

Jnana Prabodhini Competitive Examinations Centre, Pune.

Celebrating journey of its alumnus on account of Tridashakpurti Varsha 2025-26 (30 years of establishment)

Shri. Ajay Kautikwar

- Presently working as Founder, Ignited Media & Digital Editor, deAsra Foundation.
- JPCEC Batch - 1999
- MA, BA - Pol Sci.
- Diploma in Journalism
- Previously worked in IBN Lokmat, Daily Sakal, ETV Marathi under various roles.



Ajay Kautikwar is a **seasoned media professional** with over 20 years of experience. He originates from Pusad in the Yavatmal district of Maharashtra. This region holds historical significance as it has produced two Chief Ministers of Maharashtra, Vasantrao Naik and Sudhakarao Naik. He completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1999, majoring in Political Science and Sanskrit Literature.

JPCEC and its Impact

Immediately after graduating in 1999, Ajay decided to pursue his ambition of preparing for competitive examinations, which had been a predetermined goal. To facilitate this preparation, he relocated to Pune. It was during this time in Pune that Ajay connected with Jnana Prabodhini. He recalls initially seeking information about various coaching centres in Pune from other students. Unfortunately, the feedback he received about other centers was overwhelmingly negative, describing them as excessively commercial and focused solely on money rather than quality education or student well-being. Ajay expressed his dismay at receiving such feedback, feeling disheartened that he had come to Pune with high aspirations only to find such an environment.

However, upon visiting Jnana Prabodhini Competitive Examination Centre (JPCEC), where some of his friends were already studying, Ajay encountered a distinctly different experience. He found the atmosphere to possess a unique, positive "vibe" which he found appealing. The feedback he received about the center was also very positive. Ajay observed that Jnana Prabodhini relied heavily on word-of-mouth publicity. He understood that building this kind of reputation through word-of-mouth requires significant dedication and effort ("tapasya"). While this approach has potential drawbacks, it also ensures a steady and organic growth. He noted that despite having no advertising, the center attracted a large number of students from across Maharashtra even then. Ajay was associated with Jnana Prabodhini for approximately two years, from 1999 to 2001. He described these two years as "the best".

Ajay remembers the center's structured approach to preparation. Teaching was conducted by senior students and guest lecturers, including individuals he recalls like Tushar Thombre sir. The curriculum focused on teaching effective study methods, such as how to take precise notes. Group discussions were a regular part of the program, and there was a dedicated study hall. Weekend sessions involved more group discussions and activities. The center organized students into small groups for various activities before they would go to the study hall to apply what they learned about study methods.

Ajay highlighted several unique aspects of Jnana Prabodhini that contributed to its "rise" or steady progress. Firstly, it had an entrance exam for admission. This was considered unique, especially at that time when many other coaching classes did not have one, even as a relatively new center starting out. Secondly, the center did not advertise. Thirdly, they maintained a limited number of students. Lastly, the fees were described as very limited and reasonable. Ajay felt that these factors were crucial to the center's development.

Ajay also shared a particularly memorable lesson learned at Jnana Prabodhini about trust and positivity. He recalled the open access to the library where students could freely borrow and return books. This system was based on a fundamental trust in the students' goodness ("changulpana") to handle books properly. When complaints arose that some books were missing, a discussion was held. In this meeting, Vivek Sir, as the head of the center, decided to maintain the existing rules and environment. The reasoning was that they should trust the majority of students (35-37 out of 40) rather than show distrust towards everyone because of the actions of a few (2-3 students). He said it was acceptable if one or two books went

missing, they could arrange for new ones, but the important thing was to preserve the atmosphere of trust. Ajay felt that maintaining this trust was a very important life principle.

Ajay's pursuit of competitive exams encountered a significant obstacle in 2000 due to the "Karnik incident". This involved the leakage of the MPSC exam paper, leading to the cancellation and postponement of the examination. This incident resulted in a full year being effectively lost for students preparing for the exam. Ajay noted that this contributed to an instability and uncertainty that was present even back then, similar to the situation today, with delayed job notifications and exams.

The Karnik incident and observing senior students who had been preparing for competitive exams for five to six years without success prompted Ajay to consider the necessity of a Plan B. He realized that simply being intelligent wasn't enough; smart work was also required. More importantly, he learned the importance of setting a limit on the number of attempts or years one would dedicate to competitive exam preparation. He saw that without setting such a limit, students could spend crucial years of their lives preparing, losing their youth, while their peers moved ahead.

Looking for a Change

A discussion with Kaumudi Walimbe, who had recently completed a journalism course, led Ajay to explore the field. He decided to pursue a Diploma in Communication (DCJ) at Ranade in 2001. The timings of the diploma course were initially convenient, allowing him to continue other studies. However, this decision ultimately led to a complete change in his career path. Ajay notes that he did not find the transition difficult mentally, as he had already prepared himself for such a possibility.

Ajay strongly believes that the fundamental skills acquired during his competitive exam preparation and time at Jnana Prabodhini are invaluable and applicable to any field. He identified four key takeaways that he feels are essential in any walk of life: Mission, Purpose, Perspective, and Perseverance.

- **Mission:** Having a clear goal, a vision of what you want to achieve (like aspiring to be an officer to serve the country or bring social change).

- Purpose: Having a reason for doing things; Ajay feels the atmosphere at Jnana Prabodhini helped provide this sense of purpose.
- Perspective: Having the right approach or viewpoint on how to go about achieving your mission and purpose.
- Perseverance: The persistence and tenacity to keep going despite facing setbacks, falling, or making mistakes.

He explains that knowing your mission, purpose, and perspective helps you persevere on the path. These qualities have been useful throughout his career in journalism, content creation, and corporate work. Ajay also highlighted the benefits of developing a wide reading habit and the note-taking methods learned at Prabodhini's library and atmosphere. These skills - such as extracting precise points, being specific rather than vague, and remembering information - proved very helpful in journalism tasks like writing copy, scripts, deciding on roles, and approaching new media.

From Notebook to Newsroom – Into the Journalism

Ajay's journalism career officially began with an opportunity at ETV Marathi in Ramoji Film City, Hyderabad, in 2001. This was a significant entry into the electronic media field when it was still in its nascent stages and considered "rising". ETV was reportedly the largest regional news channel network at the time. Ajay described the experience as being in a completely different world.

He covered various elections, including Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha polls. He went with a group of seven to eight students, and after their work was appreciated, they were hired. He learned about the studio environment, the technology being used (which was advancing), and gained new perspectives. His roles involved writing copy, translation, selecting relevant global news for Maharashtra, and deciding on headlines. He experienced his first major breaking news event while there: the attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001. Handling such a critical event taught him how to react and manage breaking news situations through practical experience.

Ajay also fondly recalled the atmosphere at Ramoji Film City as being like a "mini India" or "Laghubharat". This was because different language newsrooms (Marathi, Telugu, Kannada, Urdu, Kashmiri, Odia, Hindi belt) were located together in a large hall. They would interact,

share headlines, and discuss how different newsrooms viewed the same story, providing Ajay with diverse perspectives on news coverage.

Take Two – Sakal Media at Nagpur

Around 2003 or 2004, Ajay moved to Nagpur and joined Sakal, transitioning from electronic media to print media. He found the approach in print journalism to be entirely different from TV. While TV focused on immediate breaking news, print journalism allowed for more thoughtful writing, creating special articles and supplements, crafting appealing headlines, understanding layout, and visually "decorating" a single news item to make it engaging for readers. He learned the importance of continually considering what readers wanted to read and presenting information in a way that created a mental picture for them. His primary role at Sakal was desk work, processing reports from field journalists and presenting them.

Despite being mainly desk-bound, Ajay conducted some notable interviews at Sakal. These included an interview with the wife of the late Srikant Jichkar (a prominent politician and academic) after his accident. He also interviewed Ram Khandekar, who had served as Secretary to former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and had also written a book. Another significant interview was with the father of the renowned doctor Atul Gawande. Dr. Atul Gawande, a globally recognized figure in medicine, was originally from a small village near Ajay's hometown of Pusad. His father, Atmaram Gawande, had moved to the US in the 1960s, where Atul was born and later developed a distinct approach in the medical field, wrote bestseller books, wrote for the New Yorker, and advised Bill Clinton. Ajay recounted the logistical challenge of interviewing Dr. Gawande's father in the US from an STD booth in India, where the father noted his haste due to the rising bill and offered to call back later to conduct the interview properly at Ajay's home.

Ajay also contributed significantly to special pages and supplements at Sakal. He worked on 'Diksha', a supplement on Ambedkarite thoughts published around Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Din in Nagpur during Dussehra. He also handled the responsibility for two specific pages: 'Kali Mati' focusing on agriculture and 'Satsang' focusing on spirituality. These experiences provided him with valuable insights into the print media field.



Ajay with renowned author and surgeon
Dr. Atul Gawande

Experienced & Energetic – Working as a Deputy Editor

In 2008, Ajay relocated to Mumbai to join IBN Lokmat, which was just starting at the time, and he was part of the first training batch. He spent a considerable period of 12-13 years working there. His roles at IBN Lokmat included Input Head and Deputy News Editor. For two years, he also managed the digital desk. Ajay notes that the television news industry, particularly with its focus on breaking news, involves immense stress. After many years, this constant stress and the repetitive nature of dealing with breaking news led to a feeling of fatigue. Observing the significant changes happening in journalism also contributed to his desire for a different direction.



Behind the camera - Ajay during his tenure at IBN
Lokmat (now News18 Lokmat)

Doing Something Different

Deciding to explore a different path after his long stint in mainstream journalism, Ajay currently works with the deAsra Foundation. This foundation is an initiative of Persistent Systems, a software company in Pune founded by Dr. Anand Deshpande. deAsra Foundation's core mission is to focus on entrepreneurship development. Their main goal is to foster the creation of new entrepreneurs to generate employment and create wealth.

Ajay currently leads the digital content creation for the foundation's platform, 'Yashasvi Udyojak' (Successful Entrepreneur). This was previously a magazine but has been completely converted into a digital platform. In his role as Digital Editor, Ajay is responsible for producing all the necessary content, including writing, creating and conducting podcasts, and developing stories for the platform.



Ajay receiving digital creator award from the hands of Shri. Achyut Godbole (renowned Writer & Entrepreneur) & Shri. Vivek Sawant, Chief Mentor, MKCL.

He explained Dr. Anand Deshpande's philosophy of "Learn, Earn, Return". Dr. Deshpande believes there are three phases in a person's life: learning (as a student), earning (working), and returning (philanthropy). After reaching the age of 50 and having dedicated 30-35 years to building Persistent Systems, Dr. Deshpande decided it was time for the "Return" phase, focusing on philanthropic work in areas of interest. He chose to address the significant problem of unemployment/employment in India, recognising it as one of the biggest challenges in such a large country. Since government jobs are decreasing, the question becomes how to provide work for so many people. The solution, according to Dr.

Deshpande's vision, is to create new small businesses and help existing ones grow, which in turn generates employment and creates wealth.

deAsra Foundation acts as an ecosystem to support aspiring entrepreneurs. Ajay explained that if someone has a business idea but lacks the background, deAsra guides them through the entire process, from idea validation to implementation. This guidance includes aspects like validating the idea's feasibility, choosing a location, determining the required capital, understanding licenses and compliance, social media marketing, building a team, and managing cash flow. They also assist existing businesses looking to scale up, advising them on changing their "orbit," increasing production, adding new elements, and connecting with experts. Ajay mentioned that many businesses fail due to poor cash flow management, a skill they specifically teach.

Beyond that, deAsra Foundation also runs a digital platform - Yashaswi Udyojak. Yashaswi Udyojak is the digital platform that focuses on areas like entrepreneurship, innovation, etc. Ajay hosts the 'Udyojak Katta' podcast there and has conducted over 40 interviews with prominent figures from various industries. The platform's reach has now surpassed 7 million. Ajay considers interviewing these experts to be an enriching and rewarding experience.



Ajay with various entrepreneurs at the
“Udyojak Katta” podcast.

Reflecting on his professional journey, Ajay considers his association with the deAsra Foundation to be one of the most valuable phases of his career, primarily because it gave him direct access to the mentorship of Dr. Anand Deshpande, Founder of Persistent Systems. Persistent, now among India's leading corporations with a market capitalisation approaching ₹1 lakh crore, stands as a rare example of long-term value creation. Founded in 1991 with an initial capital of just ₹7 lakh, the company's journey, in Ajay's view, underlines the power of vision, patience, and ethical leadership.

What leaves a deeper impression on Ajay, however, is not merely the scale of success but the simplicity and humility with which Dr. Deshpande conducts himself. Despite building one of India's most respected technology companies, he remains firmly rooted in values—an attribute Ajay believes has become increasingly rare across sectors. During his interactions, Dr. Deshpande often articulated a clear five-point framework for building a strong and sustainable career. These principles were not presented as theory, but as lived practice:

- **Continuous Learning** – Maintaining curiosity and consistently upgrading one's knowledge in a rapidly evolving world.
- **Collaboration** – Working across teams and disciplines, recognising that lasting growth is rarely achieved in isolation.
- **Communication** – Expressing ideas with clarity, responsibility, and purpose.
- **Networking** – Building long-term, trust-based relationships rather than transactional connections.
- **Understanding the Economy** – Developing a practical awareness of economic forces that shape businesses, careers, and society.

Ajay notes that these five principles, reinforced repeatedly through example rather than instruction, have had a lasting influence on how he approaches both media and entrepreneurship.

Going beyond deAsra Foundation, in 2025, Ajay founded *Ignited Media*, a consultancy firm through which he continues his professional work. A significant part of his engagement today lies at the intersection of media, language, and emerging technologies. As global AI companies increasingly focus on improving the quality of responses in Indian languages, Ajay has been closely involved in this shift. He worked for six months on an AI learning project for a leading company in the AI ecosystem, contributing specifically to how artificial

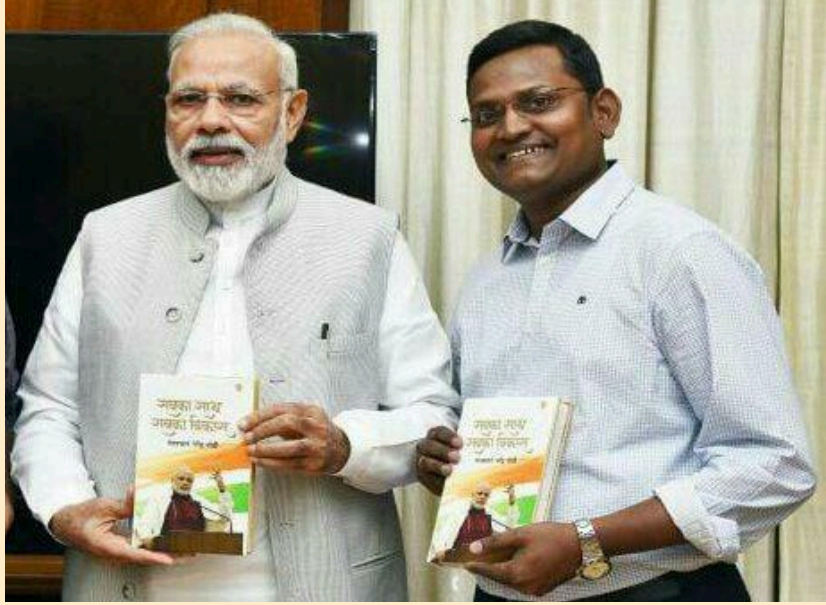
intelligence can generate more accurate, contextual, and culturally grounded responses in Marathi.



Ajay with Dr. Anand Deshpande, Founder,
Persistent Systems and DeAsra Foundation

Awards and Achievements

Ajay has also authored and compiled several publications. He translated a book about Dr. Vinayak Sen, titled "Dr. to Defend," into Marathi, which was published as "Asahi Ek Doctor". In 2017 or 2018, he created a Diwali special issue focused on Foreign Policy. He chose this subject because it interested him and invited prominent Marathi writers on the topic, including Nitin Gokhale, Sudhir Deore, Godbole sir, and Vijay Naik. He also included a translated article by Sushma Swaraj. The special issue was titled "Badalat Jag Badalta Bharat" (Changing World Changing India). In 2017, he compiled a Marathi translation of 42 of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speeches focused on foreign policy and related topics such as security, rural development, women empowerment, and energy. The compilation was titled "Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas" and was notably inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself at the Parliament House, which Ajay described as a wonderful and memorable experience. After this, he also wrote a blog and had a 4-10 minute interaction with Modi.



Ajay in an interaction with Hon. PM Shri. Narendra Modi after publishing his book Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas based on PM's various speeches.

In 2018, Ajay received the “**Dr. Arun Tikekar Fellowship - New Media and Challenges**” from the Asiatic Society of Mumbai. His subject of study for this year-long fellowship (worth Rs 1.25 lakh) was "Journal News Media and Challenges". This allowed him to deeply study the challenges facing traditional media (electronic and print) from the rise of digital media. His research was published as a book titled be: **Patrakarita – Navya Sandhi, Navi Aavahane** (पत्रकारीता – नव्या संधी, नवी आव्हाने), exploring the challenges and opportunities of new media. Having worked across electronic, print, and for two years on the digital desk at IBN Lokmat, Ajay felt fortunate to have experienced all three aspects, giving him a comprehensive understanding of the media landscape.



Ajay, while receiving Tikekar Fellowship

State of Media – Present and Future

Reflecting on the current state of media, Ajay sees the challenges as reflective of a broader societal degeneration, as media is an integral part of society. A primary driver of these challenges is the intense competition fueled by digital media. Digital platforms have dismantled traditional structures, reducing the time lag between a news event occurring and reaching the public to virtually zero. He notes a significant shift from the past where the editorial department dominated, to the present where the marketing department holds sway, viewing media purely as a product.

This focus on treating media as a product means the emphasis is on numbers – views, likes, shares, comments – rather than editorial quality or journalistic integrity. Editorial discussions are minimal (around 10%), with 90% of meetings focused on these metrics because they directly correlate to revenue. This relentless pursuit of numbers in a "cutthroat competition" leads to the sacrifice of values. Practices like using sensational or misleading clickbait headlines ("Ratri Kai Jhale Timba Timba") become common tactics to attract clicks, even if the story lacks substance. Ajay feels that a lack of thoughtful individuals in decision-making roles exacerbates this problem. He recounted being told by a boss on the digital desk that "journalistic headlines don't work" because they don't generate enough traffic, leading him to question the purpose of doing journalism.

Ajay notes that this intense competition creates a cycle where media houses justify their questionable practices by saying, "they do it, so we do it," and vice versa. This mentality prevents anyone from pausing to consider the implications. He believes the government actually benefits from this fragmented and competitive media landscape.

While the lack of restrictions on digital media is its greatest strength in terms of reach, Ajay argues it is also its biggest weakness because it removes the check on conscience. This environment facilitates the spread of sensational content, including sex and crime, and increasingly, deliberate misinformation. Ajay foresees potential government intervention and regulation in the future due to the spread of fake news and harmful content on digital platforms, arguing that the media's own practices have invited this. Although there are internal discussions within media houses about establishing a code of conduct, these voices are often drowned out by the demands of fierce competition.

A major contributor to the difficulty in discerning truth is the presence of organised groups or "gangs" and "troll armies" who deliberately spread narratives and false information to create a specific atmosphere or set perspectives - Narrative building. Ajay believes this contributes to the declining trust in media and even electoral processes, citing the example of the recent Maharashtra elections, where conflicting narratives were pushed on social media, leading to public confusion and allegations when results differed from the created atmosphere. He notes that people's emotions regarding caste and religion have become very sensitive, making them easily manipulated by these deliberate campaigns.

Ajay points out that the average person cannot realistically verify every piece of information they encounter. He shared a personal anecdote about his mother receiving false information on WhatsApp and questioning him, "What *is* true? You say everything is false," highlighting the difficulty in explaining the reality of deliberate misinformation. He also recounted a professional instance where a reporter sent him photos of wall cracks claiming they were from a small earthquake in Maharashtra, which Ajay knew wouldn't cause such damage; verification revealed the photos were from an earthquake in Myanmar, illustrating a lack of basic common sense in verification. Another example was the circulation of a video claiming lions were on a road in Thane; Ajay noted that basic common sense indicates lions are not found in Maharashtra outside specific reserves. He stresses the need for public awareness and constant education to help people use their own common sense.

Ajay contrasts the current era of information overload with the past when information was scarce, which could lead to different forms of misinformation. He questions whether people genuinely *want* to verify information, especially when false narratives might confirm their existing biases. He distinguishes between what people *like* and what is *necessary* or *required*, arguing that the media's role should be to provide what is necessary, drawing an analogy to a parent restricting a child's chocolate consumption even if they like it. Ajay believes that this situation, which he calls a "monster," will continue to grow, possibly exacerbated by AI. He asserts that unless individuals cultivate their conscience and maintain self-control over how they use information, complaining about platforms or technology is futile. Similar concerns were raised about the advent of television, but society adapted; he expects the same with digital media, emphasising the need for personal control.

There is still some hope in the Media....

Despite the significant challenges, Ajay holds a strong belief in the media's immense power for positive transformation. He shared a powerful example from a village near Washim where women suffered skin issues from manually processing *bibba* fruit for the edible nut inside. A news story about their plight led an industrialist from Aurangabad and an MLA to provide them with machines developed to process the fruit, significantly improving the women's lives and appearance. Ajay highlights this as a case where a small news item brought about a major transformation. He mentioned many other instances where media coverage helped people with health problems, education, or resolving local issues like water scarcity. He finds this ability of the media to bring about positive change the most satisfying aspect of his career.

Ajay also shared an inspiring story of an office boy he knew at IBN Lokmat who, through dedication and further studies (MBA), rose to become a Marketing Head at another channel. Ajay wrote about this inspiring journey on his Facebook and Twitter, attracting attention on LinkedIn. Subsequently, the Marketing Head of Sakal saw Ajay's post, contacted him for the individual's number, and called the former office boy for an interview at Sakal. Ajay emphasized that this small story, shared via media, has the potential to completely change someone's life if he gets the job. This illustrates the immense power of media when used for good.

Ajay also reflected on positive technological changes in media, citing the shift from large, crew-dependent OB Vans to modern portable equipment like backpack kits. This allows a single person (the reporter, who can also act as a cameraman) to report quickly and flexibly from challenging locations like calamity sites or war zones, a significant improvement over the past. While technology changes can lead to job reductions (like the OB Van crew), Ajay believes they also create new opportunities requiring new skills. He sees certain roles like translation, proofreading, and basic editing diminishing due to AI and automation. He gave the example of deAsara Foundation using AI for translating success stories from Marathi to Hindi/English, saving significant costs (Rs 30,000/month) that can be redirected to improve quality elsewhere. He notes that while technology changes, basic principles often remain constant. He also mentioned that his team of 40 at deAsara has been working entirely remotely since COVID-19, using digital communication tools effectively.

Looking ahead, Ajay's vision for the future centers on media and content creation, particularly on digital platforms and podcasts. Beyond simply informing and updating people, his primary goal is to create content that adds value to their lives ("Value added"). He aims to share inspiring stories and content that motivates people or helps them learn something valuable. He is considering starting his own venture ("swatahch kahi ubharta yeel ka") to pursue this goal of adding positive value and creating something positive.

JPCEC in Future

Ajay feels it is absolutely crucial to explicitly advise students to set a time limit for their competitive exam attempts. Given the decreasing number of government jobs, students need to understand the reality and avoid wasting crucial years. It is important to help them establish a "border line" or "simaresha" for how long they will pursue this path. Ajay also strongly believes in the importance of equipping students with soft skills and critical thinking. He feels the center is already focusing on this, but it is essential because these skills are universally applicable and will benefit students regardless of the field they enter. Learning how to think critically and even understanding the limits of one's own knowledge is vital for future success. Providing these skills and a realistic perspective is essential for preparing students for a future with fewer traditional job opportunities. He emphasises that the ultimate goal is to do good work in any chosen field and perhaps bring about change, but this starts with personal transformation enabled by skills and perspective.

Photo Gallery



Ajay with wife Trupti and son Pranav



Ajay with Dr. Vivek Sir & Dr. Savita tai
glancing through Ajay's book -
'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'