

Vol. I

The District as Public Policy Classroom

Learning State Capacity

An Anthology by Cohort 2024-2026



**PUBLIC POLICY IN ACTION
PRAXIS RESIDENCY PROGRAMME**
Practice | Academics | Leadership

The District as Public Policy Classroom: Learning State Capacity

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Gouri Rajagopal,
Course Coordinator

Foreword

India's welfare architecture is being remade at speed. Dashboards now track what registers once recorded. Direct bank transfers have replaced, in many places, the queue and the intermediary. This is the moment of what is often called India's new-welfarism — a state that reaches the citizen more directly, more visibly, and more often through a screen than through a person.

And yet, one thing has not changed. The district remains the unit through which most citizens actually experience the state. It is where a ration card is issued or denied, where a school either has a functioning toilet or does not, where a woman's Self-Help Group either gets its loan sanctioned or waits another cycle. Dashboards can display data about the district; they cannot substitute for what happens inside it. For this reason, the district continues to be the essential unit of state capacity — the place where policy stops being a document and becomes a fact of someone's life.

Building capacity at this level is not a technical problem alone. India is a deeply stratified society, carrying into its democratic institutions a centuries-old grammar of clientelism and patronage, in which many functionaries still see themselves as patrons dispensing favour rather than as duty-bearers discharging obligation. Political economy exerts a real pull on institutions that are, historically speaking, still young. And into this landscape has arrived the promise of technology-enabled delivery and a more assertive, more informed citizenry — an opportunity, but not one that resolves the older tensions on its own.

Layered on top of this is a more mundane but equally stubborn problem: fragmented design and fragmented action. Programmes are frequently rolled out without the systematic, ground-level analysis that should precede design — an absence that shows up later as implementation failure, and is then, unfairly, read back as a failure of will or capacity at the district level.

What this moment calls for is not another round of the same thinking. It calls for public programmes that are built on evidence; that are designed through well-researched processes rather than templates; that disentangle the change process into its constituent parts — context, institutions, agents, and events; that borrow method and insight across disciplines rather than staying within one; that take seriously the existing distribution of power and influence in a locality rather than assuming a blank slate; that use science and technology as instruments of delivery rather than as ends in themselves; and that recognise, without embarrassment, that personal relationships and mutual understanding are themselves a locus of change — not a soft add-on to the "real" work of governance.

II. The Praxis Residency

It is this conviction that led Transform Rural India to design the Public Policy in Action — Praxis Residency Programme. The premise is straightforward, even if testing it is not: if the district administration is the unit through which government programmes are delivered, can it also be the classroom in which young professionals learn the fundamentals of governance and public policy? Not by studying the district from outside, but by working inside it — strengthening its systems while a structured cycle of in-person and virtual sessions helps them place what they are learning within the wider academic and policy discourse.

Ten young professionals were placed across ten districts of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Uttar Pradesh — districts chosen for being resource-challenged, and deliberately not the home districts of the learners themselves. Each carried roughly two years of prior experience across an eclectic range of work in research and development, and in the social policy space more broadly. For two years, the district was to be their subject of study — not as an administrative unit alone, but as a socio-cultural and economic entity in its own right.

Most of these learners had lived or worked in metropolitan cities before this. They were now embedded — a few were transferred mid-way for operational reasons, and adapted — in district administrations working on public health and livelihoods, among other themes. This anthology gathers their accounts of what that embedding taught them: about India's permanent executive, about the district as a vantage point on development, and about what it actually takes, in practice, to make delivery happen.

III. The Insider-Outsider

Nearly every learner describes arriving with what they call a linear theory of public policy: that to get things done, one needs formal authority — a Weberian legitimacy conferred by position and rank. Time in the district revised this.

What they discovered instead was the peculiar advantage of their own in-between status neither fully inside the system nor fully outside it. Their proximity to formal authority gave them a seat at the table, a chance to shape how implementation actually happened. But it was their distance from that same authority, their lack of a formal chair, a formal charge, a formal command over anyone, that let them build the informal networks on which so much of district governance actually runs. Because they carried no command, they were not read by government stakeholders as monitors sent to check up on the system. Through the accumulated evidence of their own work, they came instead to be seen as something more useful: technical and managerial support, arriving precisely where the permanent executive was stretched thinnest.

This anthology is organised around three things their experience teaches about how that support translates into capacity on the ground.

IV. Three Lessons from the Field

1. Local problems are interconnected — and convergence follows from understanding this, not the other way round.

Convergence between government departments is usually described as a matter of coordination: get the line departments to collaborate. What the learners' experience suggests is subtler. Convergence becomes possible once the local problem itself is understood as it actually is — not sorted into the sectoral boxes that departments use to organise themselves.

In Kanker, an intervention aimed at raising farmer incomes through crop diversification illustrates this. It was based on the premise that a single watershed structure can influence agricultural productivity, groundwater recharge, biodiversity, livestock, and household income all at once — the categories dissolved under scrutiny. Solar lift irrigation drew water from ponds and local water bodies to ease pressure on borewells; convergence with

MGNREGA funded check dams, stop dams, staggered contour trenches, and boulder structures to recharge groundwater and slow surface runoff — all in service of one unchanged objective: letting farmers diversify into horticulture and higher-value crops without further stressing an already stressed water system. The same intervention reached into forest-based livelihoods through the Lac se Lakhpatti initiative, strengthening lac cultivation through SHGs and Cluster Level Federations, and opening conversations with paint, cosmetic, and pharmaceutical companies about direct procurement that could cut out intermediaries. Raising farmer income, this experience showed, is never only about a new crop. It is about institutions, market access, ecological restoration, and livelihood options that lie outside agriculture altogether. A women's SHG strengthened for one purpose turns out, on the ground, to also be an intervention in entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and community leadership.

The same insight — that convergence must answer to local rhythms, not sit above them — shaped a very different kind of project: an adult literacy programme deliberately connected to the National Rural Livelihood Mission, because most learners were women whose mobilisation could never rest on the Education Department alone. The connection ran deeper than logistics. The local economy is seasonal — mahua collection, tamarind and tendu leaf gathering, tora, mango season, Beej Pandum, paddy sowing, paddy harvest — and these cycles determine when people are free, when households need cash, when women are overburdened, and when a classroom will simply stand empty. A woman absent from a literacy centre after a morning of mahua collection, cooking, childcare, and a trip to the haat is not exhibiting a lack of interest; she is living a life that a fixed class schedule failed to anticipate. This reframed what monitoring itself should mean. Attendance was not simply a discipline problem to be enforced. It was a design problem to be solved — by asking whether the timing, the location, and the stated purpose of the class had been built around the adults it was meant to serve.

2. What convergence looks like in practice.

Sabal Kashi, an initiative anchored by a learner in Varanasi, shows convergence taking administrative form. Its subject was children born with congenital disabilities such as cleft palate or club foot — a population that, on paper, looks like a medical caseload, but that in practice moves through an entire arc of institutions: hospitals, frontline health workers, Anganwadi centres, schools, rehabilitation providers, welfare departments, and community organisations. Where these institutions do not talk to one another, the work of stitching a child's care together falls on families already contending with poverty, distance, and stigma. Reframed this way, the problem was recognisably one of governance, not medicine alone.

Before a line of code was written, the design process consisted of consultation: with Medical Officers, RBSK teams, district officials, NGOs, hospitals, and frontline workers, each conversation surfacing a constraint a purely top-down design would have missed. Doctors wanted visibility into where their referrals actually went. Frontline workers wanted processes that would not add hours to days already full. NGOs wanted clearer coordination with government. District administrators wanted to know whether individual children were progressing, not merely whether activities had been logged as complete. And parents wanted, more than anything, fewer offices to visit and fewer times to repeat the same story.

The Sabal Kashi portal that emerged from this process is often described as a digital platform, and technically it is one. It is better understood as the visible surface of something larger: an administrative architecture that lets Medical Officers, ASHAs, ANMs, Anganwadi workers, teachers, hospitals, and parents register a child, then follow that child through diagnosis, referral, treatment, rehabilitation, and long-term inclusion — with district administrators finally able to track a child's actual journey rather than a programme's tally of activities.

3. Telling technical challenges from adaptive ones — and treating each on its own terms.

District work also teaches a distinction that is easy to state and hard to hold onto under pressure: some challenges are technical, solvable with the right expertise or the right resource; others are adaptive, rooted in behaviour, where people are resisting not change as such but the losses — economic, sentimental, or cultural — that change threatens to impose on them.

A project called Maintaining and Developing Arenas for NextGen, aimed at raising school attendance in Lakhimpur Kheri through a dual-track playground model — ground-level facilities for rural schools, rooftop playgrounds for urban ones — ran into exactly this kind of resistance. A mandatory thirty-minute morning play period required teachers to record attendance for it, and teachers, offered no formal incentive for the extra task, were reluctant. Read at face value, this looked like simple non-cooperation. Read more carefully, it looked like a perfectly rational response to a policy that added to their workload while acknowledging, adjusting for, or rewarding none of it.

Once the problem was correctly diagnosed as adaptive rather than technical, the solution stopped being a matter of persuading teachers harder and became a matter of changing the incentive structure they operated under. The intervention that followed built students' sporting performance into teachers' own performance review and appraisal — making the initiative's success something that mattered, structurally, to the very people whose daily behaviour would decide whether it succeeded.

The residency didn't hand learners a new *goal* so much as a new *epistemology of policy* — a conviction, grounded in specific field encounters, that policy knowledge is incomplete unless it has been tested against implementation reality. Our learners believe the residency gave them "not a fixed career path, but a clearer sense of purpose." In other words, the residency's impact wasn't vocational (telling people what job to take) but conceptual — teaching learners *where real policy learning actually lives* and making that seam between design and delivery the place they now all want to keep returning to, whatever form their next step takes.

Taken together, these accounts resist a tidy summary, and that is rather the point. They do not offer a single method for building state capacity, because the district does not present a

single kind of problem. What they offer instead is a way of seeing: attend to how local problems actually connect to one another before assuming departmental silos are the obstacle; build convergence through patient, unglamorous consultation rather than assuming it into existence by decree; and learn, case by case, whether what stands in the way of a programme is a missing resource or a threatened interest — because the remedy for one will not touch the other.

None of this was learned in a classroom in the conventional sense. It was learned in the field — in a watershed in Kanker, a literacy centre timed to the mahua season, a hospital corridor in Varanasi, a school playground in Lakhimpur Kheri. If there is a single argument this anthology makes, it is this: that the district, taken seriously, is itself a school — one whose curriculum is written by the place, and whose lessons are only available to those willing to be taught by it. We hope these narratives make the case as well as the ten young professionals who lived them.

Understanding Livelihood Resilience: A Praxis Journey Through Jashpur And Uttar Bastar Kanker, Chhattisgarh

Arul Singh

I grew up in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, a district defined by its fertile sugarcane fields, agrarian economy, and deeply entrenched caste dynamics. Located in the National Capital Region, life in Meerut moved at a relentless pace. Good roads, easy communication, and close proximity to Delhi meant that accessibility was rarely a concern. Agriculture was familiar to me, but it was agriculture shaped by irrigation infrastructure, commercial crops, and market linkages. Naturally, when I was informed that I would be posted in Chhattisgarh as a PPIA Praxis learner, I expected to encounter a very different world, though I did not fully comprehend how different it would be. Unlike the plains of western Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh presented an opportunity to understand rural development through the lens of tribal communities, forest-based livelihoods, and rainfed agriculture. More importantly, it offered an opportunity to examine how governance, ecology, and livelihoods intersect in regions that remain relatively distant from mainstream policy discourse.

Discovering Jashpur

On 2 September 2024, I arrived in Jashpur, a tribal-dominated district situated in the northernmost part of Chhattisgarh, forming the state's boundary with Jharkhand and Odisha and nestled within the western extension of the Chota Nagpur Plateau. Unlike the plains of western Uttar Pradesh, Jashpur was characterised by dense forests, undulating terrain, cooler weather, and scattered habitations. Having studied sociology, I was familiar with theories surrounding tribal societies and community institutions, but I anticipated that living and working alongside these communities would offer a far richer understanding than any classroom ever could.

The initial weeks required considerable adjustment. Life in Meerut, located within the National Capital Region, is characterised by relatively good connectivity, faster administrative processes, and an urban pace of life. The language, food, customs, and rhythms of everyday life were unfamiliar. In Jashpur, villages were located far apart, mobile connectivity was inconsistent, and travel often meant navigating winding forest roads. Gradually, however, what first appeared unfamiliar became deeply fascinating. I observed how tribal communities maintained strong collective institutions, organised community events, and cultivated close relationships with forests and natural resources. Their agricultural practices reflected generations of adaptation to the local ecology rather than intensive commercial farming. Development here was inseparable from culture, geography, and traditional knowledge.

During my time in Jashpur, I had the opportunity to visit several blocks, including Bagicha, Kansabel, and Manora, each possessing distinct geographical and cultural identities. Whether facilitating a Gram Sabha in Kansabel or participating in Integrated Natural Resource Management planning exercises in remote villages, I began to appreciate the complexities of governance in a district where nearly two-thirds of the population belongs to Scheduled Tribes. Every field visit reinforced that administrative decisions could not be divorced from local customs and community participation.

Agriculture as the Defining Reality

Agriculture emerged as the defining feature of life in Jashpur. While the district cultivates a variety of crops, including millets, maize, pulses, and horticultural produce, paddy overwhelmingly dominates the agricultural landscape. Over time, I realised that this dependence was at the heart of many developmental challenges. Paddy cultivation, though culturally significant, is highly water-intensive. While government procurement through the Minimum Support Price (MSP) provided farmers with a degree of income security, this dependence on a single, water-intensive crop had begun to create deeper ecological and economic challenges. In a region with limited irrigation infrastructure, farmers depend almost entirely on the monsoon, making agriculture vulnerable to rainfall variability. Simultaneously, groundwater extraction has steadily increased while groundwater availability has declined, threatening the long-term sustainability of farming. Despite their hard work, most farming households earned only modest seasonal incomes, making agriculture increasingly precarious.

As I engaged more closely with the district administration, line departments, and farming communities, it became evident that the challenge extended beyond agricultural productivity. The real issue was one of livelihood resilience. How could farmers increase their incomes while conserving natural resources? Could crop diversification towards millets, vegetables, and medicinal plants provide better economic returns without placing additional stress on water resources?

What struck me most was that these challenges were not simply technical. They reflected decades of policy choices, market incentives, ecological change, and evolving livelihood aspirations. Understanding these interconnected realities would eventually shape both my residency work and my broader understanding of rural development.

A Second District, A Familiar Challenge

After nearly ten months in Jashpur, I was transferred to Uttar Bastar Kanker district in April 2025. The move once again required adapting to a completely different socio-cultural landscape. Although Kanker, like Jashpur, is predominantly tribal and agriculture remains the primary occupation, the district presented an entirely new developmental context. All 454 Gram Panchayats fall under the provisions of the PESA Act, and unlike Jashpur, Kanker's economy is significantly influenced by mining. Mineral extraction across four of its seven development blocks, coupled with the substantial role of the District Mineral Foundation (DMF), shaped governance priorities in ways I had never encountered growing up in Meerut.

The district also bears the legacy of Left Wing Extremism, with several remote habitations continuing to face challenges of connectivity and public service delivery.

Experiencing two distinct tribal districts within a single residency became one of the most valuable aspects of my journey. While their geography, livelihoods, and administrative priorities differed, both districts highlighted a common reality: sustainable rural development cannot be achieved through uniform solutions. It demands an understanding of local ecology, institutions, culture, and people's aspirations. Coming from the sugarcane belt of western Uttar Pradesh, I had expected to learn about governance. Instead, Jashpur

and Kanker taught me that effective public policy begins with listening, adapting, and understanding the lived realities of the communities it seeks to serve.

Understanding the Problem

When I joined the district administration in Jashpur as a PPIA Praxis Learner in September 2024, I expected to contribute to governance by supporting ongoing initiatives across departments. Like most young professionals entering public administration, I imagined my role would largely revolve around assisting in programme implementation and learning how government functions from within. It did not take long to realise that governance at the district level is rarely compartmentalised. Every issue, whether related to agriculture, health, livelihoods, or natural resources, is deeply interconnected. Consequently, meaningful interventions require departments to work together rather than in isolation.

My residency coincided with a period when the district administration was increasingly concerned about the future of agriculture in Jashpur. At first glance, the district appeared agriculturally prosperous. Vast stretches of paddy fields dominated the landscape during the monsoon, and almost every household was engaged in farming. However, repeated field visits gradually revealed a more complex reality. Farmers were cultivating more paddy than ever before, yet their incomes remained modest. Seasonal earnings rarely reflected the effort invested throughout the agricultural cycle. Simultaneously, groundwater extraction was steadily increasing, irrigation infrastructure remained limited, and farmers continued to depend almost entirely on monsoon rainfall.

The contradiction intrigued me. If agriculture was the primary occupation and government procurement ensured a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for paddy, why were farming households still economically vulnerable?

Finding the answer required moving beyond statistical reports. During village visits, discussions with farmers, interactions with Krishi Sakhis, Rural Agricultural Extension Officers, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), a consistent pattern emerged. Paddy cultivation had become both an economic habit and a policy incentive. Since procurement was assured, farmers preferred growing paddy even when alternative crops promised significantly higher returns. The risks associated with horticulture, vegetables, medicinal plants, or millets, uncertain markets, inadequate storage facilities, lack of technical guidance, and limited post-harvest infrastructure, made diversification an unattractive proposition.

Why Agriculture?

Looking back, I realise that my sustained engagement with agriculture was not accidental.

Growing up in western Uttar Pradesh, I had witnessed how agriculture shaped rural livelihoods despite rapid urbanisation around cities like Meerut. Visits to my ancestral village had exposed me to the dependence of farming households on weather, markets, and the productivity of their land. These experiences had always left me curious about why agriculture continued to employ nearly half of India's workforce while remaining economically uncertain for so many families.

The residency provided an opportunity to explore these questions from within the government itself. Agriculture, I realised, sits at the intersection of multiple public policy challenges—employment, climate change, natural resource management, nutrition, rural poverty, and migration. Improving agricultural incomes is therefore not simply about increasing production; it is equally about strengthening resilience, conserving natural resources, and expanding livelihood opportunities beyond traditional farming.

This perspective gradually shaped my engagement during the residency. Although the district administration worked across numerous sectors, I found myself consistently drawn towards interventions that sought to improve farmer livelihoods while simultaneously addressing ecological sustainability.

Designing an Integrated Intervention

A farmer's decision to cultivate paddy was influenced by an entire ecosystem. Irrigation infrastructure determined what could be grown. Input availability affected cultivation costs. Market access dictated profitability. Financial institutions shaped investment decisions, while extension services influenced awareness and adoption of improved practices. Addressing only one of these dimensions would produce limited results. Sustainable livelihood improvement required strengthening the entire agricultural value chain. This understanding gradually shaped the intervention that became the central focus of my residency in Jashpur. The intervention rested on four interrelated pillars.

The first focused on improving water security through Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM). Water availability was recognised as the foundation of agricultural transformation. Since large sections of the district lacked assured irrigation, planning had to begin with understanding village-level natural resources. Integrated Natural Resource Management plans were prepared through convergence between departments such as MGNREGA, NRLM, Agriculture, and Panchayati Raj Institutions. Instead of departments preparing independent annual plans, the objective was to create a shared vision where water conservation structures, irrigation assets, and agricultural planning complemented one another. This also ensured that proposed works could be incorporated into the Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs), increasing the likelihood of implementation through existing government programmes.

The second pillar centred on reducing farmers' production costs. During field interactions, farmers repeatedly highlighted the high cost of agricultural inputs and their dependence on private dealers located far from their villages. To address this, the proposal envisioned establishing Agricultural Entrepreneur (AE) Shops managed by trained local entrepreneurs drawn from existing community cadres such as Krishi Sakhis, BC Sakhis, and Kisan Mitras. These centres were designed to function as rural service hubs, providing quality agricultural inputs at reasonable prices while simultaneously offering advisory services, access to farm equipment, and even basic digital banking facilities. Rather than creating a parallel institutional structure, the intervention sought to strengthen community institutions that already enjoyed the trust of local farmers.

The third pillar aimed to improve agricultural productivity through knowledge rather than increased resource extraction. Capacity-building programmes were planned in collaboration with institutions such as Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), ATMA, Indira Gandhi Krishi

Vishwavidyalaya (IGKV), and the Agriculture Department. Instead of conducting isolated training sessions, the emphasis was on creating a unified extension ecosystem where farmers received consistent technical advice irrespective of the department delivering it. Exposure visits to successful horticulture clusters and progressive farmers were also proposed to reduce the hesitation associated with adopting unfamiliar crops.

The fourth, and perhaps most ambitious, pillar involved shifting farmers towards high-value horticultural crops while simultaneously creating the market infrastructure necessary to support this transition. Experience from previous interventions had demonstrated that asking farmers to diversify without ensuring reliable buyers often resulted in failure. Consequently, the proposal included organising horticulture expos, facilitating buyer-seller meets, establishing integrated pack houses for grading and storage, introducing lyophilisation technology for lea value addition, and strengthening market linkages for local produce. The underlying philosophy was simple: production alone cannot improve livelihoods unless accompanied by processing, branding, and market access.

Developing this intervention was one of the most intellectually rewarding aspects of my residency. It required understanding not only agriculture but also public finance, departmental mandates, rural institutions, value chains, and behavioural economics. Equally important was learning that district administration rarely operates through entirely new programmes. More often, innovation lies in bringing together existing schemes, institutions, and stakeholders around a common objective.

Looking back, I realise that the intervention was never simply about replacing paddy with horticulture. It sought to reimagine agriculture as a sustainable livelihood system, one that generated higher incomes while reducing pressure on groundwater, strengthening community institutions, and building resilience against climate variability. Designing this framework marked the beginning of my most significant engagement during the residency ship. The real challenge, however, lay in translating this ambitious vision into action across departments, villages, and communities.

Building Convergence Across Departments

The transition from designing the intervention to implementing it was far more challenging than I had anticipated. While the proposal appeared coherent on paper, translating it into action meant navigating the realities of district administration, where every department had its own priorities, timelines, and reporting structures. I quickly realised that the success of any intervention depended less on introducing new ideas and more on creating convergence among institutions that already existed but seldom worked together.

A significant part of my role therefore shifted from technical planning to coordination. Working under the guidance of the District Collector, the Chief Executive Officer of the Zila Panchayat, I participated in bringing together officials from MGNREGA, NRLM, Agriculture, Horticulture, ATMA, Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Indira Gandhi Krishi Vishwavidyalaya (IGKV), Panchayati Raj Institutions, and frontline extension workers. Each institution possessed a piece of the solution. MGNREGA could create water conservation structures, NRLM had an extensive network of Self-Help Groups and community cadres, the Agriculture Department could provide technical guidance, while KVK and IGKV offered research support and

demonstration models. The challenge was ensuring that these efforts complemented one another rather than functioning independently.

From Planning to Practice

One of my early responsibilities involved preparing implementation roadmaps and facilitating discussions on Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM). Rather than treating water conservation as an engineering exercise, the objective was to make it the foundation of agricultural planning. Through village-level resource mapping and planning exercises, we attempted to identify locations where natural resource management interventions, such as farm ponds, check dams, staggered contour trenches, and water harvesting structures, could be converged with existing government schemes. Integrating these plans into the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) was particularly important because it transformed planning from a one-time exercise into an officially recognised development priority.

These interactions fundamentally changed my understanding of governance. I had entered the residency believing that policies flowed neatly from district headquarters to villages. Instead, I witnessed how implementation depended upon continuous dialogue, negotiation, and consensus-building. Every planning meeting required balancing technical feasibility with administrative constraints, available budgets, and community priorities.

Another important component of my work involved strengthening the institutional ecosystem around farmers. The proposal envisioned establishing Agricultural Entrepreneur (AE) Shops that would function as decentralised service centres managed by trained community members. While I was involved in preparing implementation strategies for these centres, I also worked closely with community cadres—including Krishi Sakhis, Kisan Mitras, and BC Sakhis—to understand the practical challenges they encountered while supporting farmers. Their feedback helped refine the concept beyond a simple input distribution centre. We envisioned these shops as village-level knowledge hubs capable of providing quality agricultural inputs, basic advisory services, information on government schemes, digital banking support, and access to farm machinery. More importantly, because these centres would be managed by local entrepreneurs, they had the potential to remain sustainable beyond the project period.

However, perhaps the most rewarding part of my residency emerged through the Jashpure initiative.

Jashpure: Moving Beyond Production to Value Addition

As discussions with farmers progressed, it became increasingly evident that improving production alone would not substantially improve livelihoods. Many households were already producing quality agricultural and forest-based products, yet a significant proportion of the value was captured outside the district because processing, branding, packaging, and market access remained limited. This shifted the focus of the intervention from agriculture alone to strengthening the entire value chain.

It was within this context that Jashpure emerged as one of the district's most significant livelihood initiatives. The vision was to transform traditional tribal produce into market-

ready products while ensuring that a larger share of value remained with local communities. Rather than treating agriculture, processing, and marketing as separate activities, Jashpure attempted to integrate them into a single ecosystem linking farmers, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), community institutions, processors, and markets.

The initiative promoted preservative-free, nutrient-rich products prepared from locally available produce such as Dheki Kuta rice, millets, Mahua, herbal teas, moringa, and other indigenous crops. Alongside production, investments were made in processing units, packaging, branding, storage facilities, and digital market platforms to improve market access and product visibility.

My contribution centred primarily on engaging with women's Self-Help Groups, understanding the challenges they faced at both the household and enterprise levels, and integrating these learnings into the broader Jashpure model. Through repeated field interactions, I realised that financial empowerment requires much more than providing livelihoods. Many women possessed remarkable traditional knowledge and entrepreneurial ability but lacked exposure to formal markets, branding, quality standards, and digital platforms.

This led to a series of capacity-building initiatives that included technical training, exposure visits, thematic workshops, and collaborations with institutions such as the National Institute of Food Technology Entrepreneurship and Management (NIFTEM). SHGs were gradually introduced to concepts such as branding, online transactions, inventory management, packaging standards, and digital marketplaces, including Amazon and ONDC.

An equally important aspect of my role involved documenting the complete value chain—from procurement of raw materials to processing, packaging, transportation, and final delivery. Initially, I viewed documentation simply as a reporting requirement. Over time, however, I realised that documenting processes serves a much larger purpose. It creates institutional memory, enables replication across districts, and provides future teams with a framework that survives beyond individual officers or learners. In many ways, good documentation is what transforms a successful initiative into a scalable model.

The initiative gradually gained recognition beyond the district. More than 3,000 SHG women, tribal farmers, and artisans became associated with the initiative, while over 5,000 direct and indirect livelihood opportunities were created, benefitting more than 900 households through enhanced incomes and greater economic stability. What was particularly encouraging was the market response. Within just two and a half months of its launch, Jashpure established more than 40 retail stalls in Mumbai, through which over 3 lakh products were sold. Simultaneously, the initiative expanded its digital footprint by integrating with platforms such as Amazon and ONDC, resulting in the sale of approximately 50,000 products online, with a growing base of repeat customers. In total, over 4.5 lakh products reached consumers across offline and online markets, demonstrating that community-led enterprises rooted in local produce could successfully compete beyond district boundaries. These outcomes reinforced the central premise of the initiative—that strengthening processing, branding, and market linkages can significantly enhance rural livelihoods while preserving indigenous knowledge and traditional food systems. The initiative also attracted recognition through nominations for state and national awards,

including *The Indian Express Excellence in Governance Award*, further validating the district administration's efforts to build a scalable and sustainable livelihood model.

Krishi Kranti: Creating Confidence Beyond Paddy

While Jashpure focused on value addition after production, another important question remained unanswered: how could farmers be encouraged to diversify away from excessive dependence on paddy? Changing cropping patterns is not simply a technical exercise. Farmers invest their savings, labour, and often borrowed money into a single agricultural season. Unsurprisingly, they are reluctant to experiment with unfamiliar crops unless they are confident about both production and marketing.

To address this challenge, the district administration organised Krishi Kranti, a three-day Agriculture and Horticulture Expo that brought together farmers, government departments, research institutions, Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), buyers, and private sector participants on a common platform. The objective was not merely to showcase technologies but to expose farmers to viable alternatives that could generate higher incomes while placing less pressure on natural resources.

The event included live demonstrations, buyer-seller meets, exhibitions, farmer interactions, competitions, and discussions on horticulture, agri-technology, and market opportunities. Traditional crops such as millets, buckwheat, Mahua, and other indigenous produce occupied a central place, reinforcing the message that diversification did not necessarily require abandoning local knowledge systems.

One of the most valuable lessons from organising the event was that farmers often require market confidence before they require technical knowledge. During several interactions, farmers expressed willingness to cultivate vegetables, spices, and horticultural crops but remained uncertain about where they would sell them. This reinforced a simple but important insight: diversification succeeds only when production, aggregation, processing, and markets evolve together. Demonstrating profitability is often more persuasive than promoting technology.

The expo attracted more than 7,500 visitors, facilitated interactions between producers and buyers, strengthened agricultural value chains, and positioned Jashpur as an emerging agri-business hub. Equally important, it demonstrated how district administrations can act as conveners, bringing together public institutions, private enterprises, researchers, and farming communities around a shared development objective.

A New District, The Same Question

By the time these initiatives had begun gathering momentum, I felt I had finally developed a nuanced understanding of Jashpur's development ecosystem. It was at this point, just as the work was beginning to mature, that I received mails transferring me to Uttar Bastar Kanker. Initially, the transfer felt like an interruption. In retrospect, however, it became one of the most valuable experiences of my residency, allowing me to test whether the lessons learned in Jashpur were unique to one district or reflected broader structural challenges across rural Chhattisgarh.

The transfer to Uttar Bastar Kanker in April 2025 came at a time when many of the initiatives in Jashpur had begun moving from planning to implementation. Professionally, it was difficult to leave behind work that I had invested nearly ten months in shaping. There was an inevitable feeling of incompleteness. Although implementation roadmaps had been prepared, departmental convergence established, and community institutions mobilised, development interventions rarely reached maturity within a few months. They require sustained engagement, continuous monitoring, and adaptation over several agricultural seasons. Before leaving, I ensured that project documents, implementation plans, and ongoing activities were adequately handed over to the concerned officials so that the momentum built over the previous months could continue.

Kanker presented a remarkably different administrative and ecological landscape. Situated within the Bastar division, the district is predominantly tribal, with all 454 Gram Panchayats falling under the provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA). Unlike Jashpur, where agriculture dominated the development discourse, Kanker's economy was shaped by both agriculture and mining. Revenue generated through mining and the District Mineral Foundation (DMF) played a central role in financing development activities. Coming from Meerut, where mining was never part of the local economy, this introduced me to an entirely new dimension of district administration. Development planning here required balancing ecological conservation, tribal livelihoods, mineral extraction, and infrastructure development within the same policy framework.

At the same time, Kanker also bore the imprint of being a Left Wing Extremism-affected district. During field visits, differences in road connectivity, public infrastructure, and administrative outreach were visible across several interior villages. Conversations with officials and community members revealed that governance in such regions extends beyond service delivery, it is equally about rebuilding trust between institutions and citizens. This added another layer of complexity to the residency experience.

Despite these contextual differences, one observation immediately stood out. The underlying livelihood challenge remained strikingly similar to what I had encountered in Jashpur.

Agriculture continued to be the principal source of livelihood for a majority of households. Paddy dominated cultivation patterns, and successive procurement policies had created strong incentives for farmers to continue growing it, often even during consecutive seasons wherever borewell irrigation was available. While assured procurement reduced market uncertainty, it also encouraged unsustainable groundwater extraction. During discussions with departmental officials and village communities, I learned that groundwater levels in several blocks had declined dramatically over the years, with borewells that once struck water at depths of 150 to 200 feet now extending beyond 500 feet in some locations. Simultaneously, erratic rainfall, declining rainy days, soil erosion, and increasing soil acidity were making agriculture progressively more vulnerable to climate variability.

From Water Conservation to Landscape Restoration

The intervention in Kanker therefore built upon many of the learnings from Jashpur while adapting them to the district's ecological realities.

Instead of focusing primarily on groundwater extraction, greater emphasis was placed on improving the utilisation of surface water. Solar lift irrigation systems were introduced to draw water directly from ponds and local water bodies rather than relying exclusively on borewells. Simultaneously, convergence with MGNREGA supported the construction of check dams, stop dams, staggered contour trenches, boulder structures, and other watershed interventions designed to improve groundwater recharge and reduce surface runoff.

The broader objective remained unchanged: create conditions under which farmers could gradually diversify towards horticulture and other higher-value crops without placing additional pressure on already stressed water resources.

The intervention also expanded beyond agriculture into forest-based livelihoods. Under the Lac se Lakhpati initiative, efforts were made to strengthen lac cultivation through SHGs and Cluster Level Federations while simultaneously improving processing and market linkages. Discussions with industries including paint, cosmetic, and pharmaceutical companies explored possibilities for direct procurement, reducing dependence on intermediaries and improving returns to producers.

These experiences broadened my understanding of livelihoods. Increasing farmer incomes is not simply about introducing a new crop; it is equally about strengthening institutions, improving market access, restoring ecological systems, and creating opportunities beyond agriculture itself.

What Worked—and What Didn't

Working on these initiatives broadened my understanding of what sustainable development actually entails. Earlier, I had unconsciously viewed agriculture, forestry, water conservation, women's empowerment, and rural livelihoods as distinct sectors. In Kanker, these boundaries gradually disappeared. A watershed structure influenced agricultural productivity, groundwater recharge, biodiversity, livestock, and household incomes simultaneously. Similarly, strengthening a women's Self-Help Group was not simply a gender intervention, it also improved local entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, value addition, and community leadership. Governance, I realised, is most effective when it recognises these interconnections rather than addressing problems in isolation.

Looking back over two years, it is equally important to acknowledge what did not work as planned.

The greatest challenge was not designing technically sound interventions but enabling behavioural change. Farmers understandably preferred cultivating crops with assured procurement and predictable returns. Convincing them to adopt horticulture or diversify into new enterprises required overcoming years of established practice and perceptions of risk. Demonstration plots, exposure visits, and buyer-seller interactions generated enthusiasm, but widespread adoption could not be expected within the limited duration of a residency.

Inter-departmental convergence, despite strong administrative support, was another continuous challenge. Departments function under different mandates, financial guidelines,

and reporting timelines. Bringing them together around a shared objective demanded constant coordination and follow-up. Progress was often slower than anticipated, reminding me that institutional change is incremental rather than immediate.

The residency itself imposed another limitation. Development interventions rarely conform to residency timelines. Just as relationships with communities deepen and initiatives begin to mature, transfers or administrative changes can alter priorities. Leaving Jashpur before witnessing the long-term outcomes of the intervention was personally difficult. At the same time, moving to Kanker reinforced an important lesson: the value of a learner lies not merely in executing projects but in creating systems, documenting processes, strengthening institutions, and leaving behind models that others can continue.

Looking Beyond Projects

Reflecting on the residency today, I realise that the most significant transformation was my own. I entered the programme believing that public administration was primarily about implementing government schemes. I leave with a far more nuanced understanding. Effective governance is about listening before prescribing solutions, understanding incentives before proposing reforms, and recognising that sustainable development emerges only when ecological conservation, economic opportunity, and community institutions evolve together.

The interventions in Jashpur and Kanker differed in their immediate priorities, but they were united by a common vision: enabling tribal communities to build resilient and dignified livelihoods without compromising the natural resources on which those livelihoods ultimately depend. Being able to contribute, however modestly, to that larger vision remains the most meaningful outcome of my residency.

Residency and My Learning: What Did I Learn?

When I entered the Public Policy in Action (PPIA) Praxis Residency Programme, I believed that the greatest challenge in development lay in identifying problems and designing technically sound solutions. My education had familiarised me with public policy, governance, and sociology, and I assumed that if an intervention was backed by evidence and addressed a genuine need, implementation would naturally follow. Two years of working in the district administrations of Jashpur and Uttar Bastar Kanker taught me that development is far more nuanced. Good ideas are necessary, but they are rarely sufficient. Institutions, relationships, incentives, trust, and context often determine whether an intervention succeeds or remains confined to paper.

Policy Incentives Shape Behaviour

One of the earliest lessons came from a seemingly ordinary conversation with a farmer in Jashpur. During a discussion on crop diversification, I asked why farmers continued cultivating paddy despite low returns and increasing water stress. Instead of answering my question directly, he asked me another: "If the government assures procurement at a fixed price, why should a farmer take the risk of growing anything else?"

His response stayed with me long after the meeting ended.

Until then, I had unconsciously believed that farmers continued cultivating paddy because they lacked awareness about alternative crops. That conversation made me realise that farmers were not resisting change, they were responding rationally to the incentives created by public policy. Assured procurement, minimum support prices, and an established procurement system had gradually shaped cropping patterns over decades. Diversification was not simply an agricultural decision; it was an economic one. Asking a farmer to shift from paddy to horticulture without simultaneously addressing irrigation, markets, storage, processing, and price assurance was effectively asking them to assume all the risk.

When I later moved to Kanker, I found the same pattern in a different form. Farmers with access to borewells often cultivated paddy during consecutive seasons despite rapidly declining groundwater levels. Once again, it was easy to describe the practice as unsustainable. It was far more difficult to acknowledge that farmers were making decisions based on the incentives available to them. This experience fundamentally changed the way I understood policy. Policies are not merely instruments for solving problems; over time, they shape behaviour, institutions, and aspirations. Good policy therefore requires thinking not only about immediate outcomes but also about the long-term incentives it creates.

Context Shapes Policy

Growing up in western Uttar Pradesh had exposed me to an agricultural landscape that differed considerably from what I encountered in Chhattisgarh.

In Meerut, sugarcane dominates much of the agricultural landscape. Despite being a water-intensive crop, irrigation through electric tube wells, canal networks, and relatively reliable infrastructure reduces dependence on rainfall. Agricultural decisions are therefore influenced by a very different ecological context.

In contrast, large parts of both Jashpur and Kanker continue to rely heavily on rainfed agriculture. In many villages, particularly in remote habitations, irrigation infrastructure remains limited, and farmers depend almost entirely on the monsoon. In parts of Kanker that have historically been affected by Left Wing Extremism, several habitations continue to face limited electricity connectivity, making groundwater extraction through borewells either difficult or economically unviable. Consequently, the same agricultural policy can produce very different outcomes depending on the local ecological and infrastructural context.

This experience taught me an important lesson: development solutions cannot simply be replicated across districts. Geography, institutions, culture, and resource availability fundamentally shape both the nature of problems and the effectiveness of interventions.

Learning to Work Within Government

The residency also transformed my understanding of public institutions. Before joining the district administration, I imagined governance as a clearly defined hierarchy where instructions flowed smoothly from senior officials to departments and eventually to citizens. Working from within the system revealed something entirely different. Every meaningful intervention depended upon multiple departments working together despite different priorities, budgets, reporting mechanisms, and institutional cultures. Agriculture, Rural

Development, MGNREGA, NRLM, Panchayati Raj, Horticulture, Forest, and Finance each viewed the same problem through a different lens. The role of district leadership was therefore not merely administrative but collaborative. The District Collector's ability to convene departments around a common objective often proved more valuable than any individual scheme.

Equally important was learning that a Praxis Learner occupies a unique position within this ecosystem. I was neither a government official with formal authority nor an external consultant detached from implementation. My effectiveness depended on the trust I could build with both the administration and the community. Initially, I focused almost entirely on interacting with villagers, farmers, and Self-Help Groups because I believed community engagement was the most important aspect of development work. Over time, I realised that building rapport with government officials was equally essential.

Trust Travels Both Ways

District administrations operate under enormous pressure from their top bosses. Officers manage multiple schemes, respond to unforeseen crises, attend reviews, and work under strict timelines. In such an environment, information is shared only when confidence and professional trust are established. As I spent more time working alongside officials, attending review meetings, preparing presentations, drafting concept notes, and participating in field visits, relationships gradually strengthened. Officials began sharing datasets, internal analyses, implementation challenges, and institutional constraints that would never have been visible through publicly available documents alone. These conversations enabled me to undertake better analysis and provide more meaningful inputs to ongoing interventions.

The residency taught me that evidence is not created solely through data. It is created through relationships that allow access to reliable data in the first place.

The same principle applied while working with communities. Development interventions cannot be implemented through occasional consultations. Trust has to be earned through repeated engagement. Some of my most meaningful conversations happened not during formal meetings but while sitting with farmers after field visits, interacting with SHG members during training programmes, or travelling between villages. Communities gradually began discussing not only agricultural practices but also the risks they perceived, their experiences with government programmes, and the reasons behind decisions that often appeared irrational from an outsider's perspective. These conversations were possible only because relationships had slowly evolved from formal interactions into genuine dialogue.

This mutual trust between the administration and communities also highlighted another important lesson: government officials must remain approachable. Communities are far more willing to participate in development programmes when they feel heard rather than instructed. During my residency, I observed that officers who regularly visited villages, listened patiently, and engaged respectfully often achieved greater cooperation than those who relied solely on official orders. Approachability builds legitimacy, and legitimacy ultimately strengthens implementation.

Understanding the Language of Bureaucracy

Another learning that initially appeared trivial but later became surprisingly significant was understanding the language and culture of bureaucracy. Every institution develops its own vocabulary, conventions, and ways of working, and government is no exception. During the initial weeks, I frequently misunderstood seemingly straightforward instructions. For instance, I was surprised to discover that asking for a "hard copy" in many government offices often meant asking for a PDF version of a document, while a "soft copy" referred to an editable file such as a Word document, Excel sheet, or PowerPoint presentation. These expressions differed from the conventional understanding I had carried with me. Similarly, terms such as convergence, administrative approval, technical sanction, utilisation certificates, or GPDP gradually acquired practical meanings that no textbook could adequately explain.

Learning this language was about much more than terminology. It meant understanding how files move, how decisions are recorded, how priorities are communicated, and how administrative processes shape implementation. I realised that effective policy professionals must become bilingual in a sense, they should be equally comfortable speaking the language of communities and the language of bureaucracy. Without understanding either, meaningful collaboration becomes difficult.

Looking back, I realise that the residency transformed me far more than it transformed the districts in which I worked. It taught me to question simple explanations for complex problems, to value relationships as much as technical expertise, and to recognise that governance is fundamentally a human enterprise. Lasting change does not emerge solely from schemes or projects. It emerges when governments earn the trust of communities, communities trust public institutions enough to participate, and professionals working between the two are able to build bridges rather than boundaries.

The most enduring lesson from these two years is therefore one of humility. Development begins not with answers but with listening. It requires listening to farmers before proposing solutions, understanding institutions before recommending reforms, and appreciating that every statistic represents the lived experience of a person, a family, or a community. If there is one belief that I will carry forward from this residency, it is that effective public policy is built not only on evidence and analysis but equally on empathy, trust, and the willingness to work patiently with people and institutions over time.

Beyond the Residency

When I joined the PPiA Praxis Residency, my objective was not simply to work on development projects but to understand how public systems function from within. I wanted to experience governance beyond textbooks, observe how policies are formulated and implemented, and learn directly from communities whose lives these policies seek to improve. After two years, that aspiration remains unchanged.

The residency has reinforced my belief that communities must remain at the centre of any development intervention. Policies and programmes are meaningful only when they respond to people's realities, aspirations, and knowledge rather than treating them as passive beneficiaries. Wherever my journey takes me next, I hope to continue working at

the intersection of public policy, governance, and community institutions, with a focus on creating systems that are more transparent, accountable, and accessible.

At the same time, the residency has also left me with important questions. I continue to reflect on the role of development organisations within the larger governance ecosystem. To what extent do they catalyse systemic change, and where do they risk becoming largely technocratic institutions that support implementation, document success stories, or validate existing government programmes? I do not yet have a definitive answer, but I hope to explore these questions through future roles and experiences.

For now, I remain certain of one thing: I want to continue working in the public policy landscape. Whether that journey unfolds within government, civil society, research, or another institution is still uncertain. What this residency has given me is not a fixed career path, but a clearer sense of purpose, to work towards strengthening institutions, amplifying community voices, and contributing to a governance system that people not only depend upon but also trust.

What Does Development Mean In Sukma?

Arkja Kuthiala

I had arrived in Sukma, like many outsiders with a district already assembled in my head through headlines, indicators, and a few cultural fragments. One of the most LWE-affected district, Aspirational District, one of the lowest literacy rates, high malnutrition, tribal majority. It was the site of the deadliest attack by the Maoist on Indian Security Forces in 2010 where 76 CRPF personnel were killed. The district was carved out of Dantewada in January 2012 and in April 2012 its first Collector Alex Paul Menon had been kidnapped by the Naxals and released after 12 days of captivity. In 2013, 27 Congress leaders had been killed on Sukma-Jadgalpur highway by the Naxals. Through these incidents, I knew Sukma as one of the most conflict-affected districts in Chhattisgarh and the country. I had also heard of Sukma through a very different story: Sahadev Dirdo, the young boy from Sukma whose re-singing of "Bachpan Ka Pyaar" went viral in 2019.

When I moved from Delhi to Sukma, I was struck first by its vastness. A district of about 3,00,000 people spread across nearly 5,897.79 square kilometres, Sukma felt both expansive and intimate. I saw it as a land of clean air, abundant water, dense forests and forest produce. But it was also a place where Airtel did not work, a fact I still often forget to warn people about before they arrive. Only Jio works with some reliability, and BSNL only partially. Part of Bastar, Sukma carries both beauty and injury. There is a tenderness in the landscape that sits uneasily with the violence the region has witnessed. This contradiction was perhaps the first thing I had to learn to hold: Sukma is not only a "difficult district." It is also home to Gond, Dhurwa and Halbi-speaking communities, to families who have come and settled here over time from Andhra, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. It is a place where the weekly haat is not just a market but a lifeline, where people buy, sell, meet, hear news, exchange forest produce, and remain connected to one another. In a district with little visible industry, everyday economy still moves through forests, fields, haats, small shops, government work, and people's own ways of making life continue.

My expectations changed because the district refused simple explanations. I had come prepared to think in terms of schemes, gaps, and implementation. But slowly, I began to see a deeper vacuum. Many people were far removed from their own development initiatives. Some efforts around culture, like Bastar Pandum, appeared celebratory on the surface, but did not always answer the harder question of how Adivasi knowledge, language, dignity, and everyday life could shape institutions. In hostels and schools, many children seemed cut off from traditional knowledge yet not treated with the respect or care that "modern" education promises. They were caught in a trench between so-called modernity and indigenous knowledge, disconnected from both.

This disconnection showed up everywhere. Young people did not always want to leave Sukma, but staying also did not offer enough. The reasons were mixed: fear, lack of awareness, attachment to land, family pressure, limited exposure, and the absence of clear pathways. Unemployment was not just a number here. It could be seen in the long afternoons, in drinking, in murga bazaars, in the quiet shrinking of aspiration. Development often arrived from above, in the language of targets and trainings, while people remained unsure of their own role in it.

The most pressing development challenge in Sukma, therefore, did not appear to me as only low literacy or malnutrition, although both are serious. It appeared as disempowerment. A slow, layered disempowerment of communities, young people, women, and even frontline functionaries. There were several skill development and other livelihoods or awareness activities that I witnessed but the gap between training and implementation was often wide. For example a bamboo art training was conducted however there was no bamboo found around the village so the training did not materialize into livelihood enhancement. Similarly, a date palm jaggery training was conducted however whatever was produced was taken by the official to his house, the villagers did not see any value for them in such a training. Decentralised initiative was weak. Follow-up was uneven. People attended, participated, sometimes even performed, but ownership did not automatically emerge.

The same pattern was visible inside the administration. There was overdependence on one single authority figure. Departmental heads often lacked leadership, continuity, or even basic convergence. In some cases, officials and functionaries who were supposed to work together did not have each other's phone numbers. During my placement I have worked with three Collectors and two CEOs of Zila Panchayat. A project could move quickly when pushed from the top and then become still the moment attention shifted.

Sukma taught me that the hardest development questions are not always about scarcity. Sometimes there is water, land, forest, culture, and people's aspirations of prosperity. What is missing is confidence, continuity, decentralised leadership, and institutions that listen. I had arrived thinking the challenge was to bring development to a difficult district. Over time, I realised the challenge was also to ask why people had been made spectators to development happening in their own name.

When I entered the district as a PPIA Praxis learner, I did not begin with a clear intervention in hand. I remember feeling overwhelmed and confused in the first few months. There were multiple stakeholders attached to my placement: the Praxis team, the state team, the CAL team, the district administration, and within the district, several departments. Each had different expectations from my role. Some expectations were about learning and documentation, some were about supporting district priorities, some were about attending trainings and exercises, and some were about taking up new initiatives. These expectations were not always connected to one another.

I also struggled to understand how the government functioned from inside. Before the Residency, I had worked mostly with civil society organisations, where a decision, once taken, could often move more directly into action. In the district, even verbal approval from the highest authority did not mean that work would automatically begin. A file still had to move. A department had to agree. A budget head had to be identified. A note had to be drafted in the correct format. Someone had to put it up. Someone had to sign. At every step, constant follow-up is also required because this project may not be a priority for the said personnel. Sometimes the same proposal had to be explained again and again to different people sitting in the same building. I slowly realised that in government, approval and implementation are not the same thing.

This was one of my earliest learnings. I had assumed that if an idea was useful and if a senior authority agreed to it, the rest would follow. But even after verbal approval, moving funds

through files could become another battle. Sometimes the fund was available but the department was unsure. Sometimes the department was willing but the file did not move. Sometimes the file moved but the person handling it got transferred. Sometimes the priority of the district itself shifted before the work could start. I had to learn that the administrative system does not only run on good ideas. It runs on procedure, hierarchy, timing, persistence and follow-up.

This also meant that my work did not begin with a neat, pre-decided project. It began through scattered tasks and shifting priorities. On some days I was making presentations, writing reports, documenting best practices or preparing notes. On other days I was attending field visits, following up with departments, supporting trainings, or responding to instructions that came suddenly from senior officers. I worked most closely with Education, WCD and Health, but I also found myself interacting with the Statistical Department, Nagar Palika, RES, the CAL team for PRI trainings, GPDP and INRM exercises, the state team for livelihood-related work, and the Praxis team. It took me time to understand where my role ended and where it began.

In the first phase, I also tried to follow some priorities that came from authority figures. At one point, I was asked to pursue the possibility of setting up a sanitary pad unit with an NGO. On paper, this seemed like an important idea. It connected menstrual hygiene, women's livelihoods and local production. I followed up, spoke to people, tried to understand the model and the possibility of partnership. But the conversations and negotiations did not lead anywhere. There was no clear convergence between the NGO's expectations, the district's resources, the operational requirements and the larger sustainability of the unit. The idea remained alive for some time in discussion, but it did not become an intervention.

This was disappointing, but also useful. It taught me that not every instruction or idea becomes a project. Some ideas remain at the level of conversation because the institutional conditions around them are not ready. I began to understand that pilots should not be started only because they sound good. They need clear ownership, realistic costing, market or use case, departmental responsibility and a plan for what happens after the first round of enthusiasm.

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) project was different. It had not been conceptualised by me from the beginning. When I entered the district, the project already existed in some form. Funding had been secured for strengthening early childhood care and education through selected Anganwadi centres. The broad need was clear. Anganwadis in Sukma were still largely seen as nutrition and food distribution spaces, not as early learning and school readiness spaces. Many centres lacked child-friendly environments, and Anganwadi workers had limited support for conducting regular play-based learning activities. The project had money, selected centres and a broad intention.

But even with funding secured, the work did not move easily. The intervention needed a technical partner, curriculum support, training design, monitoring structure and departmental ownership. For a long time, it remained stuck between idea and implementation. There were discussions with agencies, concerns around cost, questions of sustainability and changing expectations from senior decision-makers. I also learnt that

verbal commitments made during negotiation, such as local support for travel, stay or food, should always be documented. If they are not written clearly, they can later become points of confusion.

From Idea to Intervention: Bridging the Gap

ECCE taught me that an existing project can still require redesign. The problem was not that nothing had been thought of. The problem was that the thought had not yet become an implementable structure. My role became to help move it from a funded idea towards an operational intervention. This included understanding why a supply-driven model would not work, identifying a more suitable technical partner, thinking about contextual curriculum, and pushing for a structure where ECCE consultants, Anganwadi workers and the WCD department could be connected more meaningfully.

Even then, the process was slow. It took time for the technical partner to be onboarded, for the work order to be issued, for the ECCE Manager and consultants to be placed, and for need assessment, baseline and trainings to begin. By the time the project began moving properly, I had already learnt an important lesson: in government, money being sanctioned is only one step. It does not guarantee implementation. A project can have funds and still remain still if there is no stable decision-making, no role clarity and no one consistently pushing the next step.

Adult literacy, however, was the intervention I built more directly from the beginning. Unlike ECCE, it was not handed to me as an already funded project. I prepared the proposal, pitched it to NITI Aayog, and received sanction for it. This made my relationship with the project different. I felt more responsible for it because I had argued for why it mattered. Adult literacy seemed, at first, like a straightforward need. Sukma had one of the lowest literacy rates, and many adults had missed formal schooling because of poverty, conflict, remoteness, household responsibilities and lack of access. The idea was to create community-based literacy centres where adults could learn basic reading, writing and numeracy.

The project was sanctioned under NITI Aayog support. Thirty gram panchayats were selected in consultation with the Adult Literacy unit of the Education Department. 30 Local literacy volunteers were onboarded as Sakshar Doots. I was not directly involved in their recruitment, which later became a limitation. Because I had not been part of the selection process, I did not fully understand how they had been chosen, what their motivations were, and what level of accountability had been built with them from the beginning. This taught me that recruitment is not a small administrative step. In a community-based intervention, the quality of the first selection can shape everything that follows.

A three-day residential training was conducted in April 2025. I invited a trainer who had experience in early grade literacy and methods of teaching that did not begin with rote memorisation of alphabets. The idea was to help Sakshar Doots understand how adults and first-generation learners could be taught through sounds, words, sentences and meaning. The training created initial energy. Monitoring visits also began with Block Prabharis, and for a short period it felt as if the project had started taking shape.

But this momentum was disrupted. A baseline or scheme saturation exercise that I had imagined differently was interpreted by a senior authority figure as a door-to-door household survey to be conducted by one Sakshar Doot across an entire gram panchayat. This placed a heavy burden on the volunteers and shifted attention away from literacy classes. The honorarium also became linked to this exercise.

This was a turning point. The project had been designed for adult literacy, but it began to be pulled into a futile data collection exercise. I tried to explain that this would weaken the core work, but I did not have formal authority. I could advise, draft, coordinate and persuade, but I could not overrule a senior instruction or release honorarium. Slowly, the project lost momentum. Some classes became irregular. Some Sakshar Doots became inactive. Some left. I also began to step back because I did not know how to protect the project from being diverted.

This was one of the most difficult phases for me. I had conceptualised the intervention, but I could not fully control its implementation. It taught me the limits of informal influence. As a learner, I could be close to decision-making, but I was not the decision-maker. I could see when an intervention was going off track, but seeing it was not the same as being able to correct it.

The project began to move again only after the concerned authority figure was transferred and the earlier direction was cancelled. But by then several months had been lost. Reviving the intervention was harder than starting it. The initial seriousness had weakened. The volunteers had become used to irregularity. The department was already stretched. The Adult Literacy unit also had to manage ULLAS-related reporting and hundreds of centres, many of which existed more strongly in data than in practice. Staff faced salary delays and were also pulled into other Education Department work. In this context, adult literacy could not depend only on my follow-up.

This is when I realised that the project needed technical support. I could not build curriculum, train volunteers, monitor centres, motivate learners, solve field problems and manage other district responsibilities at the same time. I had earlier spoken to Tata Consultancy Services because of their experience in adult literacy. Later, I was able to bring TCS into a non-financial agreement with the district. This became an important course correction. TCS agreed to share curriculum, support training and participate in monitoring. They also appointed one person to support the Sukma project, although the person was not based in Sukma.

TCS conducted a two-day training in March 2026. The training covered functional literacy, financial literacy, digital literacy, entitlements, teaching methodology for adult learners, classroom strategies and field-level challenges. This helped shift the programme from a narrow understanding of literacy to something more practical. It also helped the volunteers see that they were not merely teaching letters. They were supporting adults to navigate money, schemes, forms, phones, markets and daily life.

Around this time, the TCS colleagues suggested changing the name from Sakshar Doot to Sarthak Doot. The earlier name focused narrowly on literacy. "Sarthak" carried a wider meaning. It suggested that the programme was not only about making someone literate,

but about making learning useful in everyday life. This helped us reframe the intervention from basic reading and writing to something connected with dignity, financial awareness, livelihood, entitlements and confidence.

At the same time, I tried to connect the project with NRLM because many learners were women and because mobilisation could not depend only on the Education Department. A meeting was held with PRPs, NRLM cadre and the literacy volunteers. The idea was to use women's collectives and community institutions to bring learners to centres and also to connect literacy with livelihood.

The connection between literacy and livelihood became clearer through field experience. Sukma's economy is seasonal. People's lives follow a seasonal rhythm — from mahua collection, tamarind and tendu leaves, to tora, mangoes, Beej Pandum, paddy cultivation and finally paddy harvesting. These cycles decide when people are available, when families need cash, when women are overburdened, and when a class may remain empty. If a woman has collected mahua in the morning, cooked for the family, cared for children, attended to animals and gone to the haat, her absence from a literacy centre cannot simply be called lack of interest. If a farmer is occupied with paddy, irregular attendance has to be understood in relation to agricultural labour.

This changed my understanding of monitoring. Attendance was not only a discipline issue. It was also a design issue. Had we understood people's time? Had we chosen the right location? Had we connected literacy to something adults valued? Had we explained why reading, writing and numbers mattered in the haat, the bank, the ration shop, the hospital, the farm and the SHG meeting?

The connection became even clearer during my pilot Date Palm Jaggery Project. I had piloted a training on date palm jaggery across six villages. The sap was already being collected locally, but it was mostly consumed after fermentation. The idea of the pilot was to see whether the same local resource could be converted into jaggery, stored for longer, and sold as a higher-value product. I did not want the training to remain only a training. I wanted the people participating to witness market linkage, understand that the product had value, and earn money from it.

During this process, some women came to my office with their products because I had a weighing machine. When I gave it to them, one of the women could not check the weight of her own product. She had collected, processed, carried and brought it for sale, but the final act of measurement still required someone else. That moment stayed with me. It showed me that illiteracy does not remain inside a classroom. It enters livelihood, pricing, measurement, negotiation and confidence. A woman may be part of an enterprise, but if she cannot read the weight, calculate the price, check a payment, read a message or fill a form, then her participation remains incomplete.

The TCS baseline made this even clearer. It showed that many learners struggled not only with reading and writing, but also with measurement, banking, digital literacy and financial decision-making. Some could write their own name but could not write the name of a family member. Many struggled to read simple Hindi sentences. Many did not know how to use basic phone functions or understand OTPs, UPI, QR codes and cyber safety. This contrasted

with administrative literacy data that showed large numbers of people appearing and passing. I began to understand the difference between reported literacy and functional literacy.

After TCS entered, I tried to make monitoring more structured. Weekly online meetings were started. Monday meetings focused on the curriculum for the week, and Friday meetings reviewed field challenges. I held physical meetings and evaluated Sarthak Doots individually. Roles were written down more clearly. The Samanvay Call Centre was used to call Sarthak Doots and check whether classes were happening. It was also used to call sarpanches, sachivs and NRLM PRPs for mobilisation support. Ten inactive centres were closed, because I felt it was more honest to close centres that existed only on paper than to keep reporting them. Honorarium deduction was discussed for irregular classes, but recognition was also used as motivation. Through the Collector, active Sarthak Doots and a Block Prabhari were felicitated.

I also tried to link adult literacy with Yojana Jatha — a street play initiative that I had piloted. A nukkad natak could communicate the importance of literacy in a way that a formal meeting could not. It could show how reading a medicine label, signing a form, checking weight, counting money, reading an OTP or understanding a bank slip mattered in ordinary life. In a district where development messages often come as instructions, cultural communication offered a more familiar way to begin a conversation.

Looking back, what worked was not the original design alone. The first training helped, but training was not enough. TCS helped because it brought technical seriousness. NRLM helped because mobilisation needed community institutions. The call centre helped because follow-up became more regular. Closing inactive centres helped because it made the project more honest. Recognition helped because it showed that good work would be seen. The livelihood connection helped because it made literacy feel real.

What did not work was my initial assumption that sanction, centres and volunteers would be enough. They were not. The project suffered when it was diverted into survey work. It suffered when honorariums were delayed. It suffered when departmental capacity was weak. It suffered when I was pulled into other tasks. It suffered because there was not enough institutional ownership in the beginning. It also suffered because I had underestimated how much continuous follow-up a community-based intervention needs.

I do not think I solved adult literacy in Sukma. The intervention remained unfinished in many ways. Centres still needed stabilisation. Attendance needed improvement. TCS support needed to become more field-based. NRLM mobilisation needed to deepen. The Yojana Jatha component still had to be fully tested. But the intervention taught me something important about development work in Sukma. People cannot become participants in development only because we call them beneficiaries. They need capability, confidence and control.

People as Partners and not Spectators in their Development

Adult literacy became central to my learning because it brought me back to the question that Sukma had first raised for me: why are people often spectators to development happening in their own name? Literacy did not answer this question fully, but it showed me

one part of the answer. People are made spectators not only when they are excluded from meetings or institutions, but also when they are kept dependent for reading, writing, counting, signing, measuring and understanding the systems around them.

For me, the intervention therefore became less about teaching adults to read and more about reducing this dependence, even if only slightly. It reminded me that development is not only the creation of assets, schemes or enterprises. It is also the slow work of enabling people to stand inside those systems with more confidence.

Residency and My Learning: What Did I Learn?

My most important learning from Sukma was that public systems are not moved by ideas alone. They move through authority, relationships, timing, procedure and persistence. In the beginning, I often mistook verbal approval for progress. If the District Collector or CEO Zila Panchayat agreed with an idea, I assumed that the work would begin. Over time, I learnt that approval is only one step. The file still has to move, the department has to take ownership, the budget head has to be identified, and someone has to keep following up until the work actually starts.

District leadership matters deeply in a place like Sukma. The Collector and CEO can create urgency, bring departments together and make work move faster. As a learner, this gave me an important route: I could take field realities to the topmost authority and use that space to push for action. But it also showed me a weakness in the system. Many departments depended too heavily on instructions from above. Leadership at the department level was uneven. Some officers took initiative, but many waited for direction. Since I worked with three Collectors and two CEOs during my placement, I saw how each transfer brought both possibility and disruption. A project could gain speed under one authority and slow down under another.

As a learner, I occupied an unusual position inside this system. I had access but no formal authority. I could write notes, draft proposals, call meetings, coordinate with departments and influence decisions, but I could not issue orders or release payments. At the same time, I slowly realised that even informal authority carries power. A call from someone sitting in the Collectorate is not received like an ordinary call. People respond to the office, not only to the person. This power can be useful when it is used to push delayed work or support a vulnerable group, but it also has to be handled carefully. I wanted to make a film in Sukma, but I never fully did it because the power dynamic was too visible. People would not be speaking only to me as a filmmaker; they would also be speaking to someone associated with the administration. That made consent, comfort and truth more complicated.

I also learnt that people inside public systems are motivated in very different ways. Some work because they fear authority. Some work because they have a good personal relationship with you. Some are genuinely committed. Some respond to recognition. Some need pressure. A single strategy does not work with everyone. Part of district work is understanding what moves each person and using that knowledge without becoming manipulative or unfair.

The Yojana Jatha work taught me this clearly. Initially, I planned a decentralised training model. A five-day residential training was organised, scripts were prepared, performances

were reviewed, and each performance had a separate budget. On paper, it looked participatory and well-designed. But after the training, the performances did not happen on the ground. The existence of scripts, trained people and money was not enough. Later, I changed the model. I prepared a centralised team, negotiated a higher honorarium, and created a clearer structure of responsibility. That model worked better, and more than 45 performances were conducted. The learning was not that decentralisation is bad. The learning was that decentralisation without ownership, supervision and incentives can remain only a design principle. Sometimes a centralised push is needed first to create momentum.

My second major learning was about community institutions. I entered the residency with a belief in SHGs, CLFs, FPOs and other community platforms. I still believe in them, but I now understand that forming an institution is very different from building its capacity. An institution may have a name, bank account, office bearers and meeting records, but still lack internal accountability. The FPO incident made this very clear. An FPO formed earlier had become inactive, and later it was found that the CEO appointed by the FPO had misappropriated around ₹5 lakh. I intervened with the CAL team, confronted the CEO, and he admitted to it. The police and senior district authorities were informed, and around ₹1.8 lakh was recovered.

This incident showed me how vulnerable community institutions can become when members do not fully understand accounts, documents or decision-making. It also showed the importance of timely action and documentation. Around the same period, a journalist made a complaint against Community Action Lab (CAL) team members alleging financial mismanagement. Because we had already followed up actively and demonstrated support to the FPO, those allegations did not hold in the same way. The incident taught me that in public work, it is not enough to do the right thing. One must also be able to show the sequence of action clearly.

The same concern appeared in livelihood interventions. In one mango plantation case, a senior authority wanted to accelerate the plantation. Trees were planted without ensuring fencing and water, even though a successful model already existed where these conditions had been secured first. The plantation failed, and the responsibility fell on the implementing agency, the CLF. This made me think about how easily community institutions can be made responsible for decisions they did not fully control. When success is claimed, it often belongs to the administration. When failure comes, it can fall on the community institution.

The mango marketing experience gave me another kind of learning. We had arranged a tent, ordered carton boxes, prepared a local brand and tried to organise the sale of mangoes. But some farmers left the mangoes and went to attend a wedding, leading to a loss of around ₹20,000 to ₹30,000. It would be easy to call this lack of seriousness, but I began to see it differently. Market-based work requires new habits: aggregation, timing, quality control, waiting for buyers and sometimes prioritising a market opportunity over a social obligation. The market is not just a place where products are sold. It is a discipline that people have to learn, and that learning takes time.

My third learning was about timing and sustainability. In Sukma, many livelihood opportunities are seasonal. Mahua, tamarind, tendu leaves, tora, mango and paddy all have

their own calendars. If planning is late, the whole year can be lost. This happened with the Mahua exposure visit. I had taken ten women to Jashpur to learn about collection and processing of food-grade Mahua. I had also proposed procurement of nets so that Mahua could be collected more hygienically. I was told to wait until after the visit. By the time the nets were procured, the Mahua season had passed. The intervention did not fail because the idea was wrong. It suffered because the system moved after the season had moved on.

This changed how I understood impact. A training or exposure visit can create interest, but interest has a short life if the next step is delayed. In seasonal livelihoods, implementation has to begin before the season, not during or after it. Government processes often move through files, approvals and procurement timelines, while people's lives move through forest and agricultural cycles. If these two calendars do not meet, the intervention remains technically complete but practically ineffective.

My fourth learning was about policy. At the district level, one can see policy gaps very clearly, but one cannot always change them from there. Issues around Prawn Cultivation, Poshan Tracker and PDS showed me how policies can assume conditions that do not exist on the ground. A digital platform assumes connectivity. A nutrition tracking system assumes that frontline workers have time, network and support. A delivery system assumes that people can access institutions easily. But in Sukma, distance, language, low literacy, poor connectivity and staff shortages change everything.

This does not mean district-level action is meaningless. Local fixes matter. A Collector's instruction, a district-level convergence meeting or a practical adjustment can reduce harm. But deeper policy correction needs advocacy at the state or central level. Districts like Sukma reveal the limits of one-size-fits-all policy design. They show what happens when systems built for average conditions meet difficult geographies.

Looking back, I learnt that lasting change is slower than visible activity. A training can be completed, a committee can be formed, a plantation can be done, a performance can be held, but these are not the same as transformation. The real questions are: who owns the work after the first push, who understands the money, who follows up, who has the confidence to question, and who carries the risk if the project fails.

Sukma taught me to look beyond the event. It taught me that public institutions have enormous reach, but can become overdependent on hierarchy. Community institutions have promise, but need real capacity before responsibility is placed on them. Markets can create income, but only if people are prepared for their demands. Policy can create frameworks, but the field reveals where those frameworks break.

As a learner, much of my work happened in the middle of these worlds: between file and field, community and administration, policy and practice, urgency and patience. I entered Sukma thinking I would learn how development is implemented. I left understanding that implementation is not only about getting work done. It is about making sure the work can stand after the first person who pushed it has moved away.

Beyond the Residency

As the residency comes to an end, I do not feel ready to leave Sukma immediately. This is partly because many of the interventions I worked on are still unfinished, and partly because the district has become more than a placement for me. I would like to stay here for a while longer and help stabilise some of the work that has begun, especially in adult literacy, ECCE, mental health and livelihood-related initiatives. I feel a responsibility towards these projects because I have seen how easily work can slow down when attention shifts or when the person pushing it moves away.

I also want to conduct and document impact assessments of the interventions I have been involved in. So much of my work has been in the middle of implementation: solving immediate problems, following up, coordinating, pushing files, and responding to field realities. I now want to step back and ask what actually changed, what remained superficial, and what can be learnt from both.

At the same time, I want to take a more macro view of policy implementation in Sukma. I have been deeply involved in the micro details of projects, but I now feel the need to understand the larger patterns across sectors. After this, I would like to study further, either through a Master's in Public Policy or a PhD. I am still deliberating on the exact research question, but I know it will emerge from the questions Sukma has left me with.

Governance, Convergence, And The Children Who Nearly Fell Through The Cracks In Varanasi

Leela Jerard Kurian

I arrived in Varanasi in August 2024 with a reasonable amount of work experience in public policy, but almost all of it was from Kerala. I had worked as a Consultant Resource Person at the Kerala Institute of Local Administration, focusing on research and course development for elected representatives and government officials. Prior to that, I was a Young Kerala Learner with the Government of Kerala, supporting district and state development initiatives. The contrast Varanasi presented announced itself almost immediately. I had worked within government systems that were, by Indian standards, relatively well-resourced and administratively dense. They were also socially legible to me in ways I had never had to consciously examine. Uttar Pradesh was different in almost every register: the scale, the institutional culture, the languages of authority and deference, the distance between policy intent and ground-level reality. I expected to see how governments implement programmes and how the choices made in government offices eventually reach people. What I did not expect was how thoroughly Varanasi would revise the assumptions I had quietly accumulated from working in a very different part of the country.

To most people, Varanasi is a city before it is a district. It is the city of ghats and temple bells, of evening aartis reflected in the Ganga, of narrow lanes fragrant with incense and frying kachoris. Before I arrived, my own image of the place was not very different. I expected to encounter a district shaped almost entirely by its religious identity and tourist economy. That image was real, but it captured only a fraction of what I came to know.

Working within the District Administration meant encountering a very different Varanasi. Beyond the ghats lay a district of more than three million people, where dense urban neighbourhoods dissolved into peri-urban settlements and eventually into a rural hinterland that most visitors never see. Farmers worried about shrinking landholdings and unpredictable monsoons. Handloom weavers, inheritors of the Banarasi weaving tradition, competed with machine-made alternatives in markets that grew less forgiving each year. Frontline workers travelled long distances to reach remote villages, often holding together the district's health system through sheer persistence. The Varanasi I experienced was not defined by monuments. It was defined by institutions, people, and the quiet complexity of everyday governance.

The district also occupied a distinctive position within India's administrative landscape. As the parliamentary constituency of the Prime Minister, Varanasi attracted extraordinary public attention and investment. Roads, airport connectivity, and tourism infrastructure reflected this visibility. Yet working inside the administration revealed another dimension: alongside the celebrated achievements existed numerous challenges that rarely surfaced in public conversations. I came to understand early that governance is as much about addressing invisible problems as it is about celebrating visible ones.

I had been assigned to work on strengthening public health systems, following a directive issued by the Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh. My initial weeks were spent visiting hospitals, attending review meetings, accompanying frontline workers, and trying to

understand how healthcare was actually delivered across the district. I had no idea, at that stage, that my Residency would eventually centre on congenital disabilities in children. Congenital disabilities are conditions present from birth, ranging from cleft palates and clubfoot to hearing loss and heart defects, and many of them are treatable if identified and followed up early. The issue did not arrive through a formal assignment or a predetermined project brief. It surfaced slowly, through repeated encounters with a problem that nobody seemed to own completely.

Varanasi consistently ranked among the highest-performing districts on the Uttar Pradesh Health Dashboard. Institutional deliveries had improved substantially, maternal and child health indicators were strong, and the district had earned a genuine reputation for effective implementation. On paper, the health system looked robust. Yet during field visits, I repeatedly came across stories of children born with congenital disabilities whose conditions had been identified at birth but whose subsequent journeys became uncertain.

Diagnosis happened. Continuity of care, far too often, did not.

I initially assumed that this reflected shortages in healthcare infrastructure. The more I interacted with district officials, Medical Officers, ASHAs, ANMs, and Anganwadi workers, the more that explanation dissolved. The district already had multiple schemes, dedicated frontline workers, specialised hospitals, welfare programmes, and sanctioned resources. The real problem lay elsewhere. These institutions functioned well individually but rarely worked together as a coherent system. Information generated within one department seldom translated into action by another, and families were left navigating a maze of offices and programmes without anyone assuming full responsibility for their child.

That was the moment when my understanding of public policy began to shift. I had arrived instinctively looking for policy gaps or resource shortages. Varanasi taught me that implementation failures often arise not because governments lack programmes, but because institutions struggle to coordinate around the people they are supposed to serve. Governance, I began to realise, is not simply about designing good policies. It is about ensuring that institutions collaborate around the citizens at the centre of those policies.

Looking back, that shift in perspective became the defining experience of my residency. I had arrived expecting to learn how government functions. Instead, I found myself learning how governments can function better together. The question that gradually came to occupy my work was no longer whether Varanasi had capable institutions. It clearly did. The more important question was whether those institutions could be connected in a way that ensured no child disappeared between departments, schemes, or administrative mandates. That question would eventually lead to Sabal Kashi, and to the most consequential lessons of my two years in the field.

Residency Tasks and My Contribution

I did not arrive in Varanasi with a project in mind. Like every learner, I entered the district administration with the intention of first understanding the system before attempting to change any part of it. My mandate was broad: work on strengthening public health systems, particularly district hospitals. There was no predefined intervention named 'Sabal Kashi'.

There was not even, in those early weeks, any particular focus on children with disabilities. The intervention that eventually became the core of my Residency emerged gradually, through observation, conversation, and a growing understanding of how government actually works.

Those first months were deliberately exploratory. I spent time in district hospitals, attended coordination meetings, accompanied Medical Officers on rounds, and travelled with ASHAs and Anganwadi workers into communities I would otherwise never have entered. My role, at that stage, was less about providing immediate answers and more about learning to ask the right questions. I came to appreciate, slowly, that government systems reveal themselves only to those willing to sit with them long enough to understand their rhythms.

The Problem Nobody Owned

One issue surfaced again and again. Doctors and frontline health workers could recount several children born with congenital anomalies. They remembered performing diagnoses, counselling families, and initiating referrals. But when I asked what happened to those children after diagnosis, the answers became uncertain. Some families sought treatment. Others vanished from the system. A few returned months or years later with complications that earlier intervention might have prevented. No one could say with confidence how many children had completed treatment, or whether any of them had received rehabilitation afterwards.

My initial interpretation was that this reflected gaps in healthcare infrastructure. That seemed like the straightforward explanation. But the more I engaged with officials across departments, the less convincing it became. Varanasi already possessed an extensive public health network. The Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram provided a national framework for early identification of childhood conditions. The MaNTrA application already captured data on mothers and newborns. ASHAs and ANMs maintained close contact with families in their areas. Anganwadi centres worked with young children daily.

Schools identified developmental delays among older children. Government hospitals and medical colleges held significant clinical capacity, and specialised NGOs supplemented what the public system could not directly provide. The district even had sanctioned funding for a District Early Intervention Centre that had not yet been operationalised.

Everything existed. Everything was functioning. And yet the child still disappeared.

It gradually became clear that this was not a problem of missing institutions. It was a problem of missing connections between institutions. Each one performed its designated role, but no administrative architecture held their efforts together around a single child's journey. Responsibility was dispersed, and in its dispersal, it effectively belonged to no one.

That realisation changed the direction of everything that followed.

Instead of asking what new programme the district required, conversations with senior officers began revolving around a different question: could we make existing institutions work together more effectively? These discussions, particularly with the Chief Development Officer and officials from the Health Department, became some of the most intellectually

alive moments of the residency . Rather than designing another scheme, we started imagining a system that could connect the institutions already in existence around a single child. This reframing, I now believe, was the most important contribution I made in those early months: helping shift the question from what was missing to why what existed was not working together.

This was the beginning of Sabal Kashi. In the language of Indian governance, what we were attempting is often called convergence: getting different arms of government to work toward one goal instead of each pursuing its own mandate in isolation. Sabal Kashi was, in effect, an attempt to make convergence happen in practice rather than remain a word in a policy document.

Collaborate, Collaborate, and Collaborate

The intervention was never intended to be another health programme. Its central purpose was to create an administrative architecture that would connect existing institutions into a continuous pathway from early identification through diagnosis, referral, treatment, rehabilitation, and long-term inclusion. Framing it this way also meant reframing how we understood congenital disability itself. It was not, we argued, primarily a medical issue. It was a governance issue. A child born with a cleft palate or a club foot does not interact with only one institution. That child encounters hospitals, frontline health workers, Anganwadi centres, schools, rehabilitation providers, welfare departments, and community organisations across the full arc of childhood. If each of these institutions performs its own function without communicating with the others, the burden of stitching the system together falls entirely on families, many of whom are already navigating poverty, distance, and stigma.

Designing With the System, Not For It

Designing the intervention required extensive consultation before a single line of code was written for any platform. We met with Medical Officers, RBSK teams, district officials, NGOs, specialised hospitals, and frontline workers to understand their workflows, their constraints, and their expectations. Every conversation revealed another layer of complexity that a purely top-down design would have missed. Doctors wanted better visibility over referrals. Frontline workers wanted simpler processes that would not add hours to already full days. NGOs wanted clearer coordination with government. District administrators wanted reliable monitoring that told them whether individual children had progressed, not just whether activities had been completed. Parents, when we spoke with them, simply wanted fewer offices to visit and fewer times to repeat the same story.

Out of these conversations, the Sabal Kashi portal emerged. It is often described as a digital platform, and technically it was. But I have always understood it as the visible surface of a much larger intervention. The platform allowed Medical Officers, ASHAs, ANMs, Anganwadi workers, teachers, specialised hospitals, and parents themselves to register children with suspected congenital disabilities. Once a child entered the system, referral pathways linked them to appropriate institutions for diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, and follow-up. Crucially, district administrators could now monitor a child's actual journey rather than simply tallying programme activities.

Implementation, predictably, proved far more complex than design.

Winning Trust on the Ground

When the portal was introduced to frontline workers, the initial reaction was hesitation rather than enthusiasm. Many ASHAs and Anganwadi workers perceived it as another reporting requirement layered onto already demanding work. Some worried about digital literacy. Others questioned whether more data entry would actually improve outcomes for families. Looking back, I recognise that these concerns were entirely legitimate. They were the rational response of people being asked to absorb a reform without being adequately consulted on its design.

Rather than insisting on compliance, we chose to invest in confidence. Repeated training sessions were organised, simplified guides were prepared in the local language, WhatsApp support groups connected frontline workers with immediate assistance when difficulties arose, and Medical Officers were supported to become local champions of the system. Progress was slower than I had initially expected. It was also considerably more durable. Resistance gave way to ownership as the portal gradually became less of an external requirement and more of a practical tool that helped workers track cases more effectively.

The partnerships that formed alongside the portal were equally significant. The public health system alone could not provide corrective surgeries, long-term physiotherapy, or the range of rehabilitation services that children with congenital disabilities required.

Structured collaborations were therefore established with Smile Train India, the Anushka Foundation, the Hans Foundation, GS Memorial Hospital, and KIRAN Society. These organisations became integral components of the referral architecture rather than peripheral charitable presences. Once a child was identified and registered, referral pathways connected the family with whichever institution was best positioned to provide appropriate care.

This experience reinforced a conviction that has since stayed with me. Effective governance is rarely about government acting alone. Some of the most meaningful public outcomes emerge when governments create the conditions for civil society, specialised institutions, and communities to contribute alongside them.

Bringing Schools Into the Fold

Another deliberate expansion of the referral ecosystem was the inclusion of teachers. Many developmental delays become more apparent only after children begin school. By incorporating teachers into the identification network, the intervention recognised schools as important public institutions capable of contributing to disability identification. This broadened Sabal Kashi from a health-sector initiative into a genuinely cross-sectoral governance model.

Implementation also forced an honest reckoning with the limits of planning. Integrating data with existing government systems proved technically complex. Sustaining engagement across all stakeholder groups required continuous follow-up rather than one-time training. Rehabilitation services remained uneven in remote areas where the reach of partner

organisations was weaker. Some institutional partnerships deepened quickly; others moved more slowly. There were periods when progress felt genuinely frustrating.

Over time, I came to appreciate these difficulties differently. Governance is inherently adaptive. Every obstacle became an occasion for redesigning a process, strengthening a relationship, or revisiting an assumption. Rather than following a fixed blueprint, the intervention evolved continuously in response to what was actually happening on the ground. That capacity for adaptation, I now believe, was as important to whatever success the intervention achieved as any feature of its original design.

What the Numbers Meant, and What They Did Not

By the end of the residency, the district had identified more than 500 children with congenital disabilities through systematic screening and community-based reporting. Of these, 117 children had begun receiving appropriate medical or surgical interventions through coordinated efforts involving government institutions and specialised healthcare partners. The district administration had also set an ambitious target of reaching one thousand children as the intervention scaled.

These figures matter. But they are not, I think, what the residency's contribution ultimately amounted to.

The more enduring achievement was demonstrating that district administrations carry enormous untapped capacity when existing institutions begin working together around a shared purpose. Sabal Kashi did not create a new department, recruit a parallel workforce, or introduce a new government scheme. It reorganised the relationships between institutions that already existed. And in doing so, it helped make visible a category of children that the district's otherwise strong health indicators had systematically obscured.

That, to my mind, is what meaningful public policy can look like when it takes institutional coordination seriously.

This is, in essence, the “whole-of-government” approach, applied at the scale of a single district: breaking silos, working with a shared purpose, sharing information, and collaborating toward a common goal. Sabal Kashi convinced me that this is not only a slogan for Central ministries to aspire to. It works, in exactly the same way, when it is practised between a Medical Officer, an Anganwadi worker, and a schoolteacher who have never had reason to speak to one another before. The instinct that made it work was neither personal connection nor formal authority, but a simple willingness to collaborate, collaborate, and collaborate, across whatever boundaries the system had drawn.

Residency and My Learning

If someone were to ask what I learnt during two years in Varanasi, I would probably disappoint them by not beginning with policy frameworks or technical knowledge. Those certainly mattered, and the Residency deepened my understanding of public administration in ways no classroom could have. But the most enduring lessons came from something less easily classified. They came from watching institutions interact, from observing how people responded to change, and from gradually recognising that governance is, at its core, about relationships rather than rules.

When I joined the Praxis Residency, I understood public policy primarily as a discipline concerned with designing better programmes. I believed that if a development problem persisted, it was because government lacked either resources, infrastructure, or an appropriate policy response. Varanasi challenged that belief almost immediately. The district had capable officers, committed frontline workers, functioning programmes, and substantial public investment. Vulnerable children were still falling through the cracks. The problem was not that government lacked solutions. It was that its many solutions rarely worked together.

Governance is About Relationships, Not Departments

Perhaps the single most important lesson of the residency is that governance is fundamentally relational. I had arrived thinking of government as a collection of departments, each responsible for implementing a specific programme. Over time, I came to understand that citizens rarely experience government in this way.

For a parent of a child born with a congenital disability, there is no Health Department, no Education Department, no Social Welfare Department. There is simply government. Families do not care which institution owns which responsibility. They want their child to receive timely treatment, rehabilitation, and the opportunity to live a full life.

Yet public systems are typically organised around institutional mandates rather than the journeys of those they serve. This became painfully clear while working on Sabal Kashi. A child might be identified by an ASHA, referred by a Medical Officer, treated in a specialised hospital, supported through an Anganwadi centre, and later enrolled in school and linked to welfare benefits. Every institution played a real role. Not one of them held responsibility for continuity across the entire journey. Parents were expected to navigate that fragmented system largely on their own.

The lesson I drew from this is that improving governance is not always about creating new institutions. More often, it is about strengthening the relationships between institutions that already exist. This distinction is worth stating precisely. The relationships that mattered here were not personal connections, the informal access that comes from knowing the right person and that so often substitutes for genuine coordination in government. It was about a relationship toward a shared cause: officials across departments choosing to treat a child's outcome as more important than the boundary of their own mandate, and, in doing so, working beyond those boundaries rather than around them. When those relationships become stronger, government begins to function less like a collection of separate departments and more like a single system oriented around citizens. That insight has permanently changed how I approach policy problems. My first instinct is no longer to ask what new scheme is required. It is to ask which institutions already exist and why they are not yet working together.

Leading Without Authority

Another lesson that shaped the residency deeply was learning what it means to lead without formal authority. As a Praxis learner, I held no administrative position. I could not issue orders, allocate resources, or direct officials. I initially viewed this as a limitation, worrying that meaningful change might be impossible without formal power. Over time, I

came to see this differently. The absence of positional authority became one of the residency's most valuable teachers.

Every conversation required persuasion rather than instruction. Every proposal required evidence rather than rank. Every partnership depended on trust rather than hierarchy. Whether I was working with senior officers, Medical Officers, NGOs, or frontline workers, I learnt that people support change not because someone asks them to, but because they come to believe the change is worthwhile. I remember one Medical Officer who dismissed the portal outright at our first meeting, calling it "one more form to fill." I did not argue. I kept returning, sat through his outpatient hours, and asked what would actually make his work easier. Three months later, he was the one training his colleagues on it.

This became especially clear during the rollout of the Sabal Kashi portal. Many frontline workers were understandably hesitant. Their reluctance did not reflect unwillingness to serve communities; it reflected genuine concerns about workload, digital confidence, and the fear of additional accountability without additional support. My initial instinct was to explain the system's benefits clearly. That approach moved almost nothing. What made a difference was listening, revising processes based on what I heard, organising repeated and patient training, and creating mechanisms through which people could ask for help without embarrassment.

Trust built slowly. When it did, it held. The portal became something people owned rather than something imposed on them, and the difference between those two states of ownership cannot be overstated in terms of what they produce in practice.

This experience reshaped my understanding of leadership. I had associated it primarily with decision-making authority. The residency taught me that leadership often begins much earlier, with listening carefully, building credibility through consistent presence, and creating conditions in which others choose to participate. The most effective public leaders I encountered during the residency were rarely those who spoke the loudest. They were those who patiently built consensus, nurtured relationships, and enabled institutions to choose collaboration over isolation.

What Technology Can and Cannot Do

Before the residency, I was genuinely enthusiastic about digital governance. Like many in the policy world, I believed technology could meaningfully transform public service delivery. Working on Sabal Kashi made that understanding considerably more careful.

The portal we developed was an important component of the intervention. It improved visibility over beneficiary journeys, strengthened referral pathways, and created real-time monitoring capacity that had not previously existed. But it also became obvious, fairly quickly, that the portal itself solved very few problems independently. Without Medical Officers who believed in the intervention, ASHAs willing to identify children in communities, NGOs prepared to provide specialised treatment, district officials committed to cross-departmental coordination, and teachers who recognised developmental delays as a signal to act, the platform would have remained an unused database.

Its value was entirely contingent on the institutional environment surrounding it.

This may seem obvious in retrospect. It did not feel obvious at the outset. And it is, I think, a lesson that remains underappreciated in conversations about digital public infrastructure. Technology does not replace governance. At its best, it amplifies governance. Good digital systems strengthen existing institutional relationships and make coordination less expensive and more accountable. Weak institutional relationships do not become strong simply because they are digitised. The question governments should ask is not how technology can substitute for administrative systems, but how technology can help institutions serve citizens more coherently. That is where genuine public value lives.

Learning to See Government Through Citizens' Eyes

Perhaps the residency 's deepest lesson was also the most personal.

Working closely with families fundamentally changed the perspective from which I now view public policy. As policy professionals, we tend to evaluate programmes through indicators: beneficiaries reached, schemes implemented, targets achieved. These measures are important, but they rarely capture how government is actually experienced.

Families experience government emotionally as much as administratively. Every additional office they must visit represents another day's wages lost. Every referral without follow-up creates anxiety that compounds over time. Every form that requires information they have already submitted elsewhere is a quiet reminder that the system was designed around itself rather than around them.

This perspective influenced almost every design decision within Sabal Kashi. We tried to reduce the number of times families had to repeat their story. We sought to make referrals more predictable. We worked to ensure that institutions communicated with each other rather than requiring parents to carry information between departments like a kind of informal courier service.

Looking back, I recognise that these were not merely administrative improvements. They reflected a deeper shift: from designing systems around government processes to designing them around people's lives. The residency has given me the habit of asking, whenever I encounter a policy, not only whether it is technically sound but whether it is humane. That question, I suspect, will prove useful for the rest of my career.

Beyond the Residency

As my Praxis Residency comes to an end, I find myself carrying far more than the experience of having worked on a single intervention. I leave with a changed understanding of governance, of leadership, and of my own place within public institutions. The residency has not only shaped the kind of professional I hope to become; it has reaffirmed why I chose public policy in the first place.

Before arriving in Varanasi, I saw my career largely through the lens of policy design and analysis. I am now equally drawn to the challenge of implementation, to the space where policies encounter real institutions, real communities, and the complex realities of everyday governance. I hope to continue working at the intersection of public policy, programme management, and systems transformation, helping governments design solutions that are

not only intellectually sound but also institutionally implementable and genuinely centred on citizens' lives.

It has also left me with a quiet conviction about the nature of change in public systems. Some of the most meaningful improvements in governance do not begin with new laws, larger budgets, or sweeping reforms. They begin when institutions choose to work together, when frontline workers are treated as partners in implementation rather than instruments of delivery, and when policymakers are willing to listen carefully before prescribing solutions. That belief will continue to shape how I approach every policy challenge ahead of me.

People sometimes ask whether Sabal Kashi was the biggest outcome of the residency . In one sense, yes. It represents two years of fieldwork, collaboration, and institutional learning, and it has left behind a functioning governance architecture for children who were previously invisible to the district's public systems. But in another, more important sense, the residency 's greatest outcome was personal. It changed how I understand government. It changed how I understand leadership. And it taught me, more than anything else, the value of humility.

I entered Varanasi believing that good ideas improve public systems. I leave recognising that good ideas matter only when institutions trust each other enough to act on them together. Sustainable change is rarely the product of a single policy, a single officer, or a single innovation. It emerges from patient collaboration, shared ownership, and the willingness of people across institutions to orient themselves toward a common purpose.

That is the lesson I will carry long after the residency ends. Policies will continue to evolve, governments will change, and technologies will become more sophisticated. But effective governance will always depend on something fundamentally human: relationships built on trust, respect, and a shared commitment to the people at the centre of public life. That, for me, has become the true meaning of public service.

Rethinking Assessment In Palamu's Schools

Ena Ray Chowdhury

Whenever people learnt that I had been selected for the PPiA Praxis Residency Programme and posted to Palamu for the next two years, the reaction was almost always the same. They paused on the name itself. "Palamu?" they would ask, and then, almost as a reflex, "Isn't that the Left Wing Extremism area?" A few wished me luck. Others asked, more carefully, whether it would be safe, or whether I would really find much to learn in a district that seemed to appear in the news only through its difficulties.

I had carried some of those same assumptions with me. Before arriving, almost everything I knew about Palamu had come from newspaper reports, district profiles and development indicators. I knew it was an Aspirational District. I knew its ranking on this index and that one. I could have recited the socio-economic challenges from memory. What I could not have told anyone was a single thing about the people who actually lived there.

That gap closed faster than I expected. Within a few weeks, the district I had read about and the district I was living in had stopped resembling each other. The Palamu on paper was a list of deficits. The Palamu I met was full of teachers who kept showing up every morning despite a dozen competing responsibilities, frontline workers who walked to habitations no vehicle could reach, and young people whose ambitions ran well ahead of the opportunities in front of them. Slowly, Palamu stopped being a place I had been posted to and became a place that was quietly rearranging how I understood governance, public systems and my own small role inside them.

Much of that shift happened on the road. In my first few months, I had the chance to accompany the then Deputy Commissioner on field visits across the district, and I approached them, at first, as opportunities to observe government programmes. It took only a handful of trips to realise they were offering something far more useful. On those long drives from one block to another listening to officials turn over a local problem, watching a frontline worker explain why a scheme was stalling, standing at the edge of a conversation between the DC and a group of villagers I was watching governance happen in a register that no file or review meeting ever captures. The district that had lived in my head as a column of statistics was acquiring faces, voices and arguments.

One thing struck me on almost every visit, and it took me a while to name it. Very few conversations stayed inside the subject they began with. A complaint about a school would slide, within minutes, into a complaint about drinking water. A question about a road would end up somewhere near the health sub-centre. Livelihoods, migration, nutrition and education kept folding into one another, as if the villagers had never agreed to the departmental boundaries the administration used to organise itself. Watching this happen, again and again, I understood something that no orientation session had managed to teach me: people do not experience their lives department by department. They experience them as a single, tangled reality and a district administration, whether it likes it or not, has to answer them in the same tangled way.

I remember one drive back to Medininagar in particular. I had gone out expecting to think about the schemes we had reviewed. Instead, I found myself replaying the smaller things a teacher worrying aloud about attendance, a panchayat representative pressing the DC about a handpump, a sahiya describing children who were not gaining weight. On the way out I had filed these as three unrelated problems. By the time we reached the headquarters they had quietly rearranged themselves into one. That drive taught me more about the limits of siloed governance than anything I could have underlined in a textbook.

It also changed how I understood my own job. I had arrived with a tidy theory of what a learner does: find a problem, design an intervention, deliver it. The district was gently dismantling that theory. Before I could usefully solve anything, I first had to understand the system I had just become a very junior part of. So I learnt to talk less and listen more, to watch before suggesting, to ask before answering. Those early months were not a waiting room before the “real” residency began. They were the foundation everything else would eventually stand on.

The more I saw, the more my early picture of Palamu a district defined by what it lacked gave way to something else. I kept meeting people who complicated it: teachers who stayed after hours for students who were not theirs to worry about, officials making hard calls with incomplete information and no clean options, sahiyas and anganwadi workers holding entire villages together on modest honorariums. What I had first read as a district of deficits, I began to see as a district of remarkable persistence.

Looking back now, I think my residency actually began well before I identified any intervention. It began the day I stopped hunting for a project and started trying to read a district. Public systems, I have since learnt, rarely open up to people who arrive holding finished solutions. They open, slowly and warily, to people willing to observe, to listen and to earn a little trust first. By the time I began thinking seriously about what I could contribute, Palamu had already changed the way I looked at governance. It had become less my posting than my first teacher.

A Conversation in Ramgarh

For the first few months I was not looking for an intervention so much as looking for my bearings. Every field visit, every review meeting, every conversation with an officer added another layer to my sense of how the district actually worked, and slowly convinced me that governance was not a thing you could understand from behind a desk. It had to be met where it happened in classrooms, panchayat offices, sub-centres, and the courtyards where a scheme finally reached a person.

Those months of accompanying the Deputy Commissioner across the blocks of Palamu did something to my idea of what a learner was for. In the first weeks I kept a low, anxious hum going in the back of my mind shouldn't I already have a project? Watching officers move between a dozen priorities in a single morning, each one urgent to somebody, made the hum sound faintly ridiculous. I stopped measuring my progress by whether I had a project to name and started measuring it by how much I understood at the end of each day. That small change of yardstick gave me the patience to let the district decide where I could be of use.

The moment it decided came in Ramgarh Block, on an ordinary field visit that I remember more vividly than most of what came before or after it. The official review had wrapped up and people were beginning to drift away. I was gathering my things to leave when a girl no more than thirteen or fourteen walked up to me with a directness that made me stop.

“दीदी, मुझे बहुत पढ़ना है। पापा कहते हैं कि पढ़ाई से ही मैं आगे बढ़ सकती हूँ। मुझे एक दिन डॉक्टर बनना है और लोगों की सेवा करनी है।”

The whole exchange lasted barely a minute, but it stayed with me for the entire drive back to Medininagar, and for a good while after. What held me was not the dream itself children everywhere want to be doctors and officers and teachers. It was the flatness of her certainty. She did not ask me for anything. She did not describe her difficulties or invite my sympathy. She simply stated, as a matter of settled fact, that education would carry her forward and that she would one day be a doctor. I remember smiling while she spoke, and then falling unusually quiet once she had gone.

It has taken me some time to understand why one minute lodged itself so deep. I think it was the contrast. In the schools I had been visiting, I had been quietly cataloguing everything that made outcomes uncertain learning gaps, thin academic support, examinations that arrived before anyone was ready. And here was a girl who had already done the hard part. She had imagined her future in full colour. The open question, the one I carried home, was whether the system around her was anywhere near as prepared to get her there as she was to go.

That question changed the direction of my residency more than any framework did. I had been asking myself, in the abstract, which problem I should choose to solve. After Ramgarh I began asking a different, sharper question instead: what, exactly, was standing between a girl like her and the future she already believed in? The problem, I was starting to see, was never a shortage of aspiration. It was whether the public education system could keep faith with the aspiration that was already there.

Listening Before Designing

The weeks after Ramgarh went into understanding the education system rather than acting on it. I spent time in government schools and in the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas across the district inside classrooms, but just as often in staff rooms, in wardens' offices, on the verandahs where teachers gathered between periods. I had decided, deliberately, to arrive without a solution in hand and to begin with conversations instead. I wanted to know how these schools actually ran, what wore the teachers down, and how the girls themselves talked about their own learning.

A pattern surfaced only gradually. The girls were, almost without exception, ambitious and clear-eyed they spoke of medicine, the police, teaching, the civil services, and they meant it. The teachers were, almost without exception, committed, holding academic work together while a steady stream of administrative duties pulled at their time. And yet, whenever the conversation turned honestly to learning outcomes, the same worry surfaced from every direction. Girls were reaching the higher classes carrying gaps that no one had caught, and

those gaps tended to reveal themselves only when the board examinations were already close enough to touch.

It was not a problem of motivation or of effort, but of timing: the learning gaps were being noticed too late to do much about them. That understanding did not arrive in a single meeting. It accumulated one classroom, one staff-room conversation, one candid admission at a time until it was impossible to look away from.

I remember the evening it finally cohered. I had come back from yet another school and opened my notebook expecting to jot down project ideas. Instead I found myself writing questions:

Why are learning gaps caught so late? What do teachers already know about their students that they almost never get a chance to sit down and compare? Could an assessment be a tool for learning rather than just a verdict on it?

Looking back, those three questions were the real beginning of the intervention. The design came much later. The questions came first.

Designing With the System, Not For It

The more time I spent in schools, the more one conclusion hardened: any intervention that ignored the actual texture of a teacher's day would not outlast my residency by a single week. Each school had its own context, but the constraints rhymed. Teachers wanted their students to do well and, in the same breath, described the near-impossibility of attending to five different learning levels in one room while examinations, inspections and routine duties ate the hours in between.

So I started from their problem rather than my solution. The question I kept returning to was deliberately modest: how could the academic processes that already existed be made a little stronger without adding one more thing to an overloaded plate? I had no interest in a parallel system that would run for two years and quietly die when I left; I wanted to leave behind something teachers would keep using because it made their own work easier.

That shift from inventing something new to strengthening what was already there changed everything about how the intervention took shape. After many rounds of conversation with teachers, school leaders and district officials, it settled into something recognisable. Structured assessments, run early in the academic year, would surface learning gaps while there was still time to act on them. Regular academic review discussions would give teachers a space to look at those findings together and plan support, rather than each carrying the worry alone. Previous years' board papers and carefully built question banks would make the examination less of an unknown, and so less frightening. And at the district level, simple school-visit checklists would nudge classroom observation toward teaching and learning, not only toward registers and compliance.

None of these pieces was clever on its own. Their strength was in how they fit together, and in how naturally each one slotted into something schools already did.

From Planning to Practice

Before I introduced anything, I spent a good deal of time talking it through with the people who would actually have to run it. Teachers were frank about the realities of their classrooms. School leaders pointed to constraints I had not thought of. District officials showed me where the idea could hook onto existing academic review processes instead of standing awkwardly beside them.

Plain as those components sounded, they asked for a real change in habit. An assessment was no longer only an examination; it became an occasion to reflect and plan. A review meeting was no longer only a tally of who passed; it became a place to ask why a particular gap kept recurring and what could be done about it before the next cycle.

“Will This Also Disappear?”

The early weeks of implementation were both encouraging and humbling. Some teachers took to the idea at once. Others met it with a caution I came to respect. On one school visit, a teacher heard me out, smiled, and asked the question I have never quite forgotten: “Madam, will this also disappear after a few months, like so many other schemes?”

It was not a challenge. It was an honest question, earned by experience. Rather than launch into a defence of the design, I let it sit, and it taught me something the design documents never could. These schools had seen programmes come and go for years. What they did not need was one more temporary activity to absorb and then mourn. What they needed was support that respected their time and made their existing work a little lighter.

After that conversation I stopped asking schools to adapt to the intervention and started adapting the intervention to the schools. Every visit became a chance to simplify something, to fold in a teacher’s suggestion, to strip out a step that was not earning its place. Slowly and it was slow caution gave way to a kind of ownership. Teachers began treating the assessments and the reviews less as my project and more as a normal part of their own academic practice.

What the Five Schools Taught Me

The intervention ran across five Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, and no two of them were alike. They differed in leadership, in atmosphere, in how quickly they were willing to try something new. A couple took to the assessment cycle almost immediately; others needed time to see where it would fit in an already full routine. Early on this unevenness frustrated me. Later I came to treat it as instruction. It forced me to adapt the implementation school by school without letting go of what the intervention was for.

Some of the most useful hours I spent were the ones outside any formal meeting in staff rooms after the last class, when the conversation drifted from scores to actual students. A teacher would mention a girl who had gone quiet in class, or another who had suddenly started raising her hand, and we would end up talking less about data than about children. Those unhurried conversations were where the intervention was really negotiated.

As the assessment cycles came round, something did shift. Teachers began catching learning gaps earlier during the year, when there was still room to respond instead of discovering

them in the wreckage of the board results. Classroom discussions grew more specific. Support could be planned where it was actually needed.

Confidence, Not Just Competence

Structured assessment was the spine of the intervention, but it was never the whole of it. The academic review discussions mattered just as much, because they were where a set of numbers turned into a plan. Over time the animating question in those rooms changed from “how many passed?” to “how do we help this particular girl learn better?”

The board papers and question banks were meant to do something similar for the students themselves. I never introduced them as more drilling. I introduced them as a way to make the examination familiar rather than fearsome to replace a vague dread with a known shape. Teachers used them to anchor discussions around the concepts that came up year after year. The aim was not to pile on pressure but to take some uncertainty out of a moment that too many of these girls approached with their stomachs in knots.

Alongside all of this, I worked with district officials to keep academic monitoring pointed at learning. The school-visit checklists were built so that an observation could dwell on teaching practice and student engagement, not only on whether the registers were in order. Slowly, the questions asked during a classroom review began to change. What encouraged me most was that none of this stayed sealed inside “residency activity.” It seeped into the ordinary conversations teachers, school leaders and officials were already having which, more than any indicator, told me the intervention was finding a place to live within the system.

What Success Actually Looked Like

By the end, I had stopped expecting success to arrive as a number. It showed up in smaller, stubborn ways. A teacher citing an assessment finding in a review meeting without being asked to. A school leader posing a different kind of question during a classroom visit. A girl approaching a practice paper without flinching, because the format no longer surprised her.

The change I valued most was that conversations about learning had become routine and evidence-based, spread across the year instead of bunched around results season. The intervention had not fixed everything wrong with the education system; it was never meant to, and I would not trust anyone who claimed otherwise. What it had done was open up more honest, better-informed conversations about learning inside the institutions that were already there. For a two-year residency, that felt like the right kind of progress: modest, real and capable of outlasting me.

When the Plan Would Not Hold

One lesson arrived early and kept repeating itself: even a well-made plan rarely unfolds the way it was drawn. Activities slowed because a school was juggling examinations, an inspection and a government programme all at once. Meetings were postponed. Academic calendars shifted without notice. In the beginning these disruptions genuinely unsettled me. I read every delay as momentum leaking away.

It took me longer than I would like to admit to see that this was simply what working inside a public system feels like. The schools were not resisting the change. They were carrying more than any plan of mine had accounted for, with less time and fewer hands than the work required. Once I understood that, I stopped defending my timeline and started bending it. Some components were simplified; others were introduced later, after another round of conversation. In hindsight those compromises did not weaken the intervention. They were the reason it survived. Sustainable change, I was learning, depends far less on a flawless plan than on patience, flexibility and trust.

A Meeting I Keep Returning To

Of all the review meetings I sat through, one stays with me, and not because anything dramatic happened in it. Nothing new was launched. No fresh resources were sanctioned. The discussion turned on something far smaller how the academic processes already in place could be strengthened so that schools got timely support instead of only periodic inspection. What held me was the shape of the conversation itself. District officials, education functionaries and school leaders each saw the same problem from a slightly different angle, and no single person in the room held the whole answer. Each of them held one piece of it.

That meeting quietly rearranged how I understood policy implementation. I had walked into the residency assuming decisions travelled downward handed from the top, obeyed below. What I actually watched, over and over, was decisions being assembled: argued into shape through discussion, negotiation and slow refinement. Good ideas were rarely adopted because they were new. They were adopted when enough people in the room came, together, to see the point of them.

I had no authority in that room, and no power to decide anything. But I left it understanding that contribution and authority are not the same thing. Sometimes a contribution is nothing more than careful preparation, honest listening, and the patience to help the people who will actually carry the work arrive at their own conviction.

Beyond the Classroom

Education became the spine of my residency, but it was never the whole of my work, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. Working closely with the district administration pulled me into a much wider range of responsibilities field inspections, programme reviews, inter-departmental coordination, documentation, and election-related duties that had nothing to do with schools.

The election period showed me this most sharply. Almost overnight, a district administration I had come to know as a set of departments working in their own lanes turned into something else entirely. Offices that rarely coordinated began moving in step, with a discipline I had not seen in ordinary months. Watching officials, polling personnel and field teams hold that discipline through enormous logistical pressure gave me a new respect for the invisible effort a democratic exercise quietly demands. Sitting in on the review meetings and watching the field-level preparations take shape, I understood that an election does not run on laws and procedures alone. It runs on thousands of small administrative decisions, taken quietly and correctly, day after day. It was one of the first

times I saw, rather than read about, what state capacity actually looks like when it is asked to deliver.

Each of these taught me governance from a different doorway. District review meetings drove home how much depends on coordination across departments that rarely speak the same language. Field visits kept returning me to the same plain truth: a policy means nothing until it actually reaches a person. These were not distractions from my intervention. They were the wider frame that made the intervention legible to me. The education work taught me how learning happens, or fails to; the district taught me how a state actually functions, or strains to; and the residency, taken whole, taught me something about the weight of working inside public systems at all.

One evening, back from another field visit, I opened my notebook to record the day's activities and found myself writing about people instead. A teacher who worried about her students more than about their marks. An officer trying to hold three competing priorities steady with resources that stretched to cover maybe two. A girl in Ramgarh who was certain she would become a doctor. None of them had been on the residency syllabus. Together they had taught me more about public policy than any session ever managed to.

I had joined expecting my real education to come from the coursework the workshops, the frameworks, the policy discussions. Those were genuinely valuable. But the district kept insisting, in its stubborn way, that governance is finally about people, and it reshaped my assumptions faster than any reading could. The largest thing I carry out of these two years is not a body of new knowledge. It is a changed way of seeing problems I thought I already understood.

Behind Every File, a Person

The same realisation kept ambushing me from different directions in review meetings, on inspections, in conversations with frontline workers. Government decisions almost never moved as fast as they looked like they should from the outside. Every one of them demanded consultation, coordination, and a weighing of realities that were not visible on the file. A proposal that seemed obvious in theory had to pass through procedure, financial limits and a queue of competing claims before it could reach anyone.

Watching that up close cured me of a lazy assumption. I had walked in reading delay as a synonym for inefficiency. I walked out understanding that much of what looks like delay is the slow arithmetic of balancing several equally legitimate demands at once. A public institution is not only a machine of rules. It is a crowd of people trying to make defensible decisions inside genuinely hard constraints.

The People Inside the System Know It Best

When I first began visiting the government schools and KGBVs of Palamu, I carried a tidy assumption about what they needed. More resources, I thought. Better academic materials. Fill the shortages and the outcomes would follow. It was the kind of diagnosis that sounds sensible from a distance and rarely survives contact with a staff room.

What survived contact was something quieter and harder. Visit after visit, in classrooms and on verandahs and in the unhurried talk after the last period, teachers and school leaders

kept steering me toward a concern I had not put at the centre. Their difficulty was not, in the main, a shortage of materials. It was that learning gaps went unseen for too long surfacing only when the board examinations were already near, too late for anyone to do much about them. What they wanted was not more things. It was a way to catch those gaps early enough to act on them.

That correction did not come from a report or a review meeting. It came from the people who spent every day inside the system, and who understood its real bottleneck better than any outsider arriving with a checklist. It reshaped my sense of the problem entirely, and it went on to shape the intervention itself which is why the design turned on timely assessment and academic review rather than on distributing one more set of materials. The lesson stayed with me well beyond that one question: the people inside a public system are rarely its passive recipients. Listen closely enough, and they will tell you exactly where it is failing them, and often how to begin fixing it.

Leadership Without Authority

I still remember walking out of a district-level review meeting turning over how strange leadership looked from the inside. No one person had solved anything. Officers had asked questions, pressed for opinions, traded priorities, and leaned on collective judgement before settling on a course. I had no formal standing in that room at all and yet it was becoming clear that useful contribution did not depend on a designation. It depended on preparation, on credibility, and on relationships.

That was the education, really. Without authority, I had to build relationships instead of issuing instructions, to persuade instead of direct, and to learn that trust will move a system further than a title ever will. The education intervention worked for exactly this reason: teachers, school leaders and officials took it up because they had come to believe in it, not because anyone had ordered them to. It rearranged, permanently, what I take the word leadership to mean. Leadership is not being the most visible person in the room. It is making it possible for other people to own the change.

Learning to Bend

I learnt this the hard way during one assessment cycle, when a school visit I had carefully planned had to be set aside because another district priority needed attention that same week. My first instinct was to treat the cycle as broken. Instead, I sat down with the teachers, reworked the schedule around what their week could actually hold, and we carried the assessments through over the following days. Nothing about the plan survived intact, and yet the work got done which was the point I had been slow to grasp: in a public system, bending the schedule is often not a failure of the plan but the only way the plan moves at all.

There were plenty of days like that, when a carefully prepared plan collapsed at the last moment a shifted school calendar, a postponed meeting, an inspection that swallowed the week. For a long stretch I took these as defeats. Eventually I understood them as the ordinary weather of a public system. And the useful question, I found, was never “why has this changed?” but “how does the work adapt while staying true to what it was for?”

Flexibility, it turned out, was not a compromise I was making. It was a discipline I was learning. A plan gives you direction, but real change asks you to respond, thoughtfully, when the ground moves and the ground always moves. That is a lesson I expect to carry well past this residency .

The Residency 's Real Gift

When people ask now what I got from the PPIA Praxis Residency , they usually expect an answer about projects, reports or frameworks. Those were real, and they mattered. But they are not the first things that surface when I think of Palamu.

What surfaces are the early-morning drives across the district. The long staff-room conversations after a classroom observation. The review meetings where I watched, half in disbelief, how much negotiation sits underneath a single administrative decision. And, more than any of these, the girl in Ramgarh Block who told me, without a trace of doubt, that education would carry her forward and that she would one day become a doctor.

Whenever I think about the RESIDENCY , I think about her, because she holds nearly everything it taught me. Public policy, in the end, is not really about documents or frameworks or institutions on their own. It is about keeping intact the conditions in which a girl like her can go on believing her dream is reachable and about making sure the public systems around her are actually built to help her reach it. That belief is the most valuable thing I am carrying out of Palamu.

Beyond the Residency

Two years ago I came to Palamu hoping to be of some use to a district. I am leaving with far more than I brought, and more than I knew to expect. The residency has sharpened my commitment to working where public policy, governance and education meet, but its deeper gift is a way of approaching that work with curiosity, with humility, and with respect for the people who live inside public systems every day. I have learnt that lasting change is almost never the work of one person. It emerges when institutions, communities and a few stubborn professionals pull in the same direction.

If anything, the residency has settled a direction I once held only loosely. I want to keep working where public policy, governance and education meet with the institutions that build state capacity, strengthen public education systems and push decisions toward evidence rather than assumption. In the longer run I hope to take up research and leadership roles that sit on the seam between policy design and its implementation, the exact seam where I watched so many good intentions succeed or fail in Palamu, so that public systems grow more responsive, more inclusive and more able to keep their promises.

Whatever comes next, I will carry Palamu with me. It was never simply the place I was posted. It will always remain the place where I learnt that meaningful public service begins not with having all the answers, but with the humility to listen, the courage to keep learning, and the commitment to walk alongside the people we hope to serve.

Influencing Public Systems: Notes from Residency in Basti & Aligarh District

Muhammed Salim

Let me describe the kind of transition that brought me here, because without it, nothing that follows makes much sense. I come from Kerala — a state where public services mostly work, where literacy is near-universal, where a woman in a village can usually find a health worker within walking distance. In August 2024, I stepped into Basti District in north-eastern Uttar Pradesh, and it felt like arriving on a different planet. This was the beginning of what I can only call a survival journey — not dramatic, but genuinely disorienting in the way it dismantled almost every assumption I had carried into the residency .

Culture and norms before institutions

Basti is dense, agrarian, and deeply shaped by its own internal logic. With a population of over 24 lakh and a density of 917 persons per square kilometre — higher than the already-crowded UP state average — the district sits at the boundary of the Awadh and Bhojpuri cultural belts. The spoken language is a layered mix of regional Hindi dialects, and getting anywhere with anyone required me to stop thinking in Malayalam and English and start listening carefully. The local economy runs almost entirely on rice, paddy, and sugarcane. Smallholders operate on razor-thin margins: fragmented landholdings, monsoon-dependent irrigation, no market access to speak of. The sugarcane cycle, in particular, traps families in multi-generational debt because sugar mill payments are chronically delayed.

What I had not been prepared for was how thoroughly cultural beliefs and social taboos governed daily life — more than any formal policy or institutional mandate. My academic training had led me to expect an environment shaped by formal regulatory structures and top-down implementation. Instead, I found a world where what the government said and what people actually did were two very different things, and the gap between them was filled by custom, tradition, and distrust.

The most pressing development challenge I observed in Basti was not any single programme failure. It was the collision between a public health infrastructure operating far beyond its capacity and a population that lacked the educational foundation to navigate it. With a literacy rate of 67%, preventive health messaging rarely landed. Facilities were overcrowded, under-staffed, and under-equipped. And the people who depended on these institutions had no alternative.

From Basti to Aligarh — a new locale

In August 2025, I was transferred to Aligarh District in western Uttar Pradesh, and the contrast was immediate. Aligarh is urban, economically active, and carries a different kind of energy — home to thousands of small enterprises manufacturing locks and brassware, and anchored by the intellectual presence of Aligarh Muslim University, where I had spent my master's years. Arriving as a development practitioner rather than a student meant I could see what I had missed the first time around: that economic dynamism can coexist with severe structural inequality, and that familiarity with a place does not mean you understand its problems

AMU had given me a baseline understanding of Aligarh's socio-political landscape. But life inside a university campus is, in many ways, a sealed bubble. The challenge here was not the absence of infrastructure, as it was in Basti, but the fragmentation of what already existed. Institutional silos. Weak tracking. Data that sat in one department while the decision-makers sat in another.

I want to be careful about drawing grand comparisons between the two districts — I spent roughly a year in each, and that is not long enough to make sweeping claims. What I can say, from what I lived and observed, is that Basti and Aligarh presented two distinct kinds of difficulty. Basti asked me to understand poverty from the ground up, to sit with its texture and complexity. Aligarh asked me to navigate a system that was functional enough to have politics — departmental rivalries, competing priorities, the institutional inertia of a place that was not in crisis but was not quite moving either.

Residency Tasks and My Contribution

Phase 1: Grassroots healthcare infrastructure in Basti

When I joined the district machinery in Basti in August 2024, I was assigned to a high-stakes state-level priority: improving the district's public healthcare infrastructure. I had a background in Public Administration and English literature, and zero experience in hospital management. That gap closed fast, because it had to.

My days began with field assessments at the District Hospital in Basti Town and the Community Health Centre in Bankati Block. The District Hospital served as the primary referral centre for millions of citizens who had nowhere else to go. The building was colonial-era construction — narrow, poorly ventilated, not designed for the volumes it was handling. Over a thousand outpatients a day. Overworked staff. Long queues in every corridor. The smell of tobacco staining walls that got cleaned every morning and re-stained by afternoon.

I worked with the District Magistrate, the Chief Medical Officer, and the District Health Society on a set of targeted infrastructure improvements: fire and safety audits, reorganising patient registration flows, reconfiguring waiting areas to reduce crowding, streamlining medicine distribution. Small changes, individually. But watching them take effect — watching a chaotic, colonial-era building become even slightly more dignified for the people who depended on it — gave me an early sense of what a learner could actually do inside a district system.

Alongside this, I was embedded in the district's TB Elimination Campaign, travelling into remote rural pockets to monitor door-to-door screening by ASHA workers. These visits taught me more than any hospital audit could. Clinical treatment, I came to understand, cannot be separated from the world around it. Stigma, migration, malnutrition — they all showed up before the disease did.

Project Saheli — finding a gap nobody had addressed

It was during these field visits that I kept encountering the same problem, quietly embedded in conversation after conversation. Women in rural Basti had no safe, affordable access to menstrual hygiene products. The cost of commercial sanitary napkins was out of reach for

most families. Traditional alternatives — old cloth, ash, husks — were unhygienic and led to infections and missed school days. And in the semi-urban pockets where disposable pads had been introduced through charity drives, used pads were piling up in open dumps and water bodies because there was no waste management to speak of. The more I heard, the more I thought a solution might exist that could address both problems at once.

I put together a proposal for Project Saheli. The idea was straightforward: introduce reusable menstrual cups — one cup, used correctly, lasts up to ten years and costs a fraction of annual pad expenditure — through the existing ASHA network. ASHA workers would be trained as health educators and distribution agents. Village-level awareness camps would address the cultural taboos directly, using materials designed for the local context. A follow-up tracking mechanism would monitor retention and usage. For funding, I looked at CSR partnerships and local NGOs, deliberately avoiding block funds, which I had already seen could disappear overnight.

Challenges of seeding a social innovation in a public system

The Chief Development Officer of Basti reviewed the proposal, approved it verbally, and gave instructions to begin coordinating with corporate donors. I felt, briefly, that things were moving. Then the CDO was transferred.

The incoming officer had different priorities — visible infrastructure, physical assets. Without a written government order, the block-level bureaucracy had no reason to commit to Saheli. Every meeting I requested hit a polite wall. I kept pushing until my own transfer to Aligarh in August 2025. The project remained in limbo.

I have thought about that experience many times since. It was a brutal but necessary lesson: in a public system, a verbal commitment from one officer is not a commitment from the institution. Social innovations that depend on individual champions rather than formal mandates are extremely fragile. The absence of a written order was not a technicality. It was the whole story.

Phase 2: Data-driven convergence in Aligarh

In Aligarh, I was embedded in the Aspirational Block Programme in Gangiri Block. The shift in work was significant. In Basti, I had been designing things. In Aligarh, I was coordinating across departments to make existing things actually function together.

In agriculture, a baseline assessment showed that only 19,506 out of 40,516 active farmers in Gangiri had Soil Health Cards — meaning more than half were farming without any scientific data about their own soil. Overuse of urea and DAP was degrading yields and inflating costs. I put together a proposal to address this by deploying portable soil testing kits at Common Service Centres and the Krishi Vigyan Kendra, training SHG members and rural youth as mobile sample collectors, and running live soil testing demonstrations during Gram Sabhas to build community trust. The goal was to reach 90% coverage within a year without waiting for infrastructure that wasn't coming.

Women-led FPOs — from labour to ownership

The work I found most meaningful in Aligarh was around Farmer Producer Organisations, specifically the effort to ensure that women — who perform the majority of agricultural labour in the region — actually became institutional shareholders rather than invisible contributors. In Tapal and Gangiri blocks, I worked on registering cluster-based FPOs targeting potato, mustard, wheat, and vegetable crops, with a deliberate emphasis on women's leadership. The goal was to move women from being unorganised individual workers to being members of a collective with bargaining power, bulk procurement capacity, and direct market access. I have seen too many programmes that consult women without including them. This was an attempt to do something structurally different.

In the health sector, the challenge was data reconciliation rather than infrastructure. Maternal registrations were delayed; institutional delivery numbers were leaking to unregistered clinics; low-birth-weight tracking was scattered across two departments that never compared notes. An intensive 8-week convergence sprint — disciplined, structured, department by department — eliminated most of this fragmentation and produced a single, reliable source of truth for the block's maternal health picture.

In skilling, I designed a block-level placement cell to connect certified vocational trainees with employers — the problem being not a shortage of training centres but a complete absence of any institutional bridge between those centres and the job market. A centralised database, regular job fairs, and a target of 60% direct placement. Unglamorous coordination work, but the kind that actually changes whether a young person in Gangiri gets a job or migrates out.

Residency and My Learning

What the CDO's transfer taught me about institutions

The most important thing the residency taught me about public systems is something I learned the hard way in Basti: verbal approvals mean nothing when a new officer arrives. Project Saheli did not fail because the idea was wrong or the need wasn't real. It failed because it existed only in one person's head and one officer's goodwill. That is not a foundation.

In Aligarh, I saw the difference. The Aspirational Block Programme gave every intervention a formal anchor — tracked indicators, state-level monitoring, documented accountability. Projects that sat inside that framework survived routine staff transfers because they were written into the system's obligations, not just an individual officer's to-do list. This is the thing I keep coming back to: sustainable change requires converting personal administrative interest into formal, written mandates. Not because paperwork is meaningful in itself, but because the paperwork is what survives when the person leaves.

Grassroots networks are not passive recipients

The Women FPO work in Tapal showed me something I had understood in theory but not in practice: communities are not empty vessels waiting to receive government programmes. The SHG networks I worked with had their own knowledge, their own hierarchies, their own politics. When we treated them as implementation partners — when we built the FPO

structure around their existing relationships and made sure the financial benefits were immediate and transparent — they moved faster and more sustainably than any top-down rollout I observed.

The lesson is simple but easy to forget in the pressure of indicator targets: real empowerment happens when communities move from consultation to co-ownership. When they are not just informed about a scheme but are actually running it.

The art of getting things done without formal authority

One of the strangest professional situations I found myself in, repeatedly, was this: I was expected to drive improvements across critical district indicators, but I had no formal authority to sign anything, authorise any spending, or tell any officer what to do. A Praxis learner has responsibility without power. Navigating that required developing what I can only describe as the art of persuasion — learning how to get people to do things voluntarily that they might resist if ordered.

What I found is that the most effective approach was not to argue for things but to make myself useful. I reduced people's administrative burdens. I wrote the first draft of the proposal they needed to submit. I organised the data they had to present. Once I was no longer an outsider arriving with ideas but an insider who understood the workload, people listened differently. Horizontal influence, built through trust and usefulness, consistently worked better than trying to invoke programme authority I did not actually have.

Inertia, resistance, and the insider-outsider tension

The inertia and resistance I encountered from front-line government staff was real and understandable. A young professional embedded in a district machinery is an ambiguous figure. Officers who had spent careers in the system were understandably wary of someone who had arrived from outside, seemed to have the DM's ear, and was asking probing questions about their data. The initial reading was: auditor, spy, or idealist who would be gone in a year.

What shifted it, in both Basti and Aligarh, was consistency over time. Showing up to the same meetings every week. Not routing credit for successes to myself. Being honest when I did not know something. The defensiveness did not disappear, but it reduced enough to work with. I am under no illusion that I was ever fully trusted. But functional cooperation is not the same as full trust, and functional cooperation was usually enough.

Development works when all three forces align

The Women FPO work gave me a practical understanding of something I had only seen in frameworks before: that the most durable interventions are the ones where the community wants it, the government enables it, and there is some market logic that makes it self-sustaining. The FPO model worked in Tapal because women farmers had a genuine economic interest in collective bargaining, because the block administration had a KPI target that gave it institutional motivation, and because the market — agro-processors, digital trading platforms — had real demand for organised supply. Remove any one of those three and the whole thing becomes another scheme that gets inaugurated and then quietly dies.

Beyond the Residency

I did not emerge from two years in Basti and Aligarh with a clean five-year plan. What I emerged with was a much clearer sense of what kind of work I find meaningful and what kind I find hollow.

I find it meaningful when I am close enough to a problem to understand it in its specificity — not as an indicator to be moved but as a situation that belongs to real people with names and circumstances. I find it hollow when I am producing reports about communities I have visited twice, or designing schemes that will be implemented by people I have never met. The residency taught me that the gap between policy intention and ground reality is not a technical problem to be solved by better design. It is a human problem that requires persistent, trusting relationships with the people on both ends of a programme.

I want to keep working in government-embedded spaces — not because the government always gets it right, but because that is where the decisions that affect the most people actually get made. I am drawn to district-level governance: the scale is manageable enough to observe consequences, and close enough to communities to stay honest. Whether that takes the form of another residency, a role in state administration, or something in the policy research space, I want it to remain anchored in the field.

Seeing the State from Within- Praxis Residency in Kanker and Bastar

Suman Khatik

When I first learned that I would spend two years of my residency in southern Chhattisgarh, I knew very little about Bastar. Having been born in Rajasthan and brought up across Rajasthan and Gujarat, my exposure to central India was limited. My understanding of Chhattisgarh was shaped largely by broad public perceptions of it as a relatively underdeveloped and conflict-affected region. It was only after receiving my placement that I began researching Bastar and the larger Bastar division.

I distinctly remember that many learners who were allotted districts in the Bastar region were apprehensive and wanted to switch their placements due to concerns around conflict and remoteness. Their reactions prompted me to learn more about the region, and I was introduced to the history of Left-Wing Extremism, tribal movements, and the socio-political complexities of Bastar. During my Master's programme at TISS, I had studied Naxalism as part of broader discussions on development, displacement, and resource politics. I had always been curious to understand conflict not merely through media narratives or state perspectives, but through the lived experiences of people inhabiting these regions. Rather than feeling fearful, I found myself becoming increasingly excited about the opportunity to live and work in a region that I had previously encountered only in academic discussions.

My residency journey began in Kanker district, where I worked with the World Resources Institute (WRI) on landscape restoration for nine months, before moving to Bastar district for the remaining fifteen months of my residency. Bastar, with a population of over 1.4 million people and a predominantly tribal population, occupies a unique place in India's developmental landscape. Rich in forests, biodiversity, cultural heritage, and natural resources, the district simultaneously grapples with challenges of poverty, livelihood insecurity, geographical isolation, and uneven access to public services. However, statistics and development indicators alone fail to capture the essence of Bastar. What I encountered was a region characterized by extraordinary resilience, strong community networks, vibrant weekly haats, deeply rooted indigenous knowledge systems, and an intimate relationship between people and their natural environment.

Before coming to Bastar, I had imagined that I would spend much of my time working directly with communities, particularly in conflict-affected regions, and understanding how people perceived development, governance, and their own aspirations. However, my experience revealed that the developmental challenges of Bastar extended beyond issues of conflict or resource deprivation. I observed a recurring gap between the region's immense human, cultural, and ecological potential and people's access to opportunities, institutions, and decision-making processes.

What surprised me most about Bastar was the contrast between its external image and lived reality. While I had initially approached Bastar through the lens of conflict, I encountered a society characterized by remarkable resilience, cultural richness, strong community institutions, and an extraordinary relationship with land and forests. This realization challenged many of the assumptions I had carried before arriving. Whether I worked on artisan livelihoods, participatory planning, education, tourism, or water

conservation, this gap repeatedly manifested itself in different forms. Communities possessed knowledge, skills, aspirations, and resilience, yet institutional systems often struggled to effectively recognize, support, and build upon these capacities.

Looking back, I realize that the most significant challenge I encountered in Bastar was not merely a lack of resources or infrastructure, but the challenge of bridging the distance between community aspirations, institutional processes, and developmental outcomes. Understanding this gap—and my own position within it—ultimately became the defining context of my residency journey.

Strengthening Livelihoods of Bastar's Traditional Artisans

When I began my Residency journey in Kanker district with the World Resources Institute (WRI), I intended to work on issues of social inclusion, particularly concerning persons with disabilities. Through preliminary field visits and interactions, I had begun exploring barriers faced by differently abled persons in accessing government schemes, livelihoods, and public services. However, after spending nine months in Kanker, I moved to Bastar district as part of an internal transition within the Residency programme. Since my intervention in Kanker was still at an exploratory stage, I decided to redesign my intervention to align with the context, priorities, and opportunities available in Bastar.

Soon after joining Bastar, I started working closely with the Chief Executive Officer, Zila Panchayat, who encouraged me to explore livelihood interventions. Since I had always been interested in art, culture, and community livelihoods, I chose to work with traditional artisans of Bastar. Over time, this intervention became the work to which I devoted the greatest amount of time, energy, and emotional investment during my residency. However, like most embedded practitioners in district administration, I simultaneously worked across several domains based on district priorities and emerging opportunities.

The artisan intervention — which we eventually named Kalagudi — emerged through discussions with the district administration, the Bastar Academy of Dance, Art and Literature (BADAL), artisans, market actors, and technical institutions. The objective was to strengthen the livelihoods of tribal artisans by improving access to working capital, reducing distress sales, promoting design innovation, and strengthening market linkages. Kalagudi focused on traditional crafts such as Dhokra metal art, wrought iron craft, bamboo craft, woodwork, and emerging forms of indigenous artistic expression.

My first responsibility was to conduct a situation analysis of the artisan ecosystem. I travelled to artisan settlements, interacted with artisans, documented their challenges, and attempted to understand the structural barriers that prevented them from accessing markets and institutional support. I still remember one of my early visits to a Dhokra artisan's home in Chilkuti village of Bastar — Mahesh Naag's, a name and a story I will return to later. Across these visits, one truth became clear again and again: the challenge was rarely a lack of talent, creativity, or cultural value, but the absence of institutional systems capable of supporting and sustaining these livelihoods.

During these interactions, I observed that many artisans remained trapped in cycles of distress sales due to their dependence on intermediaries and limited access to working capital. Several highly skilled artisans remained excluded from mainstream markets

altogether. More importantly, I came to realize that artisans were not merely producers of handicrafts; they were custodians of Bastar's cultural identity, traditional knowledge systems, and artistic heritage.

Based on these observations, I prepared a Detailed Project Report proposing a ₹50 lakh rotational fund through the District Mineral Foundation Trust (DMFT). The proposed mechanism aimed to enable institutional procurement of raw materials, reduce artisans' dependence on intermediaries, and facilitate the purchase and marketing of finished products through BADAL. The intervention was designed to initially support fifty artisans while establishing a scalable and sustainable institutional model.

A significant part of my role involved institution building and coordination. I prepared a draft Memoranda of Understanding between BADAL, Lokabazaar, the district administration, and design institutions such as IICD Jaipur. I coordinated meetings between artisans, market partners, district officials, and technical institutions, and facilitated communication among stakeholders with often differing expectations and priorities. A multi-stakeholder review meeting involving artisans, BADAL, Lokabazaar, and the district administration was also organized to identify operational bottlenecks and collectively design solutions.

I also worked extensively on creating market opportunities for artisans. Artisan products were showcased during Bastar Dussehra, Swadeshi Mela, Bastar Pandum, and exhibitions organized in Raipur and Delhi. Exhibition carts were developed and installed in high-footfall areas to improve visibility and branding. Simultaneously, efforts were initiated to onboard artisans onto digital platforms such as Lokabazaar and Amazon Karigar. Rather than promoting products alone, our emphasis remained on artisan-centric branding, highlighting the identity, stories, and cultural context of the artisans themselves.

Another important component involved facilitating design innovation. In collaboration with the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design (IICD), Jaipur, a pilot initiative was organized in which design interns worked directly with artisan communities to develop new products and designs. Discussions were subsequently initiated to establish a long-term institutional partnership. One of my most memorable experiences was during Bastar Pandum, where artisans witnessed their products being appreciated by thousands of visitors and national dignitaries.

Adi Karmayogi Abhiyan: Experiencing Participatory Planning at Scale

If Kalagudi became my primary thematic engagement, the Adi Karmayogi Abhiyan became my most intensive administrative experience. Launched under the Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan, the programme sought to strengthen last-mile service delivery and participatory planning in tribal villages through a convergence-based approach.

From the beginning, I was deeply involved in the programme's planning and implementation. I participated in district process labs, facilitated training sessions, supported certificate distribution programmes, and coordinated meetings chaired by the District Collector and CEO, Zila Panchayat. One of my earliest responsibilities involved preparing a model Village Action Plan for Parapur village, which subsequently became the basis for developing formats for Village Action Plans, Block Action Plans, and District Action Plans.

Over several months, I worked closely with district officials, civil society organizations, block administrations, and field teams to facilitate participatory planning exercises across tribal villages. This involved conducting meetings, facilitating block process labs, providing technical support during village-level planning exercises, reviewing action plans, consolidating data, and continuously coordinating with implementation stakeholders. Eventually, we successfully prepared action plans for 377 villages across Bastar district and facilitated their integration into the Adi Karmayogi Abhiyan portal. The final district action plan proposed interventions worth ₹69,361.82 lakh across sectors such as education, health, livelihoods, infrastructure, and tribal development.

The programme exposed me to the practical realities of large-scale participatory planning and convergence. It also exposed the challenges of balancing community aspirations with administrative priorities, available resources, and institutional constraints.

Other Significant Assignments

Beyond these interventions, I worked across several other district priorities:

Water conservation: coordinated across nine line departments and three civil society organizations under the District Water Conservation Plan, and compiled water budgeting data for 436 Gram Panchayats.

Education: secured approval and rollout of an Abacus-based learning programme for 4,709 students across 50 residential schools (₹36.57 lakh, Aspirational District Programme), and onboarded The Pi Jam Foundation for AI and digital-skills training.

Tourism: supported the UN Tourism Best Tourism Village Upgrade Programme in Dhudmaras village, including coordinating the UN mentor's visit and aligning community-led tourism with international standards.

Also contributed to: district livelihood proposals (Ministry of Home Affairs), PM Awards submissions, the Aamcho Bastar grievance redressal portal, agrivoltaics in Rural Industrial Parks, portable libraries, Good Governance Week, Jan Chaupal, and last-mile entitlement delivery for Naxal-affected and surrendered individuals.

Residency and My Learning

When I joined the Public Policy in Action Residency, I believed that development challenges primarily emerged from gaps in implementation or lack of political will. However, working within the district administration fundamentally changed this understanding.

My experience in preparing and uploading Village Action Plans for 377 villages under the Adi Karmayogi Abhiyan revealed that participation, planning, and implementation are often very different processes. Initially, I believed that participatory planning meant listening to communities and translating their aspirations into action. However, the process revealed a more complex reality. During Gram Sabha meetings, communities articulated aspirations relating to irrigation, education, roads, healthcare, livelihoods, and social infrastructure. Yet, translating these aspirations into implementable plans required navigating administrative priorities, budgetary constraints, departmental mandates, and institutional capacities. For example, in Parapur village of Lohandiguda block, community members repeatedly

emphasized irrigation and access to forest-based livelihoods as their primary concerns, while existing schemes and departmental priorities focused largely on infrastructure creation. This gap between community aspirations and institutional frameworks became one of the most important lessons of the programme.

This experience taught me that the challenge of governance is rarely a lack of ideas or intentions; rather, it lies in aligning aspirations, institutions, resources, and administrative processes.

Building Institutions Is Harder Than Designing Projects

This became clearest to me not through a framework, but through one artisan.

Case Study: Mahesh Naag, and the Deer That Couldn't Fly

Mahesh Naag lives in Chilkuti village, Jagdalpur block, with his wife and four daughters, in a mud house that has held three generations of Dhokra artisans. His father worked the same metal before him, though Mahesh wasn't drawn to it as a child. He wasn't particularly drawn to school either, and once he dropped out, the choice was made for him: his family pushed him into the craft because there was little else. What began as an obligation became, over the years, something closer to mastery. Today Mahesh no longer copies patterns passed down to him — he imagines a design entirely in his head before he ever touches wax or metal.

One story captures this better than any description could. A group of foreign visitors once bought one of his Dhokra deer figurines, only to be stopped at the airport — the figure's cast-metal horns were sharp enough to be flagged as a security risk. Confused officials tracked Mahesh down and asked if he had made it. He hadn't; it wasn't his piece. But the incident stayed with him, and he later couriered a replacement to the visitors himself. From then on, he changed his own design — he stopped casting the horns sharp, and began shaping tiny dhokra flowers and leaves along them instead, so the antlers curved into something ornamental rather than dangerous.

His work is seasonal in ways that have nothing to do with demand. Through the monsoon, he cannot fire the wood needed to cast his pieces, so the household simply waits. His wife shapes the clay base for each figure; he works the wax and dhokra design on top of it — a division of labour that has held for years. He sells only against orders, nothing speculative, nothing stockpiled.

There is a notion many outsiders carry about Bastar — that its people lack drive or aspiration. Sitting in Mahesh's home, watching him describe a design that existed nowhere but in his head, that notion didn't hold up. He works honestly, patiently, around a craft that offers him no guarantees, and inside constraints he never chose.

Mahesh's skill was never the missing piece. A similar lesson emerged across my work on strengthening the livelihoods of traditional artisans in Bastar more broadly.

When I first began working with artisans, I believed that many of their challenges had straightforward solutions: improved access to working capital, better market opportunities,

stronger institutions, and design innovation. However, as I worked with the district administration, BADAL, artisans, market actors, and technical institutions, I gradually realized that designing interventions was often easier than building institutions capable of sustaining them.

One example that remains particularly significant was the proposed **₹50 lakh rotational fund under BADAL**, designed to reduce artisans' dependence on intermediaries and distress sales. Considerable effort went into preparing the Detailed Project Report, designing institutional mechanisms, coordinating stakeholders, and obtaining approvals. Similarly, discussions with Lokabazaar and the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design (IICD), Jaipur, generated significant enthusiasm and institutional interest.

However, despite strong support from multiple stakeholders, these initiatives progressed much more slowly than anticipated due to administrative procedures, institutional ownership concerns, and coordination challenges. My experience with Kalagudi demonstrated that institutional change requires ownership, coordination, and time.

Perhaps the most meaningful outcome of Kalagudi was not the completion of a project but the gradual transformation in the aspirations of artisans themselves. During Bastar Pandum and other exhibitions, I witnessed artisans beginning to discuss branding, product diversification, packaging, and long-term enterprise development rather than merely immediate sales. This shift in aspiration taught me that sustainable development often begins with changing how individuals and institutions imagine their own futures.

Authority Without Power: The Embedded Practitioner's Dilemma

One of the most challenging aspects of the residency was understanding my own role. As a learner, I occupied a peculiar position. I had access to institutions, meetings, and decision-making processes, yet I possessed no formal administrative authority. There were moments when I found myself preparing proposals worth several crores, coordinating meetings involving multiple departments, and facilitating district-level decision-making processes, while simultaneously realizing that I possessed no formal authority to ensure implementation. This paradox—responsibility without authority—became one of the defining experiences of my residency.

I still remember a remark made by the District Collector while interacting with trainee IAS officers. He observed that there is a perception that district administrations eventually become stagnant and that young professionals are introduced into the system to bring fresh perspectives, energy, and innovation. I found this observation both encouraging and unsettling.

Throughout the residency, I frequently found myself navigating expectations that exceeded my expertise. I was expected to prepare proposals, coordinate departments, facilitate convergence, and produce outcomes across multiple sectors while simultaneously learning how public administration itself functions.

In retrospect, this experience taught me that leadership in public systems is rarely exercised through formal authority alone. Rather, it emerges through relationships, trust-building, persistence, and the ability to navigate ambiguity.

The Fear of Becoming Comfortable

Perhaps the most profound learning of my residency was not about governance or institutions. It was about myself.

Throughout the residency, I repeatedly encountered the phrase:

"Arey, aisa hi hota hai." - it is what it is

This phrase frightened me.

I was never afraid of difficult field conditions, remote locations, or challenging assignments. What I feared most was becoming comfortable with practices and realities that had initially disturbed me.

I often found myself asking: Where is the person who entered this residency hoping to work with communities? Where is the person who believed that even small acts of public service could create dignity, hope, or happiness? I knew that I could not transform entire systems, but I also believed that if I could contribute positively to even a few lives, that contribution would matter.

What frightened me was not corruption, bureaucracy, or administrative complexity. What frightened me was the possibility that, over time, I too might stop questioning them.

Ironically, this fear became one of my greatest sources of learning.

The residency taught me that development practice is not about resolving contradictions but about learning to live with them. It requires balancing ideals with institutional realities, urgency with patience, and personal convictions with professional responsibilities.

Looking Back from the Balcony

If I were to summarize my greatest learning from the residency, it would be this:

The most difficult challenge of working within public systems is not learning how the system functions; it is learning how to work within it without losing the values that brought you there in the first place.

Throughout the residency, I often remained so absorbed in meetings, proposals, deadlines, and administrative processes that I rarely stepped back to understand the larger picture. I remained occupied with playing on the field and seldom moved to the balcony to observe the game itself.

Perhaps that is the most important lesson I carry forward.

Beyond the Residency

As I approach the end of my residency, I find myself carrying both clarity and uncertainty.

When I joined the residency, I imagined that I would eventually find a clear professional identity and a well-defined career path. However, the past two years have taught me that

personal and professional journeys are rarely linear. Rather than providing definitive answers, the residency has compelled me to ask deeper questions about the kind of work I want to do, the kind of person I want to become, and the kind of impact I wish to create.

One realization that has become increasingly clear to me is that I am most fulfilled when I am working closely with people, listening to their stories, understanding their lived experiences, and contributing, however modestly, to improving their lives. Throughout my residency, despite working within institutions and administrative systems, I repeatedly found myself drawn towards communities, culture, storytelling, art, and human experiences rather than bureaucratic processes alone.

At present, I do not have a fixed answer regarding what comes next, and I have learned to accept this uncertainty. I know that I want to continue working in spaces that allow me to engage with people, culture, livelihoods, and social change. I remain deeply interested in documenting stories, understanding communities, and exploring the intersections of development, identity, art, and public life. I also aspire to create work that is meaningful not only professionally but also personally and emotionally.

If there is one dream that I carry forward from this residency, it is not the dream of changing entire systems or solving complex problems. Instead, it is the aspiration to remain connected to people, to continue learning from them, and to contribute meaningfully wherever I find myself. I entered the residency hoping to create change in the world around me; I leave with the understanding that the most important task ahead may be ensuring that I do not lose the person who first chose this journey.

If this anthology serves as a guide for future learners, I hope it communicates one simple truth: the residency will teach you about policies, institutions, and governance, but its deepest lessons will emerge from the questions you repeatedly ask yourself. The challenge is not merely to work within the system, but to do so without losing your curiosity, your empathy, and your capacity to remain uncomfortable with injustice.

Playing It Right: Sport, Space And Systemic Change In Government Schools

Amal M.

There is a particular kind of silence that settles over a government school at ten in the morning. Not the silence of concentration — children bent over notebooks, working through a problem — but the silence of absence. Classrooms where a third of the benches are empty. Corridors where children sit in loose clusters, not quite engaged, not quite disruptive, simply passing the hours. Courtyards of cracked concrete and sun-baked earth, swept clean of anything that might invite lingering. What struck me was not the absence of children — it was the absence of anything for them to do. More than seventy percent of schools in the district had no playground. Not an inadequate one — none at all. The silence was not accidental. It had been built.

This was Lakhimpur Kheri when I arrived: a district in northern Uttar Pradesh that presses against the Nepal border along a long, forested frontier. The largest district in the state by area — over 7,680 square kilometres — it is Terai country, sitting in the ambiguous zone between the Gangetic plains and the Himalayan foothills. The landscape carries that ambiguity: flat alluvial farmland in the south gives way, as you move north, to denser vegetation, unpredictable rivers, and the edge of Dudhwa Tiger Reserve. In the pre-monsoon heat, the dominant impression is of scale — long roads through tall sugarcane, market towns that operate at a pace that feels both intensely local and quietly connected to larger economic forces. After the monsoon, the impression is of water: rivers breaching their banks, roads becoming temporary islands, villages briefly unreachable.

For a farmer in Lakhimpur Kheri, the world is organised around sugarcane. The rhythms of cultivation, harvest, and mill payment structure everything else — including school attendance. The harvest season pulls boys out of classrooms. Uncertain mill payment cycles keep families in contingent planning mode, where school attendance is the first cost deferred when cash is short. Erratic monsoon years compound this. The agrarian economy is not merely background to the district's educational challenges. It is an active force within them.

The numbers, and what they could not say

The numbers I had studied before arriving were alarming: Lakhimpur Kheri ranked 72nd out of 75 districts in Uttar Pradesh on the NIPUN Bharat foundational learning index. Dropout rates spiked sharply after Class 8. Female literacy stood at 50.4 percent against a male rate of 69.5 percent. The 2021 Tikonja violence — four farmers and a journalist killed in a single afternoon — meant the district carried a particular political sensitivity that I would learn to navigate without always knowing I was navigating it.

But what the numbers could not convey was the specific texture of the school environment. Schools in Lakhimpur Kheri had buildings. They had teachers, however unevenly distributed. They had midday meals and textbooks and enrolment drives. What they did not have — in more than seven of every ten cases — was a playground. For children spending six or seven

hours within a school compound, the daily subtraction of any space for movement was a signal, repeated every day, that what happened to their bodies at school did not matter.

I had expected, before arriving, to work on something in the education space — possibly attendance, possibly learning outcomes, possibly the school-to-work transition. I had not expected the specific entry point to be a painted court. It took a few months of school visits, of sitting in courtyards and talking with ASHA workers and teachers in block offices, to understand that the dropout problem was not primarily a problem of incentives or information. It was a problem of belonging — and belonging is not produced by a directive. It is produced by an experience.

From Diagnosis to a Painted Line

Mission MaiDAN — Maintaining and Developing Arenas for NextGen — was not handed to me on arrival. It built itself, across several months of observation, in the gap between what schools were supposed to offer and what I kept finding they actually offered. The hypothesis that kept shaping itself, as I moved from school to school, was simple enough: if you give children a reason to come to school that is not purely instructional — something alive, something physical, something they can own — you change the calculus of attendance. And if you change the calculus of attendance, everything else becomes possible.

Before describing what we built and what it produced, I want to name the thing I understood earliest: that what worked and what did not came from the same root. The intervention succeeded where the system already had energy, and it stalled where that energy was absent. Holding onto that insight is what let me stop treating every failure as an execution problem and start treating some of them as structural ones.

The design

The design I developed with district officials, teachers, and community members over the early months had a layered logic. At its base was a dual-track playground model: ground-level facilities for rural schools, rooftop playgrounds for urban schools where PWD structural assessments confirmed feasibility. Ground-level design was tiered by available land — multi-sport arenas for large schools, superimposed court markings for medium-sized ones, single-sport or indoor options for the smallest. Rooftop playgrounds, equipped for chess, carrom, and table tennis, sat at the top of a technical complexity spectrum that required PWD engineers, construction contractors, school management, and the education department to coordinate in ways they had not coordinated before. Thirty Adarsh Maidans — model block-level facilities with running tracks, open gyms, and community seating — served as flagship demonstrations: proof that a government school in Lakhimpur Kheri could have something genuinely aspirational.

The gender dimension was not an afterthought. The village maidan, the open field beside the road, the space where boys gathered in the evenings — these were, in practice, male spaces. Not by formal rule, but by the accumulated weight of who was expected to be there. By situating play infrastructure within the secured school boundary, Mission MaiDAN changed the conditions of permission without requiring anyone to win an argument about the village maidan. The school gate did something quietly significant: it converted a publicly

contested space into a conditionally approved one. The 'Khele Beti, Padhe Beti' framework gave this logic a name and a policy home.

The resource architecture was the intervention's most consequential design choice. MGNREGA funds for site preparation. Gram Panchayat and Urban Local Body budgets for fencing and equipment. Education department composite grants for sports materials. CSR for rooftop construction. The effect was to dramatically expand what was possible without requiring a single new budget line — in a system where new allocations are slow and contested, this was not a minor advantage. It was the thing that made scale achievable at all.

On the ground

The first two months of implementation were consumed by the feasibility assessment — field visits to over 1,200 schools across fifteen development blocks, mapping land, categorising sites, and building the data that construction planning needed. It was unglamorous work, and it was also foundational: a theory of change is only as good as the information beneath it, and that information did not exist until we went and collected it.

At the top, alignment came relatively easily. One early meeting with BSA officials, BDOs, and Panchayat Raj representatives — establishing Mission MaiDAN as a district administration priority — could be produced almost by declaration. The district's convening authority made that possible. What it could not produce was the operational commitment that actual implementation required, block by block and school by school.

The variance that mattered most

What I saw, over months of field visits and progress reviews, was that blocks where the BDO was actively engaged — attending site visits unprompted, chasing PWD timelines, ensuring Gram Panchayat budgets were actually released — moved consistently faster and produced better-quality outcomes. Blocks where that energy was absent lagged on every measure. I have asked myself whether this was merely correlation — whether those blocks had other advantages — but the pattern was too consistent and too tied to the specific person in the role to dismiss. The BDO, it turned out, was the intervention's middle layer: the node through which district-level intent had to pass to reach school-level reality.

The hardest thirty minutes

The morning play period — thirty minutes of structured daily play, institutionalised across all participating schools — was, on paper, the simplest component of the design. In practice, it was the site of the most sustained resistance. Not outright refusal. Something quieter and harder to address: a teacher arriving a few minutes after the period had technically begun; supervision treated as optional on the mornings when no one senior was present. Nothing that could be written up as a violation, and everything that, added together, meant the thirty minutes simply were not happening.

I spent weeks trying to understand this before I stopped framing it as a motivation problem. The morning play requirement had broken an informal contract that many schools had been operating under for years. In schools where absenteeism was already high, the de facto norm was that the day began softly — that the gap between the official start time and the

moment real instruction began was elastic, absorbed quietly by everyone. Morning play closed that gap. It demanded punctuality and physical presence in a way that felt, to teachers already managing high workloads in under-resourced settings, like addition without reduction.

We tried explaining, presenting evidence, running workshops. Some of it moved some people. Then we restructured teacher performance appraisals to include student sports participation as a formal component of annual review. Within weeks, the periods began running more consistently. Teachers who had been passive supervisors became active engagers. A smaller cohort became genuine advocates — taking ownership in ways that went well beyond what any directive required. The experience taught me something I have not been able to forget: that in public systems, evidence alone does not realign incentives. Structures do.

The equity problem we did not anticipate

The equity management challenge surfaced during mid-implementation monitoring. In several schools, newly created playgrounds had been colonised within two weeks by older male students — not through organised exclusion, but through the spontaneous reproduction of social hierarchy. The playground had not disrupted the existing order. It had given it a new space to occupy. The response was formalisation: rotational play schedules, mixed-gender supervision required rather than recommended, student leadership roles deliberately assigned to girls in proportions that exceeded natural emergence. Physical equity in space provision, I learned, does not automatically produce social equity in space use.

By the end of Phase 1, playground infrastructure had been established across approximately 1,200 schools. Thirty Adarsh Maidans were operational. Fifteen rooftop playgrounds were equipped and in use. Average student attendance across district government schools increased by 19 percent. The NIPUN Bharat ranking moved from 72nd to 26th. An independent evaluation by the Shiv Nadar Foundation documented improvements in reading proficiency and numeracy, shifts in parental perception of government schools, and evidence of a specific, measurable change in how children experienced the school day.

The moment I return to most often is not a number. I had visited a school in the Nighasan block six months earlier — the first school where I had assessed playground feasibility, with a cratered field used as grazing ground and a headmaster who looked at me with the expression of someone waiting to find out whether this was a visit that would produce action or merely another report. When I returned, the field had been levelled and marked. A running track circled its perimeter. A volleyball court occupied the centre. I arrived at 7:45 in the morning, and the play period was already underway. The headmaster was on the court. A girl, who must have been in Class 6, was leading a warm-up drill with the confidence of someone who had done it many times. She was not looking for approval. She was simply doing it, because it was what happened at 7:45 now.

Structures, Not Stories

The most important thing I learned about public institutions is something I could not have arrived at through reading. I came into this residency with a broadly liberal assumption

about change: that good evidence, clearly presented, would move systems toward better outcomes. What I found is that systems resist not because they reject the purpose of a change, but because they experience it as a renegotiation of the terms of their daily existence. Mission MaiDAN made sense as a policy. It ran into resistance as a practice. And the resistance came not from the people I would have predicted — not from department heads or district officials — but from teachers, who were the closest to the children the intervention was designed for.

My first instinct was to frame teacher non-compliance as a motivation problem — something to be addressed through communication, training, and professional persuasion. That framing was analytically wrong and practically counterproductive. It missed the more precise thing that was happening: that teachers were responding rationally to a change that increased their workload without any corresponding acknowledgment, adjustment, or reward. Once I understood it that way, the solution became obvious — not more persuasion, but a structural change that made the initiative's success consequential for the people whose daily behaviour determined it. The appraisal linkage was not elegant. But it worked, in a way that elegance had not.

The second learning is about the gap between physical equity and social equity. When we built a playground and gave everyone nominal access to it, we believed we had solved an equity problem. We had, in a narrow sense. But within two weeks, the social order that existed before the playground had reasserted itself within it. The playground did not change who had social permission to take up space. It just gave the existing hierarchy a new arena.

There is a larger principle here that applies to a wide class of infrastructure and service delivery interventions: access is a necessary condition for equity, but it is not a sufficient one. Producing equitable use from equitably designed infrastructure requires active institutional management — rotational schedules, deliberate assignment of leadership roles, supervision structures that make the norms explicit. This is more demanding than simply building the thing. It is also, I now believe, the more important work.

The third learning is about the insider-outsider tension of the residency itself. There is a common assumption that a government-embedded learner occupies a useful middle position — close enough to communities to understand them, and close enough to administration to move it. What I found is that this middle position is experienced very differently depending on which direction you are looking from.

From the district administration's side, I was a learner — a temporary presence, with limited formal authority, to be given space and watched. From the teachers' side, I arrived with the district collector's office behind me, with convening authority, with the power to make something happen that would affect their daily working lives. They did not experience me as an ally who understood their constraints. They experienced me as another version of the administration — one that spoke the language of evidence and participation, but ultimately had the same power to impose.

I was embedded in the district administration, which gave me access and convening authority I would not have had as an outside researcher or NGO programme officer. That access was real and consequential — it is why Mission MaiDAN reached 1,200 schools rather

than a pilot cluster of thirty. But it also placed me in an uncomfortable position relative to the people most affected by the work. I spent considerable energy explaining the initiative, presenting evidence, trying to build what I thought of as shared ownership. But the structural reality was that I had convening authority and they did not, and no amount of explaining changes the power geometry that creates. The most honest thing I can say is that Mission MaiDAN produced better outcomes for children than it produced trust with the teachers who delivered those outcomes. That gap is, I think, the most unresolved thing I leave behind.

Still Asking

I am not entirely sure what comes next, and I think that is an honest answer rather than an evasion. What I know is that the work I want to do lives at the intersection of policy and practice — not in the design of schemes at a distance from implementation, and not in implementation without the capacity to shape the design. The Praxis Residency showed me that this intersection is genuinely difficult to occupy, that it requires a tolerance for institutional friction that I did not know I had, and that it produces a kind of knowledge that neither research nor advocacy alone can produce.

I am drawn to governance — to the specific work of making public institutions responsive, durable, and equitable at the district level, where policy becomes practice and the consequences of poor design are carried by real people. Whether that takes the form of further residency work, a role in state government, or something I have not yet found a name for, I want it to stay close to the ground. I want to be in rooms where the question is not what a scheme should say but whether it will actually change something by the time it reaches a Class 6 girl in Nighasan block at 7:45 in the morning.

I carry a few things out of Lakhimpur Kheri: a working knowledge of how MGNREGA job cards are processed, a deep respect for BDOs who do genuinely difficult coordination work with inadequate support, and the specific image of that girl on the painted court, running a drill she designed herself, for children who came early because this was the part of school they wanted to be at. That image is not a data point. It is what data is supposed to eventually produce. I intend to keep asking, in whatever work I do next, whether we are getting there.

Notes On Building A Waste Segregation Mechanism In Basti, Uttar Pradesh

Anshu Anand

I first met Basti on Google Maps.

The day I learnt that I would spend the remaining tenure of my residency there as a Praxis learner, I did what most of us do before moving somewhere new — I opened a browser. Government websites appeared one after another, each offering a different set of numbers: population, literacy rate, number of Gram Panchayats, agricultural dependency, development indicators. Within half an hour I felt strangely confident that I knew where I was going.

I was wrong. Knowing a district through statistics is a little like knowing a person through their Aadhaar card. The information is accurate, but it tells you almost nothing about who they really are.

My residency did not begin in Basti. It began in Gorakhpur, an hour away, where I spent my first thirteen months working with the district administration on strengthening aspects of the public health system and urban primary health centres. I had imagined Gorakhpur through its public image — its temples, its political weight, its crowded streets. My first real encounter with the city, though, happened inside the district hospital, standing in a long queue of patients early one morning. There were shaded waiting areas, clear signboards, an online registration system already in use. It was not a perfect hospital, but it was not the neglected institution I had unconsciously expected either. That morning unsettled one of my assumptions about government systems — that they are defined only by what is missing. The district became my classroom. I learned how administrative decisions travelled through different departments before reaching the field. I sat through review meetings, visited health facilities, participated in Kayakalp internal external assessment, NQAS assessment (**National Quality Assurance Standards**) worked with district officials, and slowly became familiar with the pace and rhythm of government systems.

Just when Gorakhpur was beginning to feel less unfamiliar, my organisation informed me that I would be moving to Basti. It was an organisational decision, one that came with the residency, and like every other learner, I packed my bags and moved.

Basti sits quietly between places louder in the public imagination — Gorakhpur to one side with its political weight, Ayodhya to the other with the millions of pilgrims it draws each year. Basti rarely appears in national conversation. It is easy to pass through without noticing it.

On paper, Basti is primarily agrarian — sugarcane, wheat and paddy dominate its fields, and a large share of its population depends directly or indirectly on farming for its livelihood. It is divided into fourteen development blocks with 2.8 million of population according to 2011 census and more than eleven hundred Gram Panchayats, each responsible for delivering government programmes at the village level. Its development indicators place it among the districts needing sustained public investment — with 4 Aspirational block (Harraiya,

Vikramjot, Kudaraha and Saltaua). These facts gave me the district's profile. They did not give me the district itself.

That understanding began only after I started travelling to the gram panchayat for understanding of how many government services provided by Gram panchayat and what the revenue collected from it, This is for the strengthening the own source revenue in Gram Panchayat. Every week took me to different Gram Panchayats — some, like Saltaua, Kaptanganj and Basti Sadar, only a few kilometres from the district headquarters; others a long drive down narrow rural roads. I learnt that every village had its own social geography: Dalit hamlets physically separated from the main settlement; weekly haats that were as much about local politics as about vegetable prices; a Pradhan who spoke one way in an official review meeting and another way entirely once the block officer had left. Before the residency I had watched the web series Panchayat and assumed it exaggerated village administration for effect. The first time I walked into an actual Gram Panchayat office in Basti, I recognised how much of its texture the series had captured.

As I moved from Panchayat to Panchayat, I began noticing the same structure standing quietly at the edge of many villages — some freshly painted, some already abandoned, a signboard on a few, tall grass swallowing the rest. These were Resource Recovery Centres, or RRCs: small pucca buildings, usually a single room of roughly three to four hundred square feet with an open shed and 4 boxes for segregation of waste like dry and wet wastes, plastic or a covered yard beside it, built under Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen) Phase II so that a Gram Panchayat could manage its own solid and liquid waste. The design was specific. A safai karmachari would collect segregated wet and dry waste door to door and bring it here each morning. Wet waste would go into compost pits along one wall. Dry waste would be sorted, stored, and eventually sold to a recycler. The income was meant to return to the Panchayat.

On paper, this was an elegant design. On the ground, something else had happened. Of the RRCs I walked into that first season, more than half were locked. Where a building was open, I sometimes found a single room half filled with unsorted sacks, a compost pit gone dry, and a second lock — rusted from disuse — on the shed next door. Neighbours living a few houses away often could not tell me who held the key, or whether the centre had ever really opened.

The challenge, I slowly understood, was not the absence of infrastructure. It was the absence of the daily rhythm that would make existing infrastructure do what it was built to do. That question stayed with me.

The Residency Tasks and My Contribution

By the time I had visited enough Gram Panchayats, I had stopped asking whether Resource Recovery Centres existed. I had begun asking a different question: why were they not working?

Almost every visit ended the same way. Someone would point towards a building at the edge of the village and say, "That is the RRC." Sometimes it was locked. Sometimes it was open but empty. Occasionally a few sacks of mixed waste lay scattered inside, untouched

for weeks. The signboard was still there, reminding everyone what the building was meant to be. The activity that was supposed to bring it to life had disappeared.

One visit, early on, has stayed with me as a kind of template for the rest. In a Panchayat in Harraiya block, the RRC stood exactly where the scheme design said it should — at the edge of the village, close enough to the main road for a collection vehicle, far enough from homes that the smell of compost would not bother anyone. The room itself was intact: a concrete floor, a tin roof, a dig pit where wet waste was supposed to become compost from the space where dry waste was supposed to be sorted into sacks by type. None of that had happened. What I found instead was a single mound of unsegregated waste in one corner, dried and half-blown apart by wind through a gap in the door, and a stack of empty cement sacks that someone had clearly intended, at some point, to use for storage. There was no smell of active compost, only dust. A woman living two houses away told me the safai karmachari used to come "sometimes, before," and that she had stopped bringing her household's waste there months ago because there seemed to be no point. The building had done everything a building can do. It had been built, roofed, and handed over exactly as designed. What it could not do on its own was decide, every single morning, whether someone would come.

Initially I assumed each village had its own reason. One Panchayat had no waste-collection vehicle. Another had a vehicle but no fixed collection schedule. Somewhere else, waste was collected but never segregated, so it arrived at the RRC as one useless heap. In one Panchayat, the safai karmachari had no motivation and had simply stopped coming. In another, the Gram Pradhan would not hand over the key at all — he had contributed money of his own toward building the shed, expecting it to be reimbursed, and when it was not, the RRC became collateral in a dispute that had nothing to do with waste. A few Pradhans were genuinely invested in making their centre work. Others treated it as one more government structure that had been handed to them, to be maintained only when an inspection was announced.

The more villages I visited, the more these started to look like the same problem wearing different faces. The infrastructure had been created. The system that would make the infrastructure function every single day had never fully taken shape.

Rather than propose a new scheme, the district's effort — and mine within it — focused on strengthening the one that already existed. The question was simple: could Resource Recovery Centres begin functioning if the administrative system around them became stronger? That question eventually became "Swachhata se Samridhi".

The programme was not something I designed alone. It took shape through several rounds of conversation with the Chief Development Officer (CDO), the District Panchayati Raj Officer (DPRO), and the District Coordinator of the Rural Swachh Bharat Mission — the official most directly responsible, day to day, for sanitation infrastructure across the district's Panchayats, and the person who worked most closely with me during this tenure. My role inside this needs to be stated plainly, because it was often misunderstood, including by me in the early weeks. I was not the implementing authority. The Panchayat, the block administration, and the Rural Swachh Bharat Mission office owned the programme and were accountable for it. My role as a PPIA Learner was to see the pattern that no single

block officer could see from inside one block — to travel enough villages to notice that a hundred separate local problems were really one structural one — and then to build the scaffolding that let the existing administration act on that pattern: consolidated data, a shared dashboard, a coordinated push across departments that do not usually speak to each other. I did not open a single RRC's lock myself. I tried to make it easier for the person whose job it was to do so.

After several rounds of field visits and discussion, we selected 150 Gram Panchayats across all fourteen development blocks. Each had already received an RRC under the Swachh Bharat Mission; nearly all of them were partially functional at best. Choosing 150 out of more than eleven hundred Panchayats was itself a decision worth explaining: we were not trying to cover the district in one sweep. We picked Panchayats where an RRC had actually been completed and handed over, and the population is above 2000, a nearby market availability so that the problem we were solving was genuinely administrative rather than still a construction backlog.

The intervention rested on three connected parts.

The first was clarity. Responsibilities had been assigned on paper, but almost no one understood the whole picture — Gram Pradhans, Panchayat Secretaries (locally called Sachivs), safai karmacharis and block officers each held a piece of the process and not the rest. We ran district- and block-level orientation sessions that walked through, concretely, how an RRC was meant to function: what "segregation" meant in practice, how compost and recyclables actually became revenue, and which of the four or five people involved was responsible for which part of that chain. In more than one session, I watched a Sachiv and a safai karmachari realise, for the first time, that they had been assuming the other one was tracking the compost sales. We also broke down the acronyms deliberately, session after session, because I had noticed that officials would say "RRC ka SBM wala kaam" in a meeting and nod along without anyone quite defining what either term meant for their own responsibility. Naming the plain task behind the acronym — collect, segregate, compost, sell, deposit — did more to align people than any orientation slide.

The second was field support. Orientation could not fix a broken handcart or an unpaid salary. We travelled block by block to find the specific reason each RRC had stalled — a vehicle that needed repair, a payment stuck somewhere between the block and the treasury, a segregation habit that had simply lapsed because no one had checked in weeks. In one block, we found three neighbouring Panchayats sharing a single functioning collection vehicle on an informal, undocumented rotation that nobody at the block office knew existed; formalising that rotation, on paper, fixed more RRCs in a single afternoon than any amount of orientation could have. In another, the fix was smaller still — a Sachiv who did not know that a district-level number existed for reporting a broken compost turner, and had simply left it unused for four months rather than ask. We tried to resist the temptation to apply one fix everywhere; the reasons were rarely identical twice.

The third was continuous monitoring, through what we called the War Room — a team of eight people who tracked daily photo updates on WhatsApp from participating Panchayats and maintained a live Google Sheets dashboard showing which were reporting regularly and which had gone quiet. On its face this looked like paperwork. In practice it was about

attention. Panchayats that knew someone was actually looking at their photographs, and not filing them away unseen, behaved differently within weeks. In the first month, roughly a third of the 150 Panchayats were reporting on any given day; by the third week that had climbed past two-thirds, not because the rules had changed, but because a Panchayat that skipped two days in a row could expect a phone call by the third — not a threatening one, just a visible one. Visibility, I learned quickly, is not the same as pressure. It only becomes pressure when it is used to punish rather than to notice.

The programme launched on 19 November 2025 — World Toilet Day, chosen deliberately. The first three weeks exceeded what I had expected. Daily reports arrived from Panchayats that had been silent for months. Compost pits that had sat dry for a year came back into use. For the first time, I watched some of the same locked buildings I had walked past in my first weeks in Basti begin to hold, in a small and unglamorous way, exactly what they had been built to hold.

Then it slowed — not because the programme had failed, but because the administration had to turn to something larger. In late November 2025, the Election Commission began the Special Intensive Revision, or SIR, of electoral rolls across Uttar Pradesh — a large statutory exercise, unconnected to sanitation, that verifies and updates every voter list in the state and depends on extensive field verification. It requires exactly the officials who had been carrying Swachhata se Samridhi: Panchayat Sachivs, Block Development Officers, revenue staff. Almost overnight they were reassigned to election duty. The WhatsApp groups that had been active every evening went quiet. Reports stopped. Field visits became difficult to arrange.

My first instinct was to escalate — I drafted a list of non-performing blocks to send to the CDO. I waited a day before sending it, and in that day I understood I was about to misread the situation. I spent the next two weeks doing something closer to listening than monitoring: I sat with the District Coordinator, not to ask for updates but to ask what was actually difficult right now. The answers were unglamorous. Some Sachivs were single-handedly managing three or four Panchayats while also doing election work. Some safai karmacharis still had not received gloves or boots, let alone a full month's salary. Some Pradhans who had been enthusiastic in November assumed, by December's silence, that the programme had quietly ended.

The problem was not unwillingness. It was that people were being asked to do two demanding jobs with the attention of one. The War Room's approach changed in response. Instead of asking who had not submitted a report, we began asking what people needed. Salary delays were escalated through the right channel rather than noted and forgotten. Pradhans who had gone quiet received a phone call that was a genuine check-in, not a reminder to send photographs. Monitoring stopped feeling like surveillance and started feeling, at least to some of the people on the receiving end of our calls, like support.

Looking back at the SIR weeks now, I think the mistake I almost made was a natural one for a learner to make. I had access to a dashboard that showed, in red and green, exactly who was underperforming. What the dashboard could not show was why, and for those two weeks I let the colours on a spreadsheet stand in for an explanation I had not actually gone and found. The correction was not a clever one — it was simply picking up the phone and

asking, which is a slower and less satisfying way of managing a programme than a dashboard, but the only one that actually works when the reasons are human rather than logistical.

I want to be honest about the limits of this. Not every Panchayat turned around. In a handful, the Pradhan's disinterest ran deeper than any logistical fix we could offer, and by the time momentum returned elsewhere, those RRCs were still locked. I do not have a tidy resolution for those villages, and I mention them because an honest account of this work cannot only be the villages where it worked.

By January 2026, momentum had returned to most of the 150 Panchayats. One stays with me particularly: Shekhpura, in Bahadurpur block. Shekhpura's RRC building did not even exist yet — construction had stalled. Instead of waiting for it, the safai karmachari and the Pradhan worked out an arrangement on their own: a small rented plot where segregated waste could be stored until it was collected. It was not the design the scheme had imagined. It was not even a proper structure. But three things were true there at the same time that were not true everywhere else: the Pradhan showed up regularly instead of delegating the problem; the safai karmachari, who was more literate and more invested than most, was being paid on time; and the War Room treated his daily photo reports as real information rather than a box to tick. None of those three things alone would have been enough. Together, in a rented plot with no building on it, they produced a functioning system faster than some Panchayats with a completed RRC and a locked door.

Till May '26, participating Panchayats had collectively generated ₹93,529 from the sale of compost and recyclable material. As a number, it is modest — I do not want to overstate it. What it demonstrated mattered more than its size: that even a partially repaired system could turn waste into revenue for a Gram Panchayat, exactly as the original scheme design had intended, if the daily fabric around it existed.

What gives me more confidence about whether any of this will outlast my presence is not the money. It is that the work stopped being mine to sustain. In a function at the Collectorate, the CDO personally awarded certificates to safai karmacharis whose RRCs had performed well — a small gesture, but one that made the work visible to the people who do it and rarely get thanked for it. More significantly, RRC progress is now a standing item on the district's weekly review meeting, on the CDO's own agenda, independent of whether a PPIA Learner is in the room to raise it. When a district collector's office owns something in that way, it no longer depends on any one person's presence to keep moving.

What I was trying to do, stated plainly, was this: run what already existed. The RRCs were there. The scheme was there. The people were there. What was missing was the daily fabric — monitoring, follow-up, accountability, a reason to keep showing up — and Swachhata se Samridhi was an attempt to weave that fabric back in, one Panchayat at a time. The problem had never been the absence of infrastructure. It had been the absence of a functioning system around it.

Residency and My Learning

When I think back on the residency, I do not remember meetings first. I remember conversations in Gram Panchayats, long drives between villages, locked Resource Recovery

Centres, phone calls that went unanswered for days, and small moments when something stagnant suddenly began to move again. Four things from those two years will stay with me longer than any technical skill I picked up along the way. None of them arrived as a single insight in a single moment.

Development is not only about creating new infrastructure.

Before the residency, I assumed that most development problems existed because resources were insufficient — that if a village lacked a working service, the answer was another building, another scheme, more money. Basti unsettled that assumption early and repeatedly. The Resource Recovery Centres already existed. Government funds had already been spent. Responsibilities had already been assigned on paper. Yet more than half the buildings I first walked into were locked. In Gorakhpur, I had seen a milder version of the same pattern — Urban Primary Health Centres with staff, medicine and equipment, and comparatively few patients using them, because the daily habit of a community actually turning to that centre first had never quite formed. The two placements, sitting back to back, taught me the same lesson twice in two different sectors, which is probably the only reason it actually stuck. What was missing in both places was not a resource line item. It was ownership, coordination, and the unremarkable daily routines that make a public system function. My first question about any scheme is no longer whether the building has been constructed. It is: what would it take to make this run, day after day, and who is actually going to do that work? A building, I now think, is a precondition for a system, not the system itself. Basti had dozens of preconditions sitting locked at the edge of its villages. What was missing could not be procured through a tender.

Implementation runs on relationships, not only on instructions.

I had assumed, going in, that government programmes move because an order is issued from above and passed down the chain. What I saw in Basti was that the instruction is only the starting point. Whether a programme survives its first difficult month depends on the Sachiv juggling three Panchayats at once, the safai karmachari deciding whether it is worth showing up, the Pradhan deciding whether this is his job or someone else's. The turning point of Swachhata se Samridhi, for me, was the week I stopped treating a missing report as a compliance failure and started treating it as a signal about someone's actual constraints.

Leadership, in a district administration, is quieter than I expected.

I arrived assuming leadership looked like making decisions, presenting ideas, solving problems visibly. What I actually did, on most days that mattered, looked nothing like that. It looked like listening carefully in a block office, connecting two departments that had never spoken to each other about the same RRC, making the tenth phone call of the day, and simply not letting a conversation die after a meeting ended. Implementation rarely moved because of one good idea. It moved because someone kept showing up after the idea had stopped being interesting. That lesson arrived slowly, through repetition, not through any single dramatic moment — which is, I think, the point. The CDO's own version of this was instructive to watch at close range. He did not personally visit every stalled RRC, and could not have. What he did was ask about them, consistently, in a forum everyone had

to attend. That repetition, more than any single directive he issued, is what kept 150 Panchayats from quietly reverting to how they were before November 2025.

Access is not the same as authority.

As a learner attached to the CDO's office, I could sit in meetings, ask for data, and speak to block officers whenever I needed to. What I did not have, automatically, was ownership of the problem I was working on. That had to be earned, and then it had to be actively kept.

Beyond the Residency

I joined Residency believing that if I worked hard enough, I could solve problems. I am leaving with a smaller, more useful belief: most public problems are not solved by one person, quickly. They are solved slowly, through institutions, relationships and persistence — hundreds of small conversations and follow-ups, and people choosing to continue even when no one is watching.

I want to keep working at the intersection of policy and implementation — not designing guidelines from a distance and moving on, but staying through the hard, unglamorous middle where a scheme either becomes real or quietly does not. I would also like, eventually, to bring this field experience into a classroom — not to lecture from theory alone, but to talk about a locked RRC in Basti, or a Sachiv's desk with five files on it, From Gorakhpur's district hospital, serving over 1,500 patients daily, to Urban Primary Health Care Centres (UPHCs) that stand within neighbourhood yet remain overlooked and underutilized by the communities they are intended to serve. because I think that is where a lot of real policy education actually lives.

I do not have a clean answer for what comes right after this. But years from now, I suspect I will have forgotten the dates of most meetings and the names of many officials. I do not think I will forget the work and efforts done by me in working two different district, experience gained from these district, understanding of government ecosystem and district administrative. It will help me throughout my career wherever I headed next.

Experiences On Improving Health And Nutrition Outcomes In Prayagraj District

Dipti Arora

My mother has a line she has used on me since I was a teenager — *tum toh bina kaam ke busy rehti ho*, you're busy without work. I used to hear it as a complaint. In my year in Prayagraj, I started hearing it differently.

I spent a lot of that year simply going and sitting at Janta Darshan, the public hearing at the Collectorate, doing nothing in particular. Watching who came, how they waited, what they were carrying — folded papers, scholarship forms, a complaint about a neighbour who'd threatened them over a handpump. I wanted to know how governance actually reaches a common man. Who gets to walk into that building without flinching. How a middleman inserts himself between a citizen and a form. What it costs, literally, in a day's wage, just to be heard and to get the issue resolved.

It struck me that I had grown up twenty minutes from the collectorate building in my district and never once been inside it before this residency. The civics textbook I'd read as a teenager had a chapter on the local government office. Here it was, finally, in front of me — and it was full of elderly people who had given up a day's labour to stand in a queue. My mother's line came back to me with its meaning inverted. For me, being busy without work was a privilege: I got to wander, observe, ask questions nobody was forcing me to ask. For the people sitting on the floor of that waiting hall, busy without work meant something closer to compromising on their daily wage — their actual livelihood eaten by the business of proving they existed to a system that was supposed to already know.

I should say, too: certain rooms in this story were simply not available to me. The RTO, the municipal counters — these are spaces that, in most families I encountered, get handled by a male relative, quietly, as a matter of course. I noticed the gender ratio thinning out the deeper into "official" territory I went, except for one thing that stayed with me — the women lawyers at Janta Darshan, unbothered, getting their work done in a hall that was otherwise overwhelmingly male. I held onto that image for a long time.

I was attached, that year, to the district administration as a Praxis Residency learner — a researcher, technically, with no formal authority, sent in by a programme designed to place young professionals inside government offices so that they become embedded in it as learners and in turn can provide support to the the district administration in innovative, smart ways/ What follows is an account of what that placement let me see, what it let me do, and — this is the part I think matters more — what it could not do, no matter how present I was.

The district behind the slogan

Prayagraj likes to be known as the VIP district — the High Court, the Collectorate, the political weight of a place where a king once ran a rival court against his own father. It is also, depending on which block you're standing in, one of the more punishing places to be poor in Uttar Pradesh. In our office, the worst threat a senior officer could make to a junior one wasn't a transfer to a hardship posting in some distant state. It was four words: *Manda,*

Meja, Koraon, Shankargarh. Blocks across the Yamuna, with significant Scheduled Caste populations, where shops sell everything in the smallest possible packet size because that's what people can afford at a time, and where children look visibly thinner and leaner than the ones in the city twenty kilometres away.

I learned this gap mostly through a man I met in Company Garden, walking the track one evening. He worked in Bangalore and was home for what I assumed were festival reasons. It wasn't that. His family's house roof had come down in a storm, and one by one, people in his household were falling sick with dengue — four of them in the past month, on top of him. I asked how many in his village. "*Bahut hain. Season hai,*" he said. Many. It's the season. He said it the way you'd mention the weather.

I had been feeling, around that point, fairly useless inside the health department — too non-medical to be taken seriously in clinical conversations, too embedded to be a true outsider. That one exchange in a park gave me something to do with myself: I sat with the District Malaria Officer afterward and helped build heatmaps for vector control, folding in field input and ASHA observations to sharpen the door-to-door Sanchari Abhiyan campaign. It is a small story. But it's the shape of a lot of what worked in that year — something only became actionable once it had a face attached to it.

The same year, Mahakumbh 2025 took over the administration's bandwidth almost entirely, and it showed me the district's two faces side by side. Smart City money built better railway infrastructure, smoother roads, fancier lighting near Sangam. Underneath the new bridges, the same flood-prone colonies that had always been there stayed exactly as they were. The public, in this telling, stopped being citizens with claims on the state and became pilgrims to be managed — a different relationship entirely, with different rules of negotiation. I don't think anyone planned this distinction. It just emerges, naturally, from where the cameras and the funding point.

What the numbers hid

The intervention I was eventually trusted to design landed in Baharia block, in three gram panchayats — Kehli, Hetapatti, Tikri chosen because four months of Poshan Tracker data showed a heavy, compounding burden of severe stunting in children under five. Stunting, not just acute malnutrition. That distinction mattered: it meant the problem wasn't a recent shock but something that had been building across years, maybe generations, of insufficient diet and care.

Before designing anything, we ran a baseline. And the baseline's first finding wasn't about diet at all it was about the data itself. Nearly 40 percent of the height records on the Poshan Tracker showed serious discrepancies against what we physically measured on site. For weight, it was 43 percent. About 30 percent of children had errors severe enough to flip their nutritional category entirely a SAM child recorded as healthy, or the reverse. And the discrepancy wasn't only digital. We watched it happen in real time: Anganwadi workers and their supervisors taking incorrect measurements in front of us, not out of negligence exactly, but because the tools and training to do it right simply weren't there.

This is the sentence I kept coming back to while writing up the findings: a programme built entirely around identifying and tracking malnourished children depends, totally, on the

accuracy of those two numbers height and weight. Where the data is wrong, the programme isn't underperforming. It's blind. And this isn't a Baharia-specific failure. The same gaps — drinking water, toilets, stockouts, untrained cadres show up in CAG audits and field studies from Gujarat to Uttarakhand to Karnataka. What we found in three gram panchayats was a local instance of something structural.

On the caregiver side, the picture was stranger. Ninety-two percent of women had heard of anaemia. Awareness wasn't the gap. What was missing was the layer underneath it what causes it, what nutrition actually address it, how it links to a child's growth. Diet stayed heavily cereal-based: rice, roti, not much else. People could repeat the message but couldn't translate it into a plate. That's not ignorance.

The land that wasn't there

Of the three gram panchayats, only Kehli had an Anganwadi Centre that actually existed as a functioning building. The other two didn't and this fact wasn't visible from a design table in the district office. It became visible only once a young trainee IAS officer, newly posted and curious about how the system actually worked, started walking the villages, asking questions, and pulling old files.

In Hetapatti, money to build the centre had been sanctioned two years earlier. It hadn't lapsed. It had just never moved, because the land it was supposed to sit on — a khasra number, neatly recorded on paper by the local revenue official — turned out, on the ground, to be unsuitable for construction. The file and the field didn't match. It took the SDM's involvement, several personal visits, sitting with the Block Development Officer, and a fair amount of department-to-department convergence work just to get a usable plot confirmed and the electrical work moving. In Tikri, the building existed but had been stalled on pending public-works clearances. Same instinct required: pull the file, find the blockage, push it.

I went along on one of the early field visits with this officer two supervisors, six Anganwadi workers, a school in Hetapatti where the centre operated out of a room under a broken roof. The officer's visit hadn't been announced to the block office, which meant we arrived to find the staff genuinely unprepared: the digital stadiometer that should have been there to measure infants was missing, so the women were using the older cloth-sling method, which needs a hook on a wall at the right height. They couldn't find one. The nail they eventually used was too high, unsafe for an infant, barely usable at all. It is a small, almost absurd image, but I think about it often an entire measurement system for a national nutrition programme, reduced in that moment to whether someone could find the right nail.

What struck me more, watching that officer over the following months, was how visibly the job changed him. Villagers had real hope pinned on his visits "*sahab tumhare gaon aaye hain, saaf rakha karo gaon,*" the officer has come to your village, keep it clean, people would say to each other, half-instructing, half-performing for him. I watched him oscillate between the curious young man who walked unpaved roads to see for himself why Scheduled Caste hamlets still had no washrooms, and the practised bureaucrat who, increasingly, just gave instructions instructions that were, just as often, not followed. Orwell wrote, about a different kind of imperial posing, that the man in that position becomes "a

sort of hollow, posing dummy" whose face eventually grows to fit the mask he's required to wear. I don't think that's quite fair to him. But I understood, watching him, exactly what Orwell meant.

What moved, and why

The second track of the work happened at the community level training sessions held with two Cluster Level Federations, trying to bring an underused cadre, the Maitreyi Sakhis (community nutrition companions drawn from the SHG network), into the same room as ASHAs and Anganwadi workers on the shared AAA convergence platform. What we found, before any training even started, was that these women simply weren't treated as having standing in nutrition conversations present, even trained, but invisible at the table next to workers from older, more established cadres. Getting them recognised as having a legitimate voice, even just once, in front of their peers, did something that no circular or government order could have done on its own.

Elsewhere, the limits of instruction-without-follow-up were just as visible. We submitted a gap assessment flagging that Anganwadi centres lacked functional stadiometers and weighing scales. The District Nutrition Committee issued instructions to fix this. As of my writing this, it hasn't happened. The instruction exists. The action on it doesn't not because anyone refused, but because nobody's job specifically depends on it moving, and nobody was watching closely enough, consistently enough, to make it move.

A planned component, nutrition kits and a snake-and-ladder-style game to make Poshan Corners more engaging for children died a quieter death: the funds for activity materials never got mobilised, the approval chain ran through too many departments to align in the time we had. We pivoted to what we could actually do with existing materials visual aids, structured session formats and it worked, modestly, which taught me something about scope: the ambitious version of an idea and the version that survives contact with a district bureaucracy are rarely the same thing, and the second one is still worth doing.

Two things did move cleanly, and I think it's worth being honest about why. A digital tool, Yojana Mitra, let beneficiaries self-select their eligibility category for various welfare schemes and routed the resulting lists through departmental verification instead of informal, intermediary-dependent channels a direct response to what we kept seeing in the field: the schemes existed, the eligibility existed, but the *link* between the two was fragile and depended on whoever happened to be around to broker it. And at the Take-Home-Ration production plants, we got the women working double shifts a basic day's gap between rotations, regularised their attendance, and enrolled every one of them in e-Shram, pension, and Ayushman Bharat. None of this shows up in any outcomes framework. It mattered enormously to the women involved women running a system meant to nourish other people's children while having no safety net of their own.

If there's a single finding I'd hand to anyone trying to understand state capacity from this vantage point, it's this: the policy architecture, almost everywhere I looked, already existed. The money, the guidelines, the convergence frameworks between ICDS and MGNREGA and NRLM all of it was on paper, often generously funded. What was missing, consistently, was the connective tissue between an instruction at the district level and an action at the centre

level. And that connective tissue, in practice, turned out to be made of people — specific, individually motivated people — rather than systems.

The embedded self

This brings me to the part I find hardest to write honestly, because it implicates the very model that put me there.

Everything that moved in this story moved because someone with no formal power over the outcome decided to be personally, stubbornly present sitting with a Block Development Officer until a file moved, walking into a CLF meeting on a day it was raining and nobody was expected to show up. That is the romantic version of embedded residencys, and it's true. It's also a serious structural weakness, and I don't think programmes like this one always reckon with it honestly.

I had no vehicle. I had no clearly defined institutional role my own liaisoning had to be invented as I went, mostly by attaching myself to whichever officer was willing to let me be useful. I worked, for most of the year, in a male-dominated office where my legitimacy had to be re-established, situationally, almost every week. What carried me through wasn't institutional standing. It was identity and the deliberate, sometimes exhausting work of switching between identities depending on the room: researcher in front of the CDO, grassroots worker in front of supervisors and Anganwadi staff, team player in front of an ICDS department that needed help with presentations nobody else wanted to make.

That flexibility is exactly what an embedded placement is supposed to offer, and exactly why it's a fragile model to build durable change on. The clearest proof of this came when the trainee officer's tenure ended. The momentum on AWC construction, on equipment follow-up, on everything that had depended on his particular, personal persistence slowed, visibly, the moment the handover happened. Nobody did anything wrong. The institution simply isn't built to sustain attention on a newer initiative once the one person carrying it moves on. This is, I think, the most honest data point I have to offer about embedded development work: it is extraordinarily good at producing momentum, and structurally unreliable at preserving it once the embedded person learner, trainee officer, consultant, whoever leaves the room.

There's a personal cost to this too, one I don't see discussed enough in how these residency is framed. Constant identity-switching, constant translating and justifying and re-earning legitimacy, can tip very easily into people-pleasing as a coping mechanism, and you don't always notice the tip happening. I had to keep checking myself on this — am I adapting because the room genuinely requires it, or because adapting is easier than having the harder, more systemic argument? I don't have a clean answer. I think the most useful thing I can say to someone walking into this kind of placement after me is: that question doesn't resolve itself. You have to keep asking it, on a kind of loop, for the whole year.

The didis in the rain

The part of this work I trust most, looking back, is the part that didn't run through any officer at all.

There was a day I went into a CLF training fully expecting it to be cancelled it was raining hard, the kind of rain that empties out rural roads, and I assumed, half with relief, that nobody would come. We arrived half an hour late ourselves. The SHG didis were already there, waiting.

I think about that morning more than almost anything else from that year. It recalibrated something in me about what counts as an outcome. The visible wins a sanctioned building, a working digital portal are real and worth claiming. But the durable thing, the thing that survives a tenure ending or a learner leaving, is closer to what I saw in that room: women who'd shown up in the rain because they'd decided, on their own terms, that the work was theirs. The Cluster Level Federations and the SHG networks they belong to don't depend on any single project's continuation. They were there before I arrived and they'll be there after every officer attached to this story has been transferred three more times. Routing change through structures like that, instead of building something new and parallel, is slower and far less satisfying to watch on a timeline. It's also the only version of this work I'd bet on lasting.

If I had to leave something behind for whoever does this next, another learner , another trainee officer, a public administrator trying to figure out where to put their energy in a system this large, it wouldn't be a checklist. It would be this: the people you're sent in to help are not a problem you're there to solve, and the slowness you'll keep running into is not always a malfunction; sometimes it's just what it costs to build something that doesn't need you to keep existing. The system doesn't reward patience visibly, and most of what you do will not show up in any report. Some of it will still be the only part of the year that was real.

I'm not sure the kind of impact I could make in the district. What I got, instead, was a year of being present enough, persistently enough, in rooms I wasn't required to be in, to see how this particular piece of the Indian state actually works when nobody important is watching. That, I've come to think, is its own kind of finding.

The story of UP 44 : Residency in Sultanpur UP

Sriya Rane

District administrations are often described as the last mile of governance. It is here that policies crafted in state capitals and national ministries encounter the realities of people's lives. Yet what appears straightforward on paper often becomes far more complex in practice. Government schemes, budgets, institutions, and infrastructure are only one part of the story. Equally important are the relationships, behaviours, beliefs, and incentives that shape how these systems function on the ground.

My journey in the Public Policy in Action (PPiA) Praxis Residency Program in Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh, began with the expectation that public policy was primarily about designing solutions to development challenges. Over the course of the residency, however, I discovered that governance is less about solutions and more about understanding systems. Many of the challenges confronting public institutions are not simply technical problems that can be resolved through better planning, additional resources, or stronger monitoring. They are adaptive challenges rooted in trust, ownership, accountability, and human behaviour.

I had the unique opportunity to work alongside government officials, frontline workers, community institutions, and citizens. The residency provided a vantage point from which to observe how policies are interpreted, negotiated, implemented, and experienced by different actors within the system. It also highlighted the gap that often exists between institutional intent and citizen experience.

The story of UP 44

The first thing one notices about Sultanpur is that it does not reveal itself immediately. Unlike districts that announce their identity through large industrial townships, famous tourist landmarks, or rapidly expanding urban skylines, Sultanpur unfolds slowly. Its character emerges through conversations on village chaupals, through the winding course of the Gomti River, through the rhythm of agricultural seasons, and through the everyday interactions that define life in eastern Uttar Pradesh. During my residency, I came to understand that Sultanpur is not merely an administrative unit on a map; it is a living social ecosystem where history, culture, agriculture, politics, and public institutions continuously shape one another.

My first introduction to the district came not through government reports or statistical handbooks, but while standing at Vallipur Ghat with an Assistant Development Officer (Panchayat). Looking at the river gently curving through the landscape, he remarked, "*Kyuki yeh nadi ghumti huyi aati hai, isliye iska naam Gomti pada*" (The river is called Gomti because it meanders through the land). That observation would later become an apt metaphor for my understanding of Sultanpur itself. Much like the river, development in the district does not follow a straight course. It bends around social hierarchies, historical legacies, institutional constraints, and community aspirations.

Located in the Ayodhya division of Uttar Pradesh, Sultanpur occupies a strategic position between Lucknow, Ayodhya, Prayagraj, and Varanasi. The district is home to nearly 2.5

million people spread across fourteen development blocks and more than two thousand villages. Geographically, it forms part of the fertile Indo-Gangetic plains, a region known for its rich alluvial soil and agricultural productivity. The Gomti River and its tributaries serve as lifelines for irrigation, supporting cultivation across vast stretches of farmland. Wheat, paddy, pulses, and sugarcane dominate the agricultural landscape, making farming the primary source of livelihood for a large proportion of households.

For a traveller, Sultanpur presents itself as a district deeply rooted in tradition. Local narratives trace its origins to *Kushbhawanpur*, believed to have been founded by Kusha, the son of Lord Rama. Religious and cultural landmarks dot the district, weaving mythology into everyday life. Sitakund Ghat is locally believed to be a place where Sita bathed during her exile, while temples such as Dhopap continue to attract pilgrims from across the region. The demographic composition of Sultanpur reflects its traditional roots. The population of about 2.5 million people is predominantly Hindu (80%), with a significant Muslim community (16%) and smaller groups of Christians and other religious minorities. The daily life in Sultanpur is intertwined with its religious customs, festivals, and community gatherings, which often take place in the courtyards of temples or along the banks of the Gomti.

As I journey further into Sultanpur, the community's deep connection to its land becomes evident. The villages surrounding the town center are characterized by mud-brick houses with thatched roofs, fields stretching as far as the eye can see, and people engaged in agricultural activities. Life here moves to the rhythm of nature- farmers rise with the sun and return to their homes at dusk, their days filled with the toil of planting, irrigating, and tending to their crops.

Durga Puja in Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh, is a vibrant celebration that fills the district with energy and devotion. Uniquely, the festivities here begin after Dussehra, unlike in other parts of India. The district comes alive with elaborately decorated pandals, music, dance, and cultural performances that bring together people from all walks of life. The celebrations are marked by a blend of traditional rituals and modern festivities, reflecting the local customs and the community's deep-rooted reverence for the goddess Durga. The entire district is transformed into a hub of joy, spirituality, and unity during this time.

The narrow lanes are filled with vendors selling fresh produce, local delicacies, and datuan (traditional toothbrush sticks made from neem or babool branches), highlighting the district's reliance on natural and homegrown resources. Transport in Sultanpur is a blend of modern and traditional modes. While personal cars and government vehicles navigate the busy roads, it's the tuktuks (auto-rickshaws) that dominate the scene, providing a lifeline to the daily commuters. These tuktuks are not just a means of transport; they are also a window into the local way of life, often adorned with colorful decorations and playing Bollywood music or local folk songs. As a tuktuk driver asks me "kaha jabo" in Awadhi (Where do you want to go?) the primary language spoken here, reflecting a culture where social interaction remains central to daily life.

Yet beneath this cultural vibrancy lies a district whose economy remains overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture. For a farmer, Sultanpur is experienced differently. The district's fertile soil and abundant groundwater make cultivation possible across most seasons, but agricultural prosperity remains unevenly distributed. Landholdings are highly fragmented,

with a majority of farmers cultivating small plots that generate limited surplus. Agricultural incomes remain vulnerable to fluctuations in rainfall, market prices, and input costs. Climate variability has added further uncertainty to farming livelihoods, making crop planning increasingly difficult for small and marginal farmers.

The historical distribution of land ownership continues to influence contemporary patterns of wealth and opportunity. Colonial records indicate that large portions of land were historically controlled by dominant Rajput clans, creating unequal patterns of ownership that persist in various forms even today. While land reforms and demographic changes have altered some aspects of this structure, access to productive assets remains deeply unequal. During field visits, it became evident that households with larger landholdings often possessed greater access to private healthcare, education, and financial resources, while landless and marginal farmers depended heavily on public welfare systems. This historical context is important because it shapes not only economic opportunities but also the ability of citizens to access and influence public institutions.

From the perspective of an industrialist, Sultanpur offers both opportunities and constraints. Its location along important transportation corridors provides connectivity to major urban centres, and its agricultural base offers potential for agro-processing industries. However, industrial development remains limited compared to other districts in Uttar Pradesh. The absence of large-scale manufacturing, coupled with significant outmigration of youth seeking employment in cities such as Lucknow, Delhi, Mumbai, and Surat, reflects the district's continuing struggle to diversify its economic base. Consequently, public sector employment, agriculture, and small businesses continue to dominate the local economy.

For a politician, Sultanpur represents a complex social and electoral landscape. The district's population is predominantly Hindu, accounting for approximately eighty per cent of residents, while Muslims constitute around sixteen per cent. Caste remains a significant determinant of social organisation, political mobilisation, and access to local power structures. Electoral contests often involve intricate negotiations between caste identities, local leadership networks, and development narratives. Panchayati Raj Institutions, self-help groups, and local bureaucracies form important arenas where these dynamics play out. Understanding governance in Sultanpur therefore requires understanding how formal institutions interact with informal networks of influence and authority.

It was, however, through the lens of a development practitioner that Sultanpur revealed its most important lessons. During my initial months in the district, I visited government offices, schools, villages, health facilities, and community meetings. What became apparent was that many of the district's development challenges could not be explained simply by a lack of infrastructure or funding. In many cases, physical infrastructure existed. Schemes had been launched. Institutions had been created. Yet outcomes remained uneven.

Residency Tasks and My Contribution

From Solving Problems to Building Trust

When people ask me what I worked on during my residency, I often find myself listing the projects: strengthening Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Days (VHSNDs), improving district hospital systems, supporting the tuberculosis campaign, working with women

Farmer Producer Organisations, contributing to district planning exercises, and assisting the administration on a range of governance initiatives. The list is long because that is the nature of working in a district administration. Every week brings a new priority, every crisis demands immediate attention, and every officer expects you to learn quickly.

Yet, when I look back at my two years in Sultanpur, one intervention stands apart. It consumed the greatest share of my time, challenged my assumptions most deeply, and transformed the way I understand public policy. That intervention was **Swasthya Saathi**. Ironically, it did not begin as a project. It began as a question.

Learning Before Designing

When I first joined the district administration, my instinct was to identify a problem and design a solution. Years of studying public policy had conditioned me to think in frameworks, theories of change, and implementation plans. I assumed that if I spent enough time analysing data and understanding schemes, I would eventually arrive at the right intervention. The district administration, however, taught me patience.

Instead of immediately assigning me a project, my supervisors encouraged me to observe. I spent weeks accompanying officers on field visits, sitting through review meetings, visiting hospitals, travelling to villages, and speaking with frontline workers. Those early months felt frustrating. I often wondered whether I was doing enough. Looking back, I realise that this period of observation was perhaps the most important phase of the residency.

It allowed me to see the district before attempting to change it. Public Health gradually emerged as a recurring concern. Every review meeting returned to maternal health, nutrition, institutional deliveries, anaemia, immunisation, or antenatal care. The district had infrastructure. There was a medical college, community health centres, primary health centres and Ayushman Arogya Mandirs spread across rural blocks. Yet the outcomes remained uneven. The same questions surfaced repeatedly: Why were pregnant women missing antenatal check-ups? Why were children with malnutrition not being referred? Why did communities continue to rely on private practitioners despite the presence of public facilities?

At first, I assumed the answers would lie in shortages of infrastructure or funding. The field had other plans.

The Village That Changed My Question

My understanding changed during a visit to Katka Khanpur. Located approximately eleven kilometres from Sultanpur town in Kurebhar Block, Katka Khanpur appeared at first glance to be an ordinary village of eastern Uttar Pradesh. Surrounded by fertile agricultural land and connected through road and rail networks, the village had access to many of the services that policymakers typically associate with rural development. Covering an area of 381.09 hectares, Katka Khan Pur includes several hamlets such as Adhri Ka Purwa, Koharaiya, Seriya, and Katka Bazar. It is well-connected with public and private bus services and a nearby railway station and is close to the Tamsa and Gomti rivers.

On paper, the village appeared reasonably well served. It had a Primary Health Centre, functioning frontline workers, government welfare schemes, and monthly Village Health,

Sanitation and Nutrition Day sessions. If one looked only at administrative reports, there was little reason to expect serious governance failures. However, the reality was different.

Rather than relying solely on departmental data, I decided to spend time in the village. I visited households, attended VHSND sessions, interacted with ASHAs, ANMs, Anganwadi workers and women who used or chose not to use the public health system. We surveyed households not to produce statistically representative findings but to understand how people experienced healthcare in their everyday lives.

One finding stayed with me: nearly ninety per cent of the households we spoke to preferred private healthcare providers, including informal practitioners, over government facilities. This preference persisted despite the availability of public services. Initially, I interpreted this as an access problem. The more conversations I had, the more I realised it was something else. People did not avoid government facilities because they were absent. They avoided them because they lacked confidence in them.

Case Study: A day at the VHND session in Katka Khanpur

Sita Anand, a 32-year-old woman, lives in Bhavani Mishr's Purva with her family of six and two goats in a modest kutcha house. Sita, married at a young age, has faced significant hardships throughout her life. Having migrated from Ranchi to Katka after marriage, she has built a life for her family in the village despite numerous challenges. Married as a teenager, Sita gave birth to her first child at the age of 19, and over the years, she has had four children, three sons and one daughter. Now, at six weeks pregnant with her fifth child, Sita faces mounting struggles that highlight the systemic issues plaguing rural families like hers.

Sita's family depends entirely on her husband, Anuj, who works as a daily wage laborer earning ₹300 a day. The family is landless, with no agricultural resources of their own. Before her current pregnancy, Sita contributed to the household income through tailoring and agricultural labor, earning an additional ₹500 a month. However, her pregnancy has forced her to stop working, further straining the family's already precarious financial situation. Despite these challenges, Sita is an aspirational woman who dreams of a better future for her children, particularly for her eldest son, who is currently in the 9th grade and helps care for his younger siblings. Her children's education remains one of her highest priorities, but the family's limited resources pose significant barriers to fulfilling this dream.

Sita's health has been a growing concern. During a Village Health, Sanitation, and Nutrition Day (VHSND) session, she received her Td vaccine and discovered that she is underweight, anemic, and classified as a high-risk pregnancy. These conditions are largely the result of inadequate nutrition, as the family struggles to afford a balanced diet. Meat and vegetables are considered luxuries, and Sita's diet consists primarily of staples that fail to meet her nutritional needs. The lack of access to adequate healthcare and nutrition during her previous pregnancies has left her vulnerable, and her current pregnancy adds to the risk of complications for both mother and child.

Family planning has been another challenge for Sita. After the birth of her youngest daughter a year ago, the local ASHA worker counseled her to undergo tubectomy. However, before she could take that step, she conceived again, further compounding the family's difficulties. Sita's story underscores the urgent need for accessible and effective family

planning services in rural areas, as well as the importance of timely interventions to prevent high-risk pregnancies.

The family's socioeconomic status remains a significant barrier to improving their quality of life. They have been enrolled under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) for housing, offering some hope for better living conditions in the future. However, the day-to-day reality of making ends meet with minimal income leaves little room for aspirations. Anuj, Sita's husband, has chosen not to migrate to cities in search of better opportunities, citing the relative stability of having a shelter, food, and family in the village. While this decision keeps the family together, it also limits their economic mobility and access to better job opportunities.

Sita was unaware of the SHGs in her village and even though there are 28 active SHGs. She says the ones who are part of it aren't from their community (scheduled castes) which is why she is apprehensive to join them.

The case of Sita points out to larger issues. Walking back from that VHSND, I remember thinking that no single scheme could solve Sita's problems since the issue was bigger than service delivery. It was about whether institutions and communities were truly connected.

Reframing the Problem

That realisation forced me to rethink my approach.

I had entered the village looking for gaps in healthcare services. Instead, I discovered gaps in governance. Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Days were functioning, but largely as routine service-delivery events. Women arrived, got vaccinated, collected supplements and went home. Conversations were minimal. Nutrition counselling was limited. Community participation was almost absent. Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Committees and Jan Arogya Samitis existed, but many were inactive. Citizens remained beneficiaries rather than participants. My problem statement changed. The challenge was no longer, "*How do we improve healthcare?*" It became, "*How do we rebuild trust between communities and the public health system?*" That question eventually evolved into **Swasthya Saathi**.

Building Swasthya Saathi

One of the most rewarding aspects of the intervention was that it was not designed in isolation. Its shape emerged gradually through discussions with the Chief Development Officer, the Chief Medical Officer, district programme officials, frontline workers, and mentors from the Praxis team. Each conversation refined the idea further. Rather than creating an entirely new programme, we asked a simpler question: *Could we strengthen what already existed?*

The answer lay in VHSNDs. Instead of viewing them only as platforms for immunisation and maternal health services, we began seeing them as potential spaces for community ownership. The intervention rested on four interconnected pillars: improving VHSND site readiness, strengthening frontline workers, creating community Trust Circles through women's Village Organisations, and revitalising Jan Arogya Samitis as platforms for accountability and dialogue. The design looked elegant on paper however, the implementation was far messier.

When the Real Work Began

Our first task was deceptively simple: understand the existing system. Across twenty-six Ayushman Arogya Mandir sub-centres, we mapped logistics, infrastructure and governance processes. The exercise revealed startling inconsistencies. Essential equipment was missing in several locations. Many VHSNDs were being conducted inside private homes rather than public buildings. Privacy for antenatal examinations was often compromised. Counselling spaces barely existed. Yet the most important discovery was not about infrastructure. It was about utilisation. During District Health Society discussions, we found that a significant proportion of the funds allocated for VHSNDs remained unused—not because money was unavailable, but because no one had clearly understood or coordinated the process for using it. A resource problem turned out to be a coordination problem. That moment fundamentally changed my understanding of governance. Many public systems do not fail because of insufficient resources. They fail because relationships between institutions fail.

One of the most revealing moments during implementation emerged from repeated observations of VHSND sessions. Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Days are designed to provide a comprehensive package of maternal, child, adolescent, and nutrition services. In practice, however, many sessions had become narrowly focused on immunisation and routine clinical services. Women would arrive carrying their maternal health records. Children would be weighed. Vaccines would be administered. Beneficiaries would collect supplements and leave. What was largely absent was the nutrition component.

Across the twenty-six assessed sites, only two had a functional POSHAN corner. Mobilisation of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM) children remained significantly below expected levels. Referral pathways for Nutritional Rehabilitation Centres were weak. Although medicines and nutritional supplements were often available, awareness regarding their utilisation remained limited. More striking than the absence of infrastructure was the absence of conversation. Counselling rarely occurred in a meaningful way. Discussions around nutrition, infant feeding, maternal diet, family planning, danger signs during pregnancy, and early childhood development were minimal. Frontline workers were highly effective at completing tasks but had limited time and support for facilitating dialogue.

The silence within these sessions was anthropologically significant.

Initially, I interpreted it as an information deficit. Over time, I realised it reflected something deeper- a deficit of ownership. Women did not ask questions because they did not perceive the health system as something they could influence. VHSNDs were viewed as state programmes rather than community platforms.

This observation became one of the strongest justifications for the Trust Circle component of Swasthya Saathi. Improving service delivery alone would not transform VHSNDs into community health platforms. The community itself needed to become an active participant in shaping these spaces.

Resistance and Where It Actually Came From

Before implementation began, I had prepared myself for resistance from senior officials. Community participation often challenges established hierarchies, and I expected scepticism regarding proposals that sought to increase local oversight and accountability. Surprisingly, district leadership proved considerably more supportive than anticipated.

The strongest resistance emerged elsewhere.

It came from within the frontline system itself. Several Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) expressed concerns regarding the introduction of community observation mechanisms and digital monitoring tools. In remote sub centres where supervision had historically been limited, the proposed VHSND monitoring application was interpreted as surveillance rather than support. The idea that Village Organisation women could observe sessions, document gaps, and provide feedback generated understandable apprehension. At first, I treated this as a technical problem. My response was to explain the application, demonstrate its functionality, and highlight its benefits. Training sessions were organised, workflows were clarified, and concerns were addressed through rational explanations. The resistance remained. Only later did I realise that I was not facing a technical challenge but an adaptive one. The Adaptive Leadership framework distinguishes between technical problems, which can be solved through expertise and procedures, and adaptive challenges, which require people to change beliefs, relationships, identities, and ways of working. The ANMs were not resisting technology. They were responding to a perceived shift in accountability and power.

During informal conversations at sub-centres, many spoke candidly about their experiences. They described conducting sessions with inadequate supplies, struggling with transportation, managing multiple responsibilities simultaneously, and being held accountable for failures originating elsewhere within the system.

The monitoring application represented something larger than a digital tool. It symbolised another layer of scrutiny within an already demanding work environment. This realisation fundamentally changed my approach.

Rather than presenting the application as a mechanism for monitoring performance, I began framing it as a tool for documenting systemic constraints. Missing equipment, stock shortages, infrastructure gaps, and operational challenges could now be recorded and communicated to decision-makers. The application could generate evidence not only about service delivery but also about the realities frontline workers faced.

The shift was subtle but important. What had initially been perceived as surveillance gradually became viewed as validation. Several ANMs who were initially sceptical began suggesting improvements to the system. Some of the strongest critics eventually became among its earliest supporters. The experience reinforced one of the most important lessons I learned about leadership. **People rarely resist change itself. More often, they resist loss i.e. loss of autonomy, legitimacy, status, certainty, or control.** Understanding what stakeholders stand to lose is often more important than explaining what they stand to gain.

Building Trust Circles

Perhaps the most meaningful part of the intervention involved working with women from Village Organisations under the National Rural Livelihood Mission. We called them **Badlav Didis**. Their role was not to supervise health workers. It was to become trusted bridges between communities and public institutions. They mobilised women, encouraged attendance at VHSNDs, documented local issues, facilitated conversations and brought community perspectives into governance platforms. Watching these women gradually find confidence in speaking about health, nutrition and accountability became one of the most rewarding experiences of my residency. One ASHA worker later shared the story of a mother who had repeatedly refused to vaccinate her child despite repeated counselling. What eventually changed her mind was not another government message but a conversation with a Badlav Didi she already trusted.

What Worked and What Didn't

Looking back, not everything worked. Institutional change was far slower than I had imagined. Building convergence across departments demanded constant negotiation. New reporting formats added pressure on already stretched frontline workers. Community ownership could not be created through a single meeting or training session. There were moments when progress felt invisible. Nor was Swasthya Saathi "completed." Like most governance interventions, it entered a process of institutionalisation rather than reaching a neat conclusion. But some things did work.

VHSND funds began to be utilised more effectively. More sessions shifted into public spaces. ANC corners were created to provide privacy for pregnant women. Nutrition counselling became more visible. Conversations between departments became more collaborative. Most importantly, community participation slowly shifted from symbolic presence towards meaningful engagement. The biggest success, however, cannot be measured through indicators.

When I first entered Katka Khanpur, I believed I was there to improve healthcare delivery. I left believing that the intervention had never really been about healthcare alone. It had always been about rebuilding trust. And in that process, I realised something equally important: the intervention had changed me as much as it had changed the system.

Residency and My Learning

When I look back on my two years in Sultanpur, I realise that the most important outcomes of the residency cannot be captured in project reports, monitoring indicators, or administrative presentations. The intervention I worked on may continue to evolve in the years ahead, but the transformation it brought about in me is complete. I entered the district believing that good governance was about designing better policies. I left understanding that governance is fundamentally about people—their relationships, incentives, fears, aspirations and trust.

Three lessons, in particular, continue to shape the way I think about public policy.

1. Policy Does Not Fail in Design; It Often Fails in Relationships

As students of public policy, we spend years studying institutions, legislation, economics and governance frameworks. We learn to identify gaps in policy design and propose better solutions. What we rarely study is the complex web of relationships through which every policy eventually passes before it reaches a citizen. Sultanpur became my classroom for understanding this reality.

2. Leadership Without Authority Is the Hardest Form of Leadership

Before joining the residency, my understanding of leadership was closely tied to authority. I assumed that decisions flowed from those occupying positions of power and that implementation followed naturally. Working inside a district administration challenged that belief almost immediately. As a Praxis Fellow, I occupied an unusual position.

I attended high-level meetings with senior officials. I contributed to policy discussions. I designed interventions. Yet I possessed none of the formal authority that government officers enjoy. I could not issue instructions. I could not allocate budgets. I could not direct departments to work together. At first, I viewed this as a limitation. Eventually, I realised it was the residency's greatest gift. It forced me to discover a different kind of leadership. One of the clearest examples came during the implementation of Swasthya Saathi.

When resistance emerged from frontline workers regarding the proposed monitoring mechanisms, my instinct was to convince them through logic. I explained the purpose of the intervention, demonstrated the technology and clarified the expected outcomes. The resistance persisted. Only later did I realise that I was trying to solve an emotional problem with technical explanations.

The issue had never been about technology. It was about identity. For many ANMs, another monitoring tool represented another layer of judgement in an already demanding profession. They were carrying impossible workloads while constantly being evaluated. Their resistance was not irrational; it was deeply human. Once I understood that, my role changed.

I discovered that influence rarely comes from having the best idea. It comes from making people feel that they are part of creating that idea.

Whether I was working with district officials, ASHAs, Village Organisation members or colleagues from different departments, progress depended less on formal hierarchies and more on relationships built through consistency, respect and patience.

The residency taught me that authority may secure compliance. Only trust creates ownership.

3. The Citizen Is Not a Beneficiary—The Citizen Is a Partner

Perhaps the deepest shift in my thinking came through interactions with communities. When I first entered villages, I unconsciously viewed citizens through the lens of government programmes. I saw pregnant women as beneficiaries of maternal health schemes, children

as recipients of nutrition services and families as users of public institutions. Over time, those labels disappeared. They became people.

Women like Sita taught me that development challenges do not exist in neat departmental categories. A pregnant woman does not experience healthcare separately from nutrition, livelihoods, education or social exclusion. These realities overlap every single day.

Government departments, however, often work in silos. Communities do not. This became especially visible during VHSND sessions.

Looking at the State from the Inside

Before joining the residency, like many young policy professionals, I often evaluated government from the outside. Working inside district administration gave me a different perspective. I witnessed officers making difficult decisions under immense time pressure. I saw frontline workers managing responsibilities far beyond their formal job descriptions. I observed departments trying to coordinate despite structural limitations. This experience made me more empathetic without making me less critical. I no longer see governance as a contest between an efficient private sector and an inefficient public sector. I see it as an extraordinarily complex system trying to reconcile competing priorities every single day.

Beyond the Residency

The Residency has also given me clarity about the kind of work I want to pursue. Having experienced public policy from the last mile of implementation, I now aspire to contribute to its design. I want to work at the intersection of research, government, and practice, where evidence from the field informs policy decisions rather than remaining confined to reports. In the long term, I hope to pursue doctoral research in public policy and governance, focusing on state capacity, public institutions, and community-centred systems change. My ambition is not simply to study governance, but to help build institutions that are more responsive, participatory, and trusted.

Leaving Sultanpur is therefore not the end of my Residency; it is the beginning of a lifelong engagement with public service. The district taught me that governance is not merely the business of governments. It is the continuous work of building trust between institutions and the people they exist to serve. If I carry one lesson forward into every role I take on, it is this: meaningful policy begins not in conference rooms or ministries, but by listening patiently, humbly, and repeatedly to the people whose lives it seeks to improve.



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