

Jnana Prabodhini Competitive Examinations Centre, Pune.

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

Rohan Katepallewar

- Presently working as Head of Partnerships (India), Youth Impact Organization
- JPCEC Batch -2009
- B.E (Instrumentation), Savitribai Phule Pune University
- Masters in Development Practice, TISS, Mumbai
- Masters in Globalisation, Business & Development, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- Previously worked in Rural Development, Agriculture, Education & other impact sectors.



Rohan Katepallewar is an experienced professional from the Impact sector. He hails from Parbhani. He completed his 10th standard at Bal Vidya Mandir in Parbhani, where he was a meritorious student from the division with aspirations for IIT. However, during his 12th grade, family level exigencies significantly impacted his ability to focus on studies. Despite this challenge, he managed to clear the AIEEE (now JEE Mains exam) entrance exam, allowing him to secure admission for engineering. He pursued Engineering at VIT Pune and graduated in 2008. He was among the university toppers in his Instrumentation branch. Notably, instead of opting for software companies, which were common placements at the time, he secured placements in core companies like Reliance, Emerson, and Siemens. He ultimately joined Emerson Process Management in 2008.

UPSC is the Goal

Around 2007-08, an aspiration for UPSC Civil Services began to form in his mind. He sought guidance on preparing for the civil services exam. He specifically recalls a valuable

interaction at Jnana Prabodhini where Prashant Wadnere (IAS of 2008, currently serving as Special Secretary in Ministry of Finance, Govt of Tamil Nadu) explained the preliminary and main exams in detail. This guidance led him to decide to switch from his job and pursue civil services preparation full-time. He joined Jnana Prabodhini around 2009-10 for this purpose. Although he was not ultimately selected for civil services, he highlights that the values learned at Jnana Prabodhini were profoundly beneficial. He particularly emphasizes that exposure to experts in Prabodhini helped him becoming 'purpose'- driven professional in the coming years.

He recounts that the academic curriculum at Jnana Prabodhini also provided significant benefit. Coming from a technical engineering background, he lacked exposure to social sciences. Studying subjects like Public Administration and Geography, even for exam purposes, proved extremely useful. He states that his study of Public Administration is still very beneficial for him today, helping him understand how the government system works, its moving parts, and how to leverage it to bring about change, particularly when empowering the government system. Geography also remains useful, for example, in understanding the context of various states he is active in, or where his global team comes from. Beyond the curriculum focused on marks, he benefited greatly from the value education sessions, guidance from instructors, and exposure to senior officers who shared their experiences. He feels these experiences were crucial during that phase of life for crafting one's path and understanding potential challenges. He also observed a contrast with some Delhi classes that focused heavily on mark improvement; Jnana Prabodhini, in his experience, emphasized understanding principles and concepts in depth, which he found beneficial in the long term for developing an aptitude. He formally did the full course at Jnana Prabodhini in 2009-10 and stayed in touch through test series and interview batches until around 2012-13. He maintains a deep connection with Jnana Prabodhini and its mentors like Viku Sir and Savita Tai, seeking their guidance even when starting new initiatives.

After not clearing UPSC, he made a transition into the impact sector. He reflects that his end goal became clear during the UPSC preparation process – he realized he didn't want to go back to a conventional engineering job. While pursuing a Master's degree in Development at Azim Premji University, he applied for the Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellowship (PMRDF). Rohan was one of the only 150 fellows selected from the applicants across the nation (2014-2017 batch). He notes that the PMRDF selection pattern during the 2nd batch

was somewhat similar to the UPSC exam pattern, which gave him an advantage during the selection process.

As a PMRDF Fellow, he worked at the district level for two and a half years. His deep understanding of Public Administration from UPSC preparation proved immensely beneficial here, helping him grasp the workings of line departments, staff departments, and the authorities of officials like the Collector and Zilla Panchayat CEO even after their transitions. His direct connection was with the Collector and CEO. The initial months were spent understanding the district administration's dynamics, including state-centre relations, fund flows, and handling the local equation. He emphasizes that his prior study of "Public Administration" was crucial in figuring out his role, identifying gaps, and maximizing his contribution.

He was trained in Balrampur district, but he actually worked in Kabirdham district (formerly Kawardha) in Chhattisgarh. He describes Kabirdham as a district with diverse geography: two blocks were in plain areas, and two were mountainous and tribal. The plain blocks were strong in agriculture (soybean), while the mountainous ones cultivated millets like Kodo and Kutki, whose value wasn't widely recognized then. Kabirdham was also a district where Verrier Elwin, a noted Anthropologist, who worked extensively on the Baiga tribe, had lived. Studying the literature on the Baiga community's cultural heritage and strengths, he aimed to leverage these strengths. He saw the potential in the Millet Value Chain by observing the huge price difference between local markets (₹7-8/kg) and urban markets (₹150-180 for 500g in Chennai). This realization led him to focus on developing this value chain.

The initiative of promoting millet value chain was fraught with multiple challenges. Community members were shifting to rice cultivation owing to ready market availability. The agriculture department acknowledged the importance of millet – there was no existing scheme for its promotion. No one in the district had seen the advanced techniques of millet processing locally. Rohan started tackling the problems one by one. With deep research, he identified the markets in south Indian states and identified a trusted player who can invest in backward chain development of Millets. Direct communication between the entity in Chennai and the farmers helped improve the mutual trust. Farmers started seeing value in continuing with the millet production. Rohan then engaged with several experts in different states of India and discovered a promising machine vendor in Tamil Nadu. With consistent efforts and patience, he managed to secure resources and required support from the Chief Minister (who

unlocked a small fund for this initiative) as well as district leadership. While he established two local millet processing centers in the district with farmer groups, within a year, 60+ such processing centers were operationalized in the state. This multiplier effect of Rohan's initiative – led to the inclusion of this strategy as best practices of Rural Development by MoRD, Government of India. Beyond millets, he also worked in Swachh Bharat and NREGA.

The success of millet value chain development in Kawardha boosted Rohan's confidence. It also helped him realize that similar efforts are possible for multiple hidden commodities in the state. After his two-and-a-half-year tenure at the district level, he became a State Project Manager under the Chattisgarh State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM). This transition was mainly from the objective of scaling multiple value chains through Self-help groups. After visiting multiple districts, he realized that many self-help groups in the state were producing multiple niche products (forest based, farm based, food based) but they seldom got the due market access. It reduces their capability to invest further in standardization and value addition of the products and such lack of income opportunities affects morale of the peer groups as well. In this context, Rohan imagined a market access 'platform' for self-help groups – Bihaan Bazaar. As State Project Manager for Bihaan Bazaar under State Rural Livelihoods Mission (SRLM), he spent around 10-12 months developing a policy to link rural/tribal Self-Help Group (SHG) products to urban markets. He studied successful models like Bhimthadi in Pune, ORMAS in Odisha, and Madhi bazaar in Tamil Nadu to inform the policy framework. He developed three-layered policy models for market linkages: organizing regular state-wide melas for SHGs to help them showcase products (like Bhimthadi), establishing small kiosks at district and block level, and creating permanent setups in prime urban locations across the state (like Madhia bazaar malls).

He recounts the experience of organizing the first Bihaan Bazaar event in Raipur. As it was a first-of-its-kind government initiative, it involved significant effort in navigating government processes and securing funding. Despite the challenges, the event saw tremendous organic growth over its four days. While it was imagined to be a low-key affair initially, the response received was massive - culminating in the Chief Minister attending the closing ceremony. This experience highlighted the effort & perseverance required to initiate unconventional & innovative government projects and the significant impact they can have. He mentions the challenge of securing immediate funds for event logistics, citing an anecdote about needing

cash and getting an ATM van brought in. But when things worked – they worked well at ‘scale’! The success of the event and the policy indicated that it was "here to stay". Subsequently, the policy was streamlined, and a Technical Support Unit (TSU) was hired to work on four to five value chains statewide, a model that is still operational. Realizing the initiative was stable and progressing, he decided to explore other fundamental ways to contribute to the business and impact sector. leading him to pursue a Master's degree.

He mentions that his wife is an IAS officer from Kerala Cadre, and their differing roles provide a unique and valuable dynamics. Her perspective comes from within the system, while his is from the outside i.e., the impact sector. This allows them to have insightful discussions about challenges and opportunities from both sides. He gives an example comparing the healthcare system in his district with the more developed system in Kerala, illustrating generational and systemic differences. He reflects on the contrast between working inside the system (with authority but vulnerable to public opinion) versus working outside (without institutional authority, requiring building equations for encouraging evidence-based decisions, but less vulnerable to direct public criticism). He feels that their combined perspectives help them develop a balanced view. They discuss how to bring-in innovations into the government system, noting the challenges of system capacity. He feels proud of their ability to discuss these complex dynamics from their different vantage points.

To contribute to the business and impact sector in a more fundamental manner and at a policy level, he opted for further education, Masters in Public Policy at Institute of Development Studies, UK. His pursuit of a Master's degree in the UK was a conscious decision to gain theoretical grounding in the development sector. He had significant ground experience by then, but he realized that while practical experience provides a solid understanding, experiences can sometimes limit one's perspective. Global exposure, like his experience in the UK, shows different approaches that have worked (or not worked) in various contexts. He notes that new theoretical concepts in a Master's might not be revolutionary after years of field experience, but understanding methodologies for analysis and problem identification is crucial, especially when working in diverse international contexts. Rohan also worked briefly in an international research consultancy. This stint involved projects based in different countries (Ethiopia, Sudan, India), requiring him to use various research methods to analyze and find solutions for issues like nutrition, highlighting the importance of rigorous and context-blind methods.



Rohan with his batchmates during the convocation ceremony at IDS, UK

Back to India and working at grassroots

Upon returning to India, he explored opportunities where he could contribute. He chose to join Gram Vaani as Director - Partnerships. Gram Vaani is an organization that uses IVR (Interactive Voice Response) technology to develop solutions for communities, which are not connected to the internet. He was interested in applying concepts like complex adaptive systems and adaptive management to communication channels in farmer groups, women groups as well as for teacher + student groups, believing IVR/voice-based channels could be effective. Gram Vaani's core idea was a community media platform where people could contribute information and build forums using voice, leveraging a missed call system so users didn't incur call costs. He helped develop IVR solutions for various use cases, including health, agriculture, and education. He worked extensively in target areas like Bihar and Jharkhand, setting up bidirectional communication channels.



Rohan on the field for promoting farmer centric communication tools during tenure at Gram Vaani.

He details the "Farm Phone" project he led. This project in Chittoor involved developing a channel for mango farmers to share their expected supply quantity and price. Simultaneously, an RWA (Residential Welfare Association) group in Bangalore could share their demand for mangoes. Using algorithms, the system would match supply and demand, sending automated notifications to pick-up logistics providers with farmer coordinates and quantities. This direct connection between farmers and consumers, facilitated by IVR and algorithms, aimed to reduce intermediaries, improve quality checks, and add value. The project, initially funded by BMGF (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), helped develop a solid framework. One of the innovative ideas he worked on was – AI based price prediction models for Soyabean and Groundnut – in order to support decision making of large farmer groups. He also mentions scaling Gram Vaani's user base significantly and contributing across multiple domains like agriculture, education, and an app for motivating the young minds. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they handled up to a million calls, providing information and support on various queries including food, transport, and health.

EdTech Company - Mindspark

After CoVID – Rohan started working in a mission driven EdTech company- Educational Initiatives - to promote RCT proven product – Mindspark. It is a personalized adaptive learning solution, which ensures that student's mis-concepts are addressed through questions and practice. He became in charge of strategic projects, wherein 200k students from government & affordable private schools in 10+ states were using the Mindspark regularly. The idea was to work with the government institutions on a non-financial basis and offer students a world-class learning solution for better learning outcomes. He also partnered with global researchers to optimize the EdTech roll out model.

At various stages of the career trajectory, Rohan addressed the challenge of scaling small projects into policy and ensuring their sustainability. He agrees that many small-scale experiments struggle to become large-scale or sustainable. He explains that achieving generalizability requires effort at multiple levels: experimenting to establish a basic model, refining it through pilots in different conditions and regular optimization for its 'sustainability'. One of the methods that can support this process is – A/B tests. A/B tests are often referred to as rapid RCTs. They are quick, rigorous and support practitioners in optimizing the programs for scale. This method is being adopted world-wide to ensure effectiveness of the program at scale with smaller but successive tweaks for efficiency.

Sustainability often depends on embedding the initiative within existing systems or having strong organizational commitment. He gives examples of successful, sustained projects like Jeevika's IVR system in Bihar and a soybean price prediction project funded by Google. He stresses that adapting solutions from one context or commodity to another (e.g., value chain of mangoes viz-a-viz lentils) requires significant effort due to differing life cycles and equations. He uses his current work, where he leads Youth Impact in India on the ConnectEd Program as an example of this multi-level refinement process, piloting it in Karnataka after experiences in other countries before scaling it state-wide.



Rohan conducting a visit to a school in Chitradurga, Karnataka under ConnectEd Program.

Currently, he works at Youth Impact, an international organization active in ten countries. He heads India operations. Youth Impact collaborates with renowned research and implementation team like J-PAL, What Works Hub (supported by FCDO, UK) & Agency fund (supported by OpenAI) as well as government partners. The ConnectEd program focuses on foundational numeracy among grade 3 to 5 students. As a knowledge partner to the Government of Karnataka, Rohan is supporting the department covering a million children during the current Academic year (2025-26) and help improve numeracy involving about 50,000+ teachers. He describes it as a low-cost, high-impact model, with its impact acknowledged globally, demonstrating its effectiveness. He is leading this large-scale implementation across Karnataka, which was announced by the Chief Minister.



Rohan with With Karnataka Finance Secretary and Noam Angrist Academic director of **‘Whats Works Hub’** for Global Education.

He highlights how his previous experience in developing AI tools for automated assessments of hand-written papers are being leveraged in the current program too. The AI tool helps teachers digitize the hand-written information with just a simple photo and submit it in quick time in a central database. It helps tracking progress of the students seamlessly at block, district, and state levels. While these experiments are still in the experimentation stage, Rohan notes that while some of these concepts exist in for-profit ventures, he chose to pursue this application within the not-for-profit, impact sector.

Discussing a career in the impact sector, he notes that individuals have varying aspirations. Some may want to work deeply within a community, establishing a school or initiative and focusing on impacting a specific group's life. Others may aim to scale a change broadly. A third path, which he chose, involves working with the system to empower the government to effect change. He explains that this choice was influenced by his background and a strong belief in the state's role in development. He contrasts this with a private-oriented approach, using an analogy of transport options in different cities to illustrate the difference between relying on private services versus leveraging strong state-provided infrastructure. He emphasizes his conviction that the state should be a stronger player in development as it has immense potential to play the role of an equalizer. His path has consistently involved working with or enabling the government system rather than focusing on pure consulting or purely outside-system interventions.

Looking towards the future, he acknowledges that some things are unknown, but he plans for them. He reflects on his diverse experiences and the self-awareness gained. He sees a clear

path forward in continuously improving his own capacity. He has recently completed a foundational course in AI to contribute to this rapidly changing field. He sees AI as a tool to bridge capacity gaps in the system, something he observes first hand. He is contributing to exploring how AI can benefit communities at the last mile, even if the full extent of its impact is yet unknown. He notes that working with the state involves dealing with inertia, rules, and diverse interests, which can be frustrating but is part of the process.

Finally, reflecting on Jnana Prabodhini's role after 30 years, from his perspective as an alumnus working outside the core civil services path, he suggests focusing on three key streams. While acknowledging that the leadership is already forward-thinking, he feels these streams are important.

1. Continue catering to the core MPSC/UPSC aspirants in the established "Jnana Prabodhini way". This is a core strength that should not stop.
2. Provide guidance and a forum for students who do not clear the exams (Plan B/C). Many students fall into this category, and they need support to discover the 'right' path.
3. Help students who come with diverse existing skills (e.g., medical, engineering) to leverage those skills. Graduates often feel lost and need mentorship and guidance to figure out how to apply their existing capabilities.

He believes the first stream is a stronghold for Jnana Prabodhini. Developing the second & third stream is crucial for addressing the evolving needs and diverse skill sets of today's youth. He expresses confidence that Jnana Prabodhini will work on these aspects

Photo Gallery



Rohan, his wife Mrunmai Joshi (IAS & Alumnus of JPCEC) along with Dr. Vivek & Dr. Savita Kulkarni.



Rohan with Dr. Vivek Sir and Dr. Savita tai during a Alumni Melava at Delhi in June 2025 on the occasion of Tridashakpurti of JPCEC.



Rohan during a workshop at Nairobi, which he conducted to explain A/B Tests in Social Impact Space.



Rohan with other officials reviewing the ConnectEd Program at Yadgir, Karnataka.



Rohan at Govt school, Mohali - with Sridhar, CoFounder of EI, ensuring uptake of evidence driven Mindspark deployment.



Glimpse of ongoing Mindspark initiative in remote schools of Himachal Pradesh.