow	Batch 16 Fellow, Piramal Foundation
38	Safia Sheikh	School Staff	Principal, Piramal Centre for Children with Special Needs, Baggar, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan
39	Dharmendra	School Staff	Vice Principal, Piramal Centre for Children with Special Needs, Baggar, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan
40	Namrata, Priyanka, Dinesh, Ashish and Rahul	School Staff	Special Educators, Piramal Centre for Children with Special Needs, Baggar, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan
41	Durga	School Staff	School Principal, Government Senior Secondary School, Hamiri Kalan Village, Alsisar Block, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan
42	Punam Choudhary	School Staff	Mathematics Teacher, Government Senior Secondary School, Hamiri Kalan Village, Alsisar Block, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan
43	Rajkumar	School Staff	Vice Principal, Government Senior Secondary School, Abusar Village, Alsisar Block, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan

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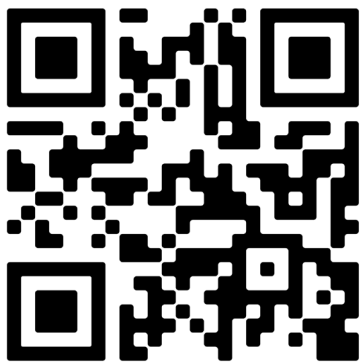Enabling transformation and thought leadership on India's social challenges through knowledge, awareness and supporting collective action.

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