

Jnana Prabodhini Competitive Examinations Centre, Pune.

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

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- Bachelors in Engineering - Govt College of Engineering, Amravati



Akash Patki hails from Amravati. His educational journey began there, culminating in an engineering degree in Electronics and Telecommunication from Government College of Engineering, Amravati.

Early Life and Education

The clarity regarding his post-engineering path towards civil services stemmed from his childhood. Growing up in a challenging environment, specifically living in a slum area in Amravati, instilled in him a strong desire to make a difference. Witnessing the circumstances around him, he felt a calling to "do something" for himself and others. The idea of becoming a Collector, suggested by his teachers as the individual capable of bringing about significant change, resonated deeply with him from the eighth standard.

This early ambition solidified his focus. While the goal of becoming a Collector was set, there was also a pragmatic understanding of the need for a professional degree as a fallback

option. During his eleventh and twelfth standards, he opted for General Science, preparing for both engineering and medical entrances. At that time, in Amravati, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BSc) solely to prepare for the Union Public Service Commission exams felt like a significant risk, as there was less confidence that these degrees would provide sufficient alternative career options if the UPSC attempt was unsuccessful. Good guidance on this path was also lacking. The prevailing definition of a "good" graduation at the time, for him, was either engineering or medical.

He initially preferred the medical path, believing that becoming a doctor would also allow him to serve people effectively. However, his engineering CET score was good. To avoid losing a year, he decided to pursue engineering at the Government College of Engineering, Amravati. Simultaneously, while still in Amravati during engineering, he began preparing for the UPSC exams by utilizing libraries and classes.



Akash volunteering with Sevankur at Melghat in 2008,
with Dr. Ashish and Dr. Kavita Satav (Founder,
Mahaan, NGO, Melghat) and team of other doctors

A significant turning point during his engineering years was meeting a friend in an UPSC class in Amravati in 2007. This friend mentioned attending a camp and helping with flood relief efforts during a flood situation near Amravati. Joining this flood relief drive provided a "short way" to engage in social work, and it was through this activity that he connected with Dr. Avinash Saoji. This connection led him to Sevankur, and from Sevankur, he learned about the 'Nirman' initiative by Dr. Abhay Bang and Dr. Rani Bang. Nirman, an initiative focused on 'Youth for Full Life,' provided considerable clarity on his future path. After attending Nirman, his perspective shifted; he realised that his medium (UPSC or MPSC) didn't matter as much as having a clear idea of "what to do" regardless of the exam outcome. This

experience, along with participating in the Tata Jagriti Yatra, opened up numerous career avenues within the development sector, clarifying what he could do professionally.

The Civil Services Preparation Phase

With clarity on his broader purpose, Akash moved to Pune in 2009 after completing his engineering degree to prepare for UPSC. He joined Jnana Prabodhini for General Studies classes. There was an entrance exam and an interview process for admission to the coaching program. He took both.

Initially, his chosen optional subjects for the UPSC mains exam were Polity and History. However, after giving his first mains exam in May, he realised that History was a subject he struggled with. He then decided to switch his optional to Sociology. Over his preparation period, he gave four attempts at the UPSC exam, reaching the mains stage in all four. His first attempt was in 2010.



Akash along with other batchmates interacting with IPS Mahesh Bhagwat, Senior Mentor, JP Officers Network during State Study Tour of Prerana Batch (UPSC Interview Batch) at Hyderabad.

He mentions that the General Studies paper and particularly the Mental Ability paper were strengths, helping him clear the preliminary exams. He felt he wasn't preparing enough for prelims yet still clearing them due to his aptitude. However, his preparation for the mains felt insufficient, leading him to question if he lacked certain qualities required by the exam.

He spent time in Pune and also went to Delhi for four months specifically for Sociology classes. He attended Upendra Gaur's classes in Delhi for Sociology. He found the teaching methodology in Delhi, particularly Upendra Gaur Sir's coaching, to be very appealing. It

helped him understand Sociology with a scientific perspective, seeing it as "a science and art together". This logical approach resonated with him, as he preferred frameworks and logic over memorizing facts, which he struggled with in History. He felt that the change in the UPSC GS pattern, which occurred around that time, suited him well.

Transitioning from Civil Services Preparation

Akash's decision to stop pursuing civil services was made clear to him by 2012. He felt he had learned what he needed from the preparation process and could now pursue his goals through other means. He also recognised the "inhuman" nature of the competition and felt he had given sufficient effort over four attempts.

During this period, while preparing for UPSC, he also attempted the Staff Selection Commission (SSC) exam. He was selected as an Excise Inspector through the SSC exam conducted around 2012-2014. His physical tests and other requirements for this post were cleared, and he received an appointment letter.

Simultaneously, while working at Pratham (which he joined after his second UPSC mains in December 2011), he also applied for the Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellowship (PMRDF) and was selected after an interview. The selection letter for PMRDF solidified his decision. He felt that PMRDF offered a direct path to do the kind of development work he aspired to, making further attempts at civil services unnecessary. He decided to forgo both the civil services path and the Excise Inspector position to join PMRDF.

Experience at Pratham

Akash joined Pratham in December 2011, right after his second UPSC mains exam. His background from the Nirman initiative was known to Usha Chavan at Pratham. She asked him about his interests and strengths; he mentioned liking various subjects, especially Mathematics. He was then assigned to the Mathematics team.

Working in the Mathematics team at Pratham was a revitalizing experience for him. Together with the team, he helped develop a curriculum focused on teaching Mathematics to dropout girls. This work involved creating materials and strategies. Through this role, he gained valuable skills in training management, program management, and teaching, particularly in

an NGO context. Working across five or six states under Pratham gave him exposure to different regions, ground realities, and the challenges of working with dropout students needing to bridge significant learning gaps to appear for tenth standard exams. He also gained experience in program management, training, and visiting schools. The experience taught him various tools and fostered his willingness to learn new ones, helping him define his own capabilities.

Parallely, he remained connected with Nirman, Sevankur, and Jagriti Yatra, exposing him to work in nutrition, agriculture, and skill development through his network of friends involved in these areas. This prepared him well for the development sector.



Akash receiving certificate of appreciation for volunteering in various activities conducted at Nirman

The PMRD Fellowship (2014-2017)

The PMRDF selection offered a clear path towards development work, fulfilling his earlier aspirations. He had heard about the fellowship, the opportunity to work directly with Collectors, and the focus on development work, which he found inspiring.

The PMRDF setup during his time specifically involved working in challenging areas. Akash was prepared for this, knowing he would be placed in one of India's most challenging districts. It was clear that the program's focus wasn't limited to rural development alone, but involved taking on "whatever work comes up". He was willing and eager to do this kind of work. When given choices for posting, he prioritized Chhattisgarh and North-East India, even foregoing the option to be posted in Maharashtra, preferring to go "where the core is". He was posted in Kanker district in Chhattisgarh, near the challenging Bastar region. Later, he

moved to Narayanpur district, which was even closer to the core challenging areas, reflecting his desire to work where the need was greatest.



Akash along with dignitaries & students celebrating Independence Day at a Livelihood College in Narayanpur, Chhattisgarh, which he established and served as Principal for 2 years

Working in Narayanpur, specifically in a region known as Abujhmad, which is sometimes referred to as a Naxal stronghold, presented unique challenges. Abujhmad means "unconquerable mountains". His district was effectively one block, as only a small area was easily accessible due to the challenging terrain and security situation. Upon arrival, the Superintendent of Police (SP) for Narayanpur at the time, Amit Kamble, explicitly told him his operational range was limited to six kilometers from the town center.

Initially, PMRD fellows in Narayanpur worked with the Zilla Parishad CEO. The Collector at the time, a promotee IAS officer who had risen from lower ranks, had immense faith in the administration and locals but was initially wary of the English-speaking, educated newcomers (the fellows). He didn't see the value in their presentations but wanted to know what was necessary for his work. Perceiving the fellows as external, he assigned them to the ZP CEO, who in turn directed Akash towards skill development.



Akash conducting review meeting of field health staff in the Abujhmad region of Chhattisgarh along with block officials.

Over the three years he spent in Narayanpur, Akash's role expanded significantly, covering Skill Development, Education, Social Welfare, Health, Nutrition, Women Child Development, Police & Security, Planning for Sensitive Areas, Construction, and PWD. He worked across almost every department, from gardening upwards. He wasn't a Collector, but his work had a Collector-like scope.

His work primarily focused on convergence. He gives an example of a health initiative in Abujhmad. Accessing the interior parts of Abujhmad was difficult for regular health services due to lack of roads, electricity, and the fear among health workers. Additionally, the Primitive Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in the area were reportedly reluctant to accept external services and personnel.



Akash along with officials crossing the riverstream to reach the core part of Abujhmad in the PVTGs area for ensuring yearlong connectivity, and laying the foundation for development work.

To address this, Akash, who was leading Skill Development, designed a convergence program. The idea was to train local youth from Abujhmad, who had passed 12th standard and stayed in Narayanpur hostels before returning to their villages. These youth were selected, given a short-term (six-month) nursing training under Skill Development, followed by an internship at the District Hospital. They were then positioned in Abujhmad's nine clusters (each covering roughly three villages) as Assistant Nurse/MPW Assistants. He called them "Swasthya Sathi" (Health Companions).

This project's head was the Collector, the secretary was the District Medical Officer (DMO)/Chief Medical Health Officer (CMHO), and Akash served as the coordinator. Other departments like Tribal Development and the ZP CEO were also involved for coordination. Funding was managed by converging resources from district government funds and existing schemes.

This administrative innovation, posting local people familiar with the area and culture, was crucial. Once these local Swasthya Sathi were in place, problem-solving began. Issues like lack of fridges for vaccines led to implementing solar solutions, the need for transporting medical supplies resulted in exploring bike ambulances, and so on. The convergence approach, bringing different departments together for a common goal, was key, as individual departments often worked in silos.



Skoch Order of Merit Award for Swasthya
Sathi Project - Innovative Project Design
and Managed during PMRDF

Other examples of convergence work included linking Livelihood Colleges with open schooling to enable tribal youth to gain skills and complete their 10th standard simultaneously. He also worked on converging resources and support for tribal hostels by involving multiple departments. His role was essentially to bring these different people and departments together, identify solutions, and utilize existing schemes or propose innovations. He didn't invent the idea alone but brought it to the Collector, who encouraged him to explore and implement ideas that seemed feasible.



Akash along with students of Livelihood College

Akash describes his experience working in these challenging areas as being a "bridge" between the people and the administration. Information flowed from the ground (locals, his team, youth) to him, which he would filter and channel to the relevant administrator (Collector or SP) for action. This required careful handling of information due to the sensitive environment. He credits this experience with teaching him the importance of thoughtful communication and processing information before speaking.

He learned the critical role of process and trust in the administration. While procedures (written orders) are important, especially in urban areas, much of the administration in areas like Abujhmad ran on trust. Officials acted on verbal requests or phone calls. The trust level was immense; he recounts an instance where he and an SDM (Sub-Divisional Magistrate), a senior district officer, would go into very interior, sensitive areas based on verbal understanding with the Collector. The SP would be aware they were going, but their specific

plan wasn't disclosed to everyone. The Collector would track their return, waiting in the office until they were back in a network area.

Negotiations with villagers in these interior areas sometimes involved individuals who were also connected with Naxal groups. For instance, a village Deputy Sarpanch acted as an intermediary for discussions and negotiations. They would negotiate basic services in exchange for cooperation, like allowing a health center to be built before a ration shop (which could be used by Naxals). This required careful dialogue.



Akash as a State Program Manager for National Rural Livelihood Mission planning strategies for Rural Development Activities.

One specific instance involved promoting a free plastic surgery camp in Narayanpur for people injured by forest fires. Akash and the SDM went into a village in a sensitive area under the guise of promoting this health camp, carrying pamphlets. This opened the door for discussions with villagers about their needs and problems. This approach, going in with a service offering, proved effective in engaging with the community and identifying priorities.

Regarding the potential friction between development initiatives and local traditions often seen in such areas, Akash found that most resistance wasn't to development itself but to the *method* of implementation. Many standard government programs, like those focused on Self Help Groups under NRLM, didn't align with the realities or understanding of tribal communities in Abujmad. They had little experience with saving money, banks, or market-based businesses. However, programs like the Swasthya Sathi initiative, which involved and trained local people, were widely accepted and supported. This program

continued even after he and the Collector left, demonstrating its sustainability due to community ownership and perceived value.

He also led the implementation of the Intense Participating Planning Exercise (IPPE) under MGNREGA, a program aimed at participatory planning of village-level works. This involved village meetings to identify work needs (like roads, farm ponds, animal sheds), analyzing technical feasibility, and preparing a "labor budget" based on available person-days and wage rates. The challenges included getting the administration (like the ZP CEO) on board, who initially felt such ground-up planning wasn't feasible. However, by involving people directly in identifying their needs and prioritizing projects, they created a list of demands.



Akash with officials and local villagers implementing IPPE program

A major conflict arose when the central government issued an order banning "earth work" (मिट्टी के काम) under MGNREGA due to concerns about irregularities. This threatened to cancel crucial road projects identified as top priority by the villagers in Narayanpur. During a meeting with the Chief Secretary, Akash's Collector advocated strongly for Narayanpur, citing that the demands came directly from villagers through a participatory process he had witnessed. An external team that visited Narayanpur and verified the participatory planning process in a village provided crucial feedback to the Collector. This validation gave the Collector the confidence to argue that Narayanpur should be an exception, as the demands were genuine and locally driven. The Chief Secretary agreed, making Narayanpur the only district allowed to undertake road work under MGNREGA that year. This illustrates that programs designed with local participation and addressing genuine needs face less opposition than externally imposed ones.

While most opposition related to the presence of police or paramilitary forces, which was a constant factor in the region, cultural traditions like 'Murga Ladai' (cock fighting), though seen as 'inhuman' by outsiders, were deeply ingrained and a source of tension when external norms were applied. Similarly, administrative mapping of villages sometimes conflicted with the significance of local sites like temples identified by the community. However, according to Akash, the community's resistance was primarily directed at perceived force or imposition, not against development that addressed their actual needs.



Akash and other PMRDF Fellows with
Hon. PM Shri Narendra Modi

Post-PMRDF Journey and Work in the Impact Sector

After completing his three-year PMRD fellowship in 2017, Akash transitioned to working with Avanta Foundation (Sulochana Thapar Foundation) on a project called Saksham, focusing on Maternal, Infant, and Young Child Nutrition (MIYCN). The project involved working with Anganwadi workers and ASHAs. He identified a gap where the project wasn't adequately engaging with the rest of the village machinery, like the Panchayat Raj institutions.

He then designed a convergence project under Saksham. The core idea was to ensure that village leaders (Sarpanch, Panchayat Raj members) were aware of the work ASHAs and Anganwadi workers were doing and, importantly, understood their needs and the needs of the Anganwadi centers. The belief was that unless the local government understood and supported these frontline workers, effective change wouldn't happen. This project involved orienting local officials and developing village-level convergence plans that would be escalated to the block and district levels for approval.

Working outside the government, unlike his PMRDF role where he was part of the system, required a different approach. Building trust with stakeholders was crucial. Foundations like Avanta (part of Ballarpur Industries) sometimes had expectations related to financial contributions, which is a general perception of the CSR sector. He built trust differently, by meeting stakeholders, participating in their activities, conducting visioning and planning workshops, and explaining that he was there not to give money but to help them function better using their own resources. He saw his role as a "machine language translator," converting the needs and language of the community into the language of the administration and vice versa.

He facilitated discussions where Anganwadi workers could articulate their needs (toys, mats, nutrition food). He also highlighted other critical needs, such as a table for vaccination, which would allow health workers to administer injections properly, or proper storage for nutritional supplements. When these needs were voiced collectively by the community and frontline workers, it became difficult for the Gram Sevak or Sarpanch to say no, as it was recognized as a genuine community need. Once the village decided collectively that something was "theirs," they would follow up with the administration themselves.

Akash observed a significant gap in the administrative system: newly appointed IAS officers (like SDMs) in their first postings often lack practical knowledge of ground realities and convergent planning. While they have power, they need orientation and discussion about development work. Sarpanches are often hesitant to approach SDMs due to the power dynamics. He emphasized the need for someone (like external support or NGOs) to engage with these administrators, explain development needs, and involve them in planning. He cites an example of SDM Rahul Kardile in Melghat who actively participated in a workshop, listened, took notes, and integrated the learning into their plan.

Since 2020, Akash has been working with Lend A Hand India. His work here also involves being an external entity working *within* the government system. He leads a team at Lend A Hand India which is placed within the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), where his team reviews books and curriculum developed by SCERT and provides technical and managerial support to the state. Despite being external, they work inside the department offices, handling files and maintaining confidentiality. This presence allows them to contribute effectively without being perceived as complete outsiders. He notes that

working within the department like this makes the work more focused compared to the broader administrative responsibilities in PMRDF.

His recent work at Lend A Hand India also involved a systemic change project in vocational education. Their proposal for systemic change in vocational education was accepted, leading to significant grant funding. He worked on research studies and proposals. When implementing this large grant, a key component was building a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system and team, which he initiated in 2022 and has led since then. He is currently working on how to sustain this systemic change and work effectively with the established system.

One of his most significant contributions has been leading the systemic change in vocational education at Lend A Hand India (LAHI). Beginning in 2020, he helped conceptualise and draft the systemic change proposal that secured multi-year, multi-million-dollar grant funding. Beyond proposal development, his role was to operationalise this vision: embedding LAHI's team within state structures, such as SCERT, aligning vocational education with NEP 2020 and NCF 2023, and ensuring government ownership. In 2022, he established LAHI's Monitoring & Evaluation unit, designing frameworks, dashboards, and processes that enabled evidence-based decision-making across more than 15 states, 15000 schools, 20,000 vocational trainers, and over a million students. This effort transformed vocational education from a "pilot project" mindset into a scalable, state-owned program, bridging NGOs and government systems. The work continues today, ensuring that skill education is no longer peripheral but integrated into India's school system at scale.

In 2024, he started his own firm, *Define Solutions*. This move was motivated by a desire to work on diverse topics beyond vocational education, which was his primary focus at Lend A Hand India. *Define Solutions* aims to collaborate with other NGOs on various projects, such as career counselling, science education, and nutrition, leveraging his accumulated skills and experience. He wants to be "useful" wherever needed, whether in high-level strategic work or more basic tasks like data entry if required. His vision is to help NGOs and the development sector enhance their strategies, program design, impact measurement, and budget management by sharing his experience and skills. He sees his firm as a "Designing Engines For Impactful Nonprofit Enterprises" – a support system to help NGOs elevate their impact.



Team DEFINE Solutions conducting impact evaluation of a project in Melghat region

Throughout this journey, Akash has received strong support from his wife, Advaita, also a JPCEC Alumnus. Advaita herself is a professional in the Development sector and has worked with various organisations like Vigyan Ashram, Vidya Vanam, Khelghar, Pratham, etc. She had also joined Mayur in leading the Narayanpur Open School Project in 2016.

Reflections on the Impact Sector and Coaching Centers

With over a decade of experience in the impact sector, Akash sees it as a "responsible sector" that plays a crucial role in supporting the large administrative structure of the government. There are significant opportunities in this sector, and it requires people from all professions. His current organization employs developers, doctors, fashion experts, and more, each contributing their specialized skills. This contradicts the traditional notion that only those with social work degrees (like MSW) can work in the sector. The job market in this sector is good.

He identifies challenges rather than threats in the sector. A significant challenge is the need for basic professional skills, such as proficiency in Excel and English, which he now requires from potential recruits regardless of their background. He believes individuals need to be ready to acquire these necessary skills.

Ecosystem challenges include changes in grant funding (e.g., reductions from sources like the US, changes to FCRA rules affecting foreign grants) and stricter CSR regulations. These external factors sometimes force NGOs to close programs. Akash believes that NGO managers must adapt to this. He stresses the importance of financial prudence, suggesting that NGOs should limit their dependency on a single funder (ideally below 20%) and

diversify their funding sources, including exploring domestic and retail funding. He feels that lack of basic financial management skills among people from diverse backgrounds in the sector contributes to these problems. Despite challenges, the sector is in demand and legally required for many government programs.

Reflecting on civil services coaching centers like Jnana Prabodhini, where he studied, Akash feels they have evolved over 30 years, with significant learning happening outside the classroom. He suggests that such centers should focus on building skills like research, data understanding, critical thinking (with practical application), and framework development, which are relevant across sectors. He also highlights the need for practical skills like personal financial management, which are not adequately covered despite teaching economics.

He strongly believes that prior work experience benefits civil servants, giving them system knowledge, understanding of people, and humility. He contrasts this with directly entering a high-level administrative role after preparation, which can create a gap in understanding ground realities.

JPCEC in Future

Akash feels that Jnana Prabodhini's true impact might be measured not just by the number of officers it produces compared to centers in Delhi, but by the number of "change-makers" and individuals serving in the development sector. He sees the need for a holistic approach to education that incorporates higher-order skills, professional skills, and values. He questions how institutions like Jnana Prabodhini can influence the current "market-driven" coaching system. He suggests exposing students to social workers' challenges or arranging visits to NGOs. He believes that institutions like Azim Premji University and TISS are currently filling the gap of providing professionally trained individuals for the administration and impact sector, a role that civil services coaching centers could potentially contribute to. He argues that practical experience gained after graduation, perhaps needing only a short period of focused preparation like what centers offer, is invaluable.

Photo Gallery



Akash, his wife Adwaita, also a JPCEC alumnus and daughter, Poorna along with Dr. Vivek Kulkarni and Dr. Savita Kulkarni at Jnana Prabodhini, Pune



Akash leading the Pune chapter of Nexus of Good, receiving award of Best Chapter from senior IAS (retd) Shri. Anil Swaroop, former Union Coal Secretary and founder of Nexus of Good



A candid moment while travelling in the hinterlands of Abujhmad during a regular inspection of the Development Project.



Akash with local school boys of Odisha during the State tour visit of Prerana (UPSC Interview) Batch.



Akash and other officials at the opening of Night Skill College for the local tribal youths in Chhattisgarh.



Akash conducting an on-field survey in a small village of Chhattisgarh during PMRDF Days.