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# Chitrakoot Rural Immersion Programme

An interdisciplinary engagement with Rural Realities and Grassroots Development

PPE Batch 2025 | O.P. Jindal Global University

## What took us there

We, the 2025 batch of PPE went to Chitrakoot between 2-6 April 2026 with our theoretical frameworks and our understanding of 'development'. We left with those frameworks deepened, revised and in some places - quietly dismantled. That is, perhaps, the most honest thing that can be said about what this immersion gave us. Chitrakoot is one of India's most spiritually layered landscapes, and beneath its devotional surface lies a complex developmental reality: tribal and agrarian communities navigating forest rights, water scarcity, livelihoods, and the chronic gap between what the state promises and what it delivers. The Deendayal Research Institute (DRI)- our host, guide, and in many ways our most important teacher, has spent decades embedded in this reality, and it was through their eyes, their networks, and their relationships that we engaged in this immersion programme.



## What DRI showed us about development

DRI, founded in 1968 by Rashtrarishi Nanaji Deshmukh on the philosophy of *Integral Humanism*, offered us something we had not encountered before in a classroom: a coherent, living alternative to the development model we had been taught to analyse. Their *swavlamban* (self-reliance) approach insists that development must address the whole person: body, mind, intellect, and spirit and cannot be reduced to income gains or caloric intake. Their Samaj Shilpi Dampatis, Social Architect Couples who live within the communities they serve, embody an institutional commitment that most organisations only write about. Before we visited a single village, DRI's own orientation session on Integral Humanism reframed our entire lens: we stopped asking whether a programme was efficient and started asking whether it was *just, dignified, and rooted*.

## Har Med Pe Ped: Water Conservation

### What community labour makes visible

The Har Med pe Ped watershed sites, where field bunds, plantation rows, and check dams have reshaped the terrain over years of collective effort, gave us one of the most visually striking encounters of the immersion. What moved us most was not the engineering but the ownership. This landscape had been built by the people who live within it, using knowledge they possess. DRI staff were candid about the complexity of implementation: whose land, whose labour, whose prior informal arrangements had been accommodated or disrupted. That candour itself was instructive. Development, we saw here, is never only a technical intervention. It is always also a political one, redistributing access, reshaping relationships, and reconstituting the terms on which communities relate to the land they depend on.



## Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Majhgawan Whose knowledge counts?

Walking through the KVK's demonstration fields, we found ourselves confronted by a question we had not expected to be asking: *whose knowledge counts here?* The crops grew in neat rows, the training schedules were clear, the programme logic coherent and yet the farmer beside us described soil variations within a single plot that no manual had accounted for, seasonal micro-climatic shifts the model could not incorporate, intercropping arrangements tied to credit relationships and social obligations that the extension officer had never asked about. This was not a failure of the programme's sincerity. It was something more uncomfortable: the realisation that institutional knowledge, however well-designed, remains constrained and leaves things out. What gets left out in Majhgawan, we understood, is not incidental. It informs the relationship between farmers and their land.

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## Ram Darshan

At DRI's cultural museum on the Mandakini, we encountered something unexpected: an indigenous theory of governance, depicted through paintings and bas-reliefs was not presented as mythology but as a framework for ethical statecraft, social responsibility, and the duty of the powerful toward the vulnerable. It prompted us to ask: what would policy look like if it began here, rather than in a planning commission?

## Krishnadevi Vanvasi Balika Awasiya Vidyalay Dignity as a development outcome

Nothing in the theoretical literature prepared us for the learning experience of visiting the tribal girls' residential school. In a region where girls' education is constrained by geography, poverty, and deeply entrenched norms, what DRI has built here is not merely a school, it is a statement about who deserves to be educated, and on whose terms. The girls we encountered were confident, articulate, and completely at home in a space that had been built for them. We left asking a question we had not arrived with: what does it mean for an institution to produce *dignity*? Not as a metric, not as an output, but as a daily, lived reality for young women who might otherwise have had none of this?



## Batohi Village: Forest Rights Act

### The distance between a right and its realisation

We arrived in Batohi knowing about the Forest Rights Act. We left understanding, for the first time, what it actually means to try to exercise it. Community members described the process: boundary maps, occupancy evidence, identity records, testimonial affidavits, verified through a succession of sub-divisional and district-level committees not as a legal process but as an ordeal. What made it navigable, where it had been navigated at all, was DRI. Their staff had the institutional literacy to translate between community experience and bureaucratic requirement to know which office, which form, which queue. Without that mediation, the rights the law confers would remain aspirational. Batohi made us ask something we could not easily answer: if a right requires an intermediary organisation to exercise it, was it ever really designed to reach the people it was written for?

## SHINE Village: PRA & Tribal Economy

### What participation can and cannot hold

The Participatory Rural Appraisal' session at SHINE village was one of the most methodologically instructive experiences of the immersion and honest about its own limits. Community members mapped their own resources, named their own priorities, and articulated their own understanding of their economy. There was genuine engagement from all. And yet, watching the session closely, we noticed issues that could not easily fit into the exercise's categories: a dispute over forest access that shaped everything but appeared nowhere on the map, a woman who answered a question differently each time it was asked, not out of confusion but out of a reality that resisted reduction. Participation, we came to understand, is not just a method. It is also a frame and what falls outside the frame remains, in some institutional sense, unseen.



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## Happiness & Spirituality Index Survey

### Measuring what mainstream development ignores

Conducting DRI's Spirituality and Happiness Index in village households gave us an encounter with measurement itself, with what it means to try to capture inner peace, community solidarity, and spiritual well-being in numbers. Some respondents engaged the questions with striking familiarity: in a region shaped by deep devotional traditions, questions about spiritual experience were not strange. Others answered in ways the categories could not hold. One respondent, asked about community belonging, paused and then narrated a multi-season dispute over water access that had fractured the village. The answer did not fit the scale. But it told us far more about belonging, conditioned by resource scarcity, and historical grievances than any number could. That moment, more than any other, showed us the irreducible gap between what an instrument is designed to receive and what a life actually contains.

### Cultural Evening

The Ganga Aarti on the Mandakini that evening was a reminder we needed: that communities are not development subjects to be studied. They are living, meaning-making worlds and no analytical framework, however sophisticated, fully contains captures that.



### Human Moments

#### The lessons that arrived unannounced

The most lasting things from this immersion were not on the schedule. A small child we met during a village survey composed, warm, and quietly generous in a way that defied their age, taught us something about hospitality and dignity that no seminar had. The family surveys and household interactions that followed were unscripted and often moving: people who opened their homes and their lives to us, speaking honestly about what they had, what they lacked, and what they valued. These moments are not footnotes to the academic content. They *are* the content, the irreducible human reality that all governance is ultimately accountable to.

### What we carry back

#### On learning from the ground up

Chitrakoot gave us something that classrooms cannot fully replicate: the experience of being wrong in front of the evidence. We had studied forest rights and then we met someone for whom the rights existed only because they were claimed through organisational effort and know-how. We had studied participatory development and then we watched a community answer questions in ways no framework had anticipated. We had studied well-being measurement and then a respondent turned a survey into a story that made the survey feel insufficient.

None of this means our frameworks were wrong. It means they are answerable to something larger than themselves. Governance in Chitrakoot is not a problem to be solved or a success to be celebrated, it is a dense, contested, ongoing encounter between institutional ambition and the irreducible complexity of real lives. DRI has been in that encounter for decades, with patience and integrity. We were in it for four days. We are grateful for every hour.



*We went with frameworks. We returned with a more complicated relationship to them, not because they failed to illuminate what we observed, but because the empirical texture of the field consistently exceeded what any single framework could fully accommodate.*

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