

Pratham is India's largest education NGO, founded in 1994 with a mission to provide quality learning to children who would otherwise go without it. Operating across nearly every state in the country and known internationally for its Annual Status of Education Report, Pratham runs learning centres, literacy programmes, and youth fellowships that place young people directly in underserved communities.

In July 2024, I joined Pratham's Youth Fellowship for seven days in Gadana, a rural village near Aurangabad in the state of Maharashtra in western India. The fellowship placed young volunteers directly in village communities to deliver education and arts programming. My work covered two streams: teaching English to adults in the community, and preparing a group of thirty children aged eight to ten to perform music at a public concert for the entire village at the week's end. The children were joyful, grateful, and wholly willing to learn — and by the final evening, the field was full of their voices. For many of the families gathered, it was the first time they had seen their child perform on a stage.

The fellowship did not end when the week did. Back in Mumbai, I began volunteering regularly at a Pratham learning centre in Antop Hill, near Wadala, as a direct continuation of the relationship the fellowship had started. Through the 2025-26 school year, I came to the centre every Saturday or Sunday, working with sessions of thirty to forty children at a time.

The sessions combined language learning with creative activity in a way that made each reinforce the other. We would learn English phrasings drawn from everyday life and occasions the children already knew — Diwali and Christmas among them — and then express those ideas through painting, which gave the language a context and the art a subject simultaneously. Sessions also included Snakes and Ladders, which became a vehicle for practising conversational English in a setting where the children were too absorbed in the game to feel self-conscious about speaking. I also taught them songs, using music as a way of making language feel less like instruction and more like something worth engaging with.

Across both the Aurangabad fellowship and the Antop Hill centre, my work with Pratham has spanned rural and urban contexts, adults and children, music and language and art — all oriented toward the same thing: making learning feel worth showing up for