



Junoon

Journey of an Associate





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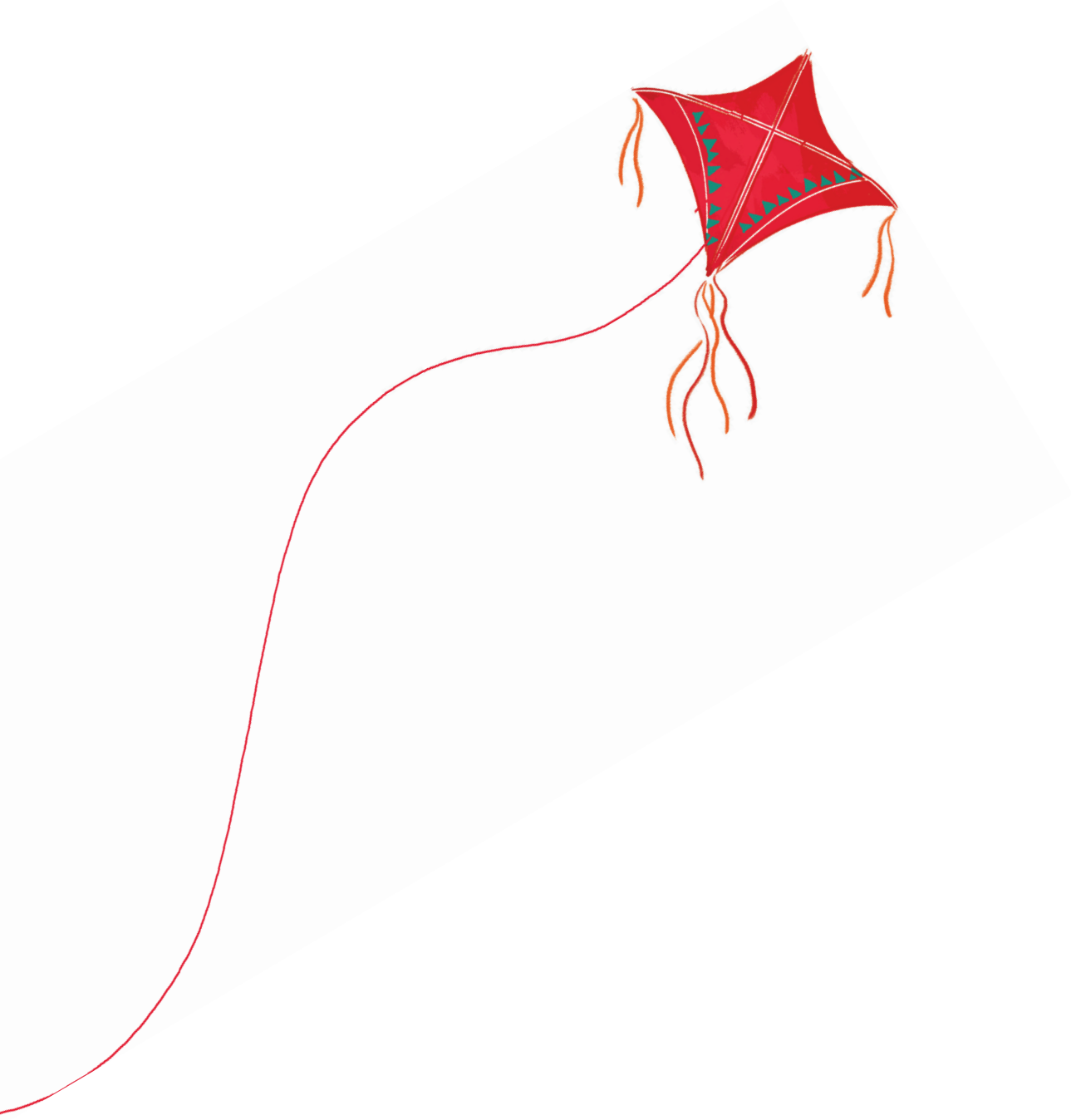
Journey of an Associate A tale of learning and living

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Azim Premji Foundation Associate Programme - 2021





Preface

Every journey is a story. It begins with a story and ends with one, too. And it's important to narrate and document every story, because each one is unique.

My personal journey of being an Associate at the Azim Premji Foundation is a story that began a year ago --- in October 2020, to be precise. The world was still reeling from the effect of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The second wave --- deadlier than the first --- was only a few months away. The pandemic changed the course of the Associate programme for the 2020-21 batch, placing very different roles and responsibilities on the shoulders of each Associate on the field. The roles and responsibilities came with big and small learnings. The learnings led to milestones, both professional and personal. And all of this went into the pages of a diary that has been my companion for the last one year.

Today, as I write this, the diary is the repository of all the moments that made my journey special. It is not just a frame of reference for the career I have chosen. It is also a montage of people --- mainly two government schoolteachers and 50 students from the first and second grades --- and places that have helped me on in my life as an Associate.

I hope this document brings joy and contentment to my parents, who have always supported me in my decisions and life choices. I also hope that aspiring Associates find emotional resonance in my experiences.

Let's take this journey together!

Why जुनून

For a person from Calicut --- present-day Kozhikode in Kerala --- communication in Hindi, that too in faraway Chhattisgarh, was nothing short of a challenge. Up until my graduation, all of which was in my hometown, Malayalam was the language I was most familiar and comfortable with. Hindi was the goal I wanted to reach. In order to do that, I started spending time with Hindi speakers during my college years. It gave me a window to the language, even though mastering it still remains on my to-do list. It will help me speed up my work, communicate more effectively and also build my confidence in making lesson plans, conducting sessions and other activities.

Among the words I picked up in the initial phase was "जुनून" - an Arabic word that has found its way to the lexicon of Hindi or Hindustani speakers.

I loved pronouncing this word, just like a child who repeatedly uses a word without even knowing its meaning. But today as I write about my own journey, I understand the significance of this word.

ये शब्द मुझे पसंद है, जब मैं इस शब्द का मतलब नहीं समझती थी तब भी मैं इस शब्द को बेवजह दोहराती थी, बस ऐसे ही |

जब मैं शुरुआत में हिंदी सीख ही रही थी तब इस शब्द का सही मतलब समझे बिना भी मैं इसका इस्तेमाल करती थी, बस अच्छा लगता था उच्चारण करना |

जब इस सफ़र को नाम देने के लिए एक शब्द सोचा तो बहुत दिन के बाद मुझे ये शब्द याद आया |

और मुझे लगा कि इस सफ़र के लिए इससे बेहतर कोई शब्द नहीं होगा क्योंकि,

मुझे लगता है कि ये जूनून ही तो है जिसने मुझे केरल से यहाँ तक पहुँचाया |

ये जूनून ही तो है कि पिछले एक साल में एक बार भी घर जाने का मन नहीं हुआ |

ये जूनून ही तो है जिसने मुझे इतनी जल्दी एक नई भाषा सिखाई |

ये जूनून ही तो है जिसने मुझे एकदम नई जगह में ठहराया |

यहाँ सब कुछ नया है, यहाँ की भाषा, मौसम, खाना, रिवाज.. सब कुछ |

और ये जूनून ही तो है जिसने मुझे ये सब सिखलाया |

Today I know why I am where I am. Today I know why I never felt homesick in the last one year. Today I know why I could embrace a new language. Today I know why I have grown roots at a place unknown --- a place where the food, customs, climate and dialect were new to me. And I also know what made me stay on and conquer the challenges.





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❖ The beginning

The genesis of my life as an Associate goes back to my days as an undergraduate in Calicut. I was pursuing physics in college, and, like most students of my age, I took tuition classes for pocket money. That's when I realised that I enjoy teaching more than the prospect of working in a tech-based role or research. Being the captain of an NSS team also gave me an opportunity to hone my skills in leadership and team play. A chance to work with the Palliative Wing in college made me familiar with social work.

Teaching seemed to be the perfect amalgamation of all that I had acquired in the roles mentioned above: The joy in sharing knowledge, the fulfilment of leading by example and also work towards a common goal, and the selflessness of changing lives for better.

Azim Premji University gave me the platform for specialising in science education. I joined in 2018 and entered a world that introduced me to the sociology, philosophy and psychology of education, curriculum and pedagogy of different domains. I also had practicals in the schools of Bengaluru apart from 3-4 internships through the programme.

As part of field immersion in the first semester, I went to Dhamtari DI in Chhattisgarh and stayed in the Bhakhara, Kurud block. I did my field practice at Rampur and Pachpedi. I didn't know that I would return to Dhamtari someday and work with the Kurud team, or even be part of the Azim Premji Foundation.

During the field immersion at MS Panchpedi, Bhakhara



I completed my MA programme in 2020, specialising in science education and teacher professional development. I explored other organisations in the education sector. Eventually, I returned to the Foundation when it was time to choose a place to work. Its work culture and the ambience of critical and rational thinking attracted the educator in me.

First lap (October – December 2020)

I joined the Foundation in October 2020, and attended an online orientation programme for 15 days. The programme was helpful in giving clarity on the nature of engagements in the field and school practices.

I reached Kurud with my father on November 1.

November 1 is an important day in the history of both Kerala and Chhattisgarh. The state of Kerala was born on this day in 1956. Forty-four years later, on the same day, Chhattisgarh was created as a state. In my eyes, my home state and my adopted state are tied together by this common thread.

My mentors Prakash and Madhubanti received us at Kurud and took us to the house they had chosen for me. Their gesture touched my father who left Kurud with the knowledge that his 22-year-old daughter was in good and caring hands.

Thus began the Kurud chapter of my life. I settled in slowly, along with three other Associates who became my friends.

Since schools were still shut due to the pandemic, we focused on internal capacity building. We participated in online workshops and teacher training programmes run by other members of the block.

Within the same month, two of my Associate friends tested positive for Covid-19, so all four of us had to move our work online. I purchased a Scooty --- my very first! --- to make my field visits easier and more efficient. Towards the end of November, I started visiting schools in the block and contributed to the Mohalla classes.

Mohalla classes are sample classroom set-ups in community spaces that ensure social distancing. Conducted by teachers from government schools, these classes are beneficial for students who cannot access lessons through the internet.

I chose the Mohalla class in Charra village, 5 km from Kurud.



I spent the first half of the day with students from first and second grades, helping them learn with the use of Teaching Learning Materials (TLMs) and the Jhola Library. Lunch was at the Teacher Learning Centre (TLC), where I dined with my mentors and other senior members of the block. We shared rotis with the

Lunch with my mentors



same enthusiasm as we shared stories from the Mohalla classes. As the meal progressed, we also discussed lesson plans for languages and mathematics.

I would like to mention Tuleshwary Ma'am from my school under the School Understanding Programme (SUP). She has more than eight years in the profession and showed great enthusiasm in exploring new pedagogies in language and math teaching for first-graders.

Visit to the Dhamtari District Institute



❖ Second lap (January – March 2021)

In January 2021, I started taking language classes in Charra. However, the lessons came to a pause because of a Covid-19 cases in the village. During this period, I accompanied my fellow Associate, Debabrata, to his school and took part in a Bal Shodh Mela. A Bal Shodh Mela is a fest conducted by either one school or

*Surveying plants
with students*



more than one school in a cluster. On the last day of the fest, students exhibit the findings of a project undertaken by them under the supervision of teachers. The subject of the project could be anything from the history of the village to the study of water table.

In February, I started exploring mathematics teaching for the first standard in topics such as prenumber concepts and counting. I made

community visits to understand the socio-economic background of my students. It helped me design my classroom strategies.

Also, in February, we held TLC fests in Bhakhara and Kurud TLCs. Fests and melas excite me. They took me back to my own schooldays when I would participate in every activity related to science and mathematics. I can proudly say that I have never missed a school fest. My master's course had prepared me for the development of curriculum materials. I applied the learnings to the TLC

*Snapshot of the TLC
fest at Kurud*



fests. This was also a good opportunity to learn from and observe teachers from different schools and their approach towards classroom teaching.

A quarterly review in the month of March brought all the Associates of Chhattisgarh to the Dhamtari DI. This was followed by a three-day TLM-making camp for teachers. My community visits, too, continued well into March. The number of Mohalla



TLC fests offer a chance to learn from teachers

classes also went up briefly before the onslaught of the second wave brought the initiative to a complete halt.



❖ Third lap (April – May 2021)

These were the most challenging months of my Associate programme. The spread of Covid-19 was at its peak and we Associates had to find a way of using our time without slipping into disappointment and depression. My fellows and I conducted discussions on learning sharing and revisited handbooks on Hindi and mathematics. I also used this time to watch movies on education and childhood. Above all, I worked with my team to reach out to villages running out of food, medicines and other basic supplies due to the lockdown. Busting myths and misconceptions about vaccination through awareness campaigns was the other important job in hand. Each of us was tasked with encouraging teachers to get vaccinated. I co-facilitated a voluntary teacher forum on the subject, which was a concrete learning step towards handling matters beyond the ambit of our work.

On a Covid-19 vaccination drive



❖ Fourth lap (June – July 2021)

*Mohalla class at
Bangar*



With the worst of the second wave behind us, our field visits resumed in June 2021. The work was split between teaching and helping with the vaccination drive. As part of Project Amaright, I visited the villages of Charra, Kokdi and

Bangar and initiated talks of reviving Mohalla classes. I helped children in enrolment at PS Charra. This was also when I built a rapport with focus teachers.

After the second wave, every Associate on field was entrusted with the task of getting Primary Health Centres (PHCs) fully vaccinated. Antara (a colleague), and I were put in charge of PHC Nari.

I feel a tinge of pride when I look back at the rounds of the villages I made as part of the vaccination drive. It made me realise the role of education in the building of a healthy and disease-free nation. Education doesn't just make people aware and knowledgeable. It makes them responsible and attentive towards self and others.

The PHC visits also opened my eyes to the problems the health workers in our country face. Sukanya of the Sankari PHC had to take the panchayat's help in fighting vaccine hesitancy among villagers. Ten people from different age groups were given the shots first. Only then did the others come forward. Surprisingly, the young generation posed the biggest challenge to the vaccine drive. Concerns over fertility kept them from coming out in big numbers.

Distance was another hurdle in the vaccination. PHCs had to set up vaccination booths at public buildings such as panchayat bhavans in order to draw the elderly.

June also gave me a chance to co-facilitate a Voluntary Teacher Forum (VTF) on child labour and another session on "engaging with differently-abled students" on Autistic Pride Day. The latter tested my abilities as a presenter, and it made me think about ways to improve my presenting skills without letting the failure of the session bog me down. In terms of milestones, this, too, is an important one for me. It was a reality check that has done me only good. When I conducted a cluster meeting in August, I could tell the differences in my planning and presentation.

The Mohalla classes were back in July and I added one more centre to my list.

❖ The last lap (August-Oct 2021)

These three months were about intense teaching. School visits came back-to-back, giving me a close look at processes such as staff meetings, assembly, parents' meetings and mid-day meals.

*Cluster meeting
on the initiation
of Setu Bridge
Course*

This was also the phase that saw the initiation of the Setu Bridge Course, which was designed to address learning loss. Implementation of the course through TLMs and worksheets presented a new challenge that was discussed extensively at a cluster meeting I conducted.



Speaking of TLMs, a block-level fest held at the Charmudiya school was an insightful journey into the world of TLMs made with cost-effective material. The very Indian concept of 'jugaad' occupied a pride of place at the exhibition put together by teachers of various clusters.

As the last lap drew to a close, it was time to reflect on the year gone by.

Sitting in my room at Kurud, hundreds of miles away from the golden beaches of Calicut and the aroma of a hot South Indian breakfast, I took stock of the comforts and familiar factors I had exchanged in order to obtain the life of an Associate. *The 'junoos' had indeed driven me to a journey worth its while.*

Special mention

Rama

Rama is a differently-abled student in PS Charra. I met her in January, a month after I had started going to my SUP school. I noticed her because she was very quiet in class. Bewildered by her silence and unwillingness to attend classes, the first-grade teacher I work with and I sought an answer from the senior student who brought her to school. The girl confused us further by saying that Rama wasn't the quiet girl at home, apparently the only place where one could hear her speak. I also observed that most children teased her by calling her 'gungi' --- Hindi for 'dumb' --- during play time.

I consulted a teacher, with a background in special education, from the Foundation, who asked me to observe the girl for certain signs and recommended meeting the parents for a clearer idea.

The Rama we met when we visited her house was a different person. She was quite talkative and also active. She was busy fetching water in a *matka* from a public tap when we reached her house. Her parents told us of the speech impairment she was born with --- ankyloglossia or tongue-tie (a condition present at birth that restricts the tongue's range of motion). Despite that, the parents added, Rama would talk to them like any other child of her age.

Armed with information on the medical condition, the fellow teacher and I started giving Rama special attention in class. She was initially reluctant to our approach. But we managed to break the ice by appreciating her work and her actions in class.

What I did for Rama:

- Sensitised the class teacher towards differently-abled students by giving her the confidence and perspective to help Rama.
- Encouraged Rama to attend school by picking her up every morning.
- Created a happy and comfortable atmosphere for Rama in school with the help of her teachers and classmates. Many of Rama's fellows started taking care Rama and stopped others from teasing her.
- Provided mental support to Rama's parents through frequent visits and conversations.
- Built Rama's confidence by appreciating her good work in activities such as drawing and colouring.

Chomendra

Chomendra, like Rama, was unwilling to attend school, even though his house was barely 10 metres from the premises. I would often find him playing outside the compound during Mohalla classes. From January to March 2021, repeated attempts at talking him into the classroom failed. In August, after school reopened, Chomendra started attending the first grade even though he was old enough to be in the next class.

One fine day, Dron, a student who was close to Chomendra and his cousin Ghanshyam, reported that the two had consumed alcohol from a bottle that possibly belonged to the father's. The news spread like wildfire and Chomendra and Ghanshyam were painted as villains.

When some senior boys tried to drag him to the staffroom, an enraged Chomendra beat them up before running away from school. His grandmother came to us soon after, alleging that her grandson had been roughed up in school. We all knew that was not correct, but no one wanted to punish the traumatised child any further.

Yet another incident, not long after the 'daaru' episode, compelled me to take a closer look at Chomendra's behaviour. He tried to run away from school once again, this time on the day of the Block Resource Centre Coordinator (BRCC) visit. We had a hard time holding back the child who was not just screaming but also ready to bite. He calmed down only when my fellow teacher started dialling his father's number. It became clear that he was afraid of the parent and a fearful environment at home could be the reason behind the acts of aggression.

Chomendra made me take a greater interest in child psychology and techniques of classroom management. Luckily for us, Chomendra's behaviour improved vastly after the two incidents mentioned above. He is now a regular at school and possibly considers me as a friend.



Teachers

Throughout my Associate programme, I met many teachers who made me stay put on the ground. There were good examples and bad, and I am not going to cloak the latter.

I worked with two teachers in Charra who observed me keenly in class. I observed them too, after which we exchanged notes on our sessions.

Apart from working on pedagogy of language and mathematics, I worked with these two teachers on perspectives on the following:

- Corporal punishment
- TLM making and its use in the classroom
- Differently-abled students

I came to know that both of them practised corporal punishment. I used my rapport with them to apprise them of the effects of such punishment on the psyche of the child. These conversations lasted 6 months and I could tell that I had managed to change their attitude on the subject. Though I was not trained to work on perspective issues, I wanted to run this experiment.

Talking about the perspective building on TLM making and usage, I worked on some misconception or alternative concepts of these teachers regarding TLMs.

My team, my strength

On my first day as an Associate, I had asked Madhubanti-di if I could base myself in Dhamtari instead of Kurud. I wanted to work in the same team as my friend Kavya. Kurud was still new to me and I wanted to be close to my friend.

Little did I know that I would fall in love with Kurud. Given a chance, I would not leave this place for anything or anyone. Kurud is a place where Foundation's culture is preserved by a team that values good and selfless work. This team has brought out the best in me. It held me up on my bad days, it cushioned me from homesickness, it corrected me when I faltered, and kept me going through the dark days of the pandemic.

The team also taught me the value of being polite and humble, of giving feedback without denting the confidence of a person, and, most importantly, of having fun at work! My lessons in people management start and end with this team; this team is my greatest strength!

Conclusion

Like the last entry in a diary, the conclusion of a journey is full of nostalgia, a summing up of the entire experience. It's that moment when you learn to thank your stars for everything that went into making the experience special. And an honest diary writer will never leave out the difficult or challenging moments from the record.

My life as an Associate, too, had many such moments.

During the pandemic, when face-to-face interactions were out of the question, life had taken a turn that was most unexpected and unprecedented. Instead of crumbling under pressure, I kept thinking about what makes my life as an Associate unique. It was the challenge of going beyond the fixed role of an Associate. Today I can proudly say that I was part of the vaccination drive.

I am also grateful that I could work with students who suffered loss of learning due to the effects of the lockdown. This, too, was a first for Associates on the field.

What will probably go down in history as one of the most testing times was an extraordinary year for me. It has helped me grow as a person. It has made me a better and stronger human being. And it has strengthened my love for the path I have chosen in life.

At the onset of another new chapter in life, I have gathered encouragement and motivation from the one that I have just closed.

Here's to more journeys, more stories and experiences!





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