



JAVED ABIDI FELLOWSHIP

# ARISE, AWAKE, AND LEARN BY APPROACHING THE WISE

PEOPLE APART, ...  
later inclusion both ...  
through sport is a ...

## **NCPEDP - JAVED ABIDI FELLOWSHIP**

Prepared by

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# BACKGROUND

Nikhileshwar Gugnani, 22 years old, hails from Nagpur, Maharashtra, and was raised in Betul, Madhya Pradesh, a tribal-dominated district renowned for its rich heritage and vibrant traditional life. Growing up in Betul within a joint family as a child cultivated in him a deep appreciation for both the collective approach to life as well as the diversity of perspectives that it entails.

Nikhileshwar categorizes his journey in 4 contrasting yet complimentary phases:

Phase One: Since birth, he faced early rickets and locomotor difficulties, compounded by sinus infections that affected his speech until the age of 7. Initially, the physiotherapy and audiology treatments that were recommended were not readily accessible after relocating from Nagpur to Betul. Consequently, his parents chose acupuncture therapy, a decision that unexpectedly facilitated his speech development, albeit with a hypernasal tone. Despite these challenges, their perseverance and the effectiveness of alternative treatments marked a pivotal turning point toward positive progress in his overall development.

Phase Two: The second phase was formative, as early schooling was largely absent due to hindrances in his speech and other health issues. During the Phase One cycle, at around 6-7 years old, he often felt scrutinized for being different. However, later in this phase, his parents helped him in perceiving challenges as acquiring immunity, instilling in him a valuable lifelong lesson in miniature format and inspiring him to strive for personal growth.

As the saying goes, "When we strive to become better than we are, everything around us also improves." In pursuit of the stepping stones to pave his path, after undergoing a series of surgeries and a recovery period spanning over two years, Nikhileshwar expressed his eagerness to return to school sooner than recommended by the hospital, particularly motivated by observing his brothers and other students. He began pursuing his education, starting from the basics, and after 5 long years, he managed to bridge the gap by working harder than what was expected or advised for his health condition. To compensate for irreparable losses, he skipped a few classes to maintain age vis-a-vis development.

Phase Three: This phase mirrors the second phase in its journey towards a sustainable career, but this time, he had no fallback support. The main difference was his self-management and personal commitment despite his increasingly debilitating disability.

After completing his 10th grade from his hometown, he pursued further education at a boarding school and later at the University of Delhi. These transitions were navigated independently while he coped with his progressing disability.

Boarding life was well-managed both personally and professionally. During this period, he filled his academic gaps effectively. Nikhileshwar also delved into various extracurricular activities, exploring a wide range of interests. Despite his disability posing challenges in every extracurricular activity he pursued, he managed to participate and complete them to a reasonable extent. He may not have mastered any particular activity, but demonstrated competence across multiple fields—a classic case of being a jack of all trades and master of none.

For instance, in swimming, which he found particularly enjoyable, his disability limited the ability to rotate his neck, restricting him to competing in 24-meter races. Even after completing college and boarding school, he is still steadfastly on a quest to find a hobby that suits and excites him.

Phase Four: During this period, he experienced harassment at college. Fortunately, a few senior members of the student union supported and empowered him, helping to push the Anti-Ragging Committee to take action against the perpetrator. Before joining the Atal Incubation Center at NITI Aayog, Nikhileshwar had never considered working in the developmental sector or social services. It was there that he had the opportunity to collaborate with an NGO. This combination of personal and professional experiences allowed him to explore opportunities beyond the corporate sector and engage in the developmental sector.

Nikhileshwar graduated from Hansraj College with honors in Economics (2022 batch) and is currently preparing for the Civil Services Examination. During the initial years of his graduation journey, he gained diverse experience in a variety of roles such as: Research Assistant at Atal Incubation Center, Project Associate at Aravali Education Society, and Javed Abidi Fellow on Disability at NCPEDP. Currently, he manages Brahma Warehousings in Betul.

Later on, pursuing higher education and entering the workforce taught him invaluable lessons in financial management, the art of making sacrifices to achieve goals, the importance of setting small milestones while nurturing big dreams, and finding joy in life's simple pleasures. A guiding philosophy that has consistently inspired him to persevere through challenges is encapsulated in the Sanskrit verse "उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान निबोधत" ("Arise, awake, and learn by approaching the wise").

He served as an NCPEDP-Javed Abidi Fellow and curator of Disability Cult(ure), empowering students with disabilities through inclusive higher education.

# PROGRESS OVERVIEW

## **NOVEMBER 2021 TO APRIL 2022**

- Nikhileshwar conducted an In-Person Survey of Colleges and Schools for assessing the status of accessible resources. The survey was conducted in three colleges within Betul Block to assess the status of inclusive education, enrollment rates, and literacy among students with disabilities. Additionally, it included inquiries about employment opportunities and government services, aiming to develop an inter-sectoral plan.
- Similar benchmarks were applied to gather data on educational access and statistics in prominent Central Universities across India. This was done to prepare the Baseline Report.
- He organized a Disability Awareness Class & Addition of volunteers to the “दिव्यांग कल्याण मंच”. The awareness class created a ripple effect in spreading insights on accessible education and equal opportunity. Further, this also helped him in implementation and contacting the administration for providing the services to Students with Disabilities. - <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjEDEujhq-0/?next=%2Fdisability.cult%2F>
- He established Disability Related Service Center In 3 Colleges Of Betul. He presented a memorandum to the college administration advocating for the implementation of the UGC 12th Plan. Unfortunately, the scheme was halted by the authorities, resulting in an unsuccessful outcome. Despite this setback, he established an informal network to facilitate disability-related services
- - [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cviriq\\_yPWN/?next=%2Fdisability.cult%2F](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cviriq_yPWN/?next=%2Fdisability.cult%2F)
- - [https://www.instagram.com/p/CtWJRIVIUdz/?next=%2Fdisability.cult%2F&img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CtWJRIVIUdz/?next=%2Fdisability.cult%2F&img_index=1)

- Nikhileshwar filed petitions for accessible election polling booths. The research and meetings with officers concerned were successfully completed. However, the implementation process is impending due to the postponement of elections. - [https://www.instagram.com/p/CvqGPIMS58L/?next=%2Fdisability.cult%2F&img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CvqGPIMS58L/?next=%2Fdisability.cult%2F&img_index=1)
- He established a platform for Students with Disability (India's 1st platform exclusive for disabled students and by disabled students). The platform named '[Disability Culture \(DisabilityCult\)](#)' serves students, faculty, and all stakeholders associated with universities and colleges. It embraces disability as a vital aspect of our diverse community and empowers students to advocate for inclusive, accessible, and supportive learning and working environments on campus, in alignment with Union, State, and University Grant Commission (UGC) regulations. They have received confirmation letters from three students who are interested in establishing a DisabilityCult chapter at their college.

## **MAY 2022 TO OCTOBER 2022**

- Nikhileshwar prepared the Baseline Study report which explores and constructs the theme of empowering students with disabilities through inclusive higher education. It explores various dimensions within it, examining government initiatives, college-level efforts, the transition to tertiary education and employment, and the role of student-centric organizations. The primary inferences drawn from the study are as follows:
  - 1.The study responses showed that 32.7 per cent of all respondents are aware of their rights. The figure rises to 75 per cent for respondents from urban areas. However, only 6.6 per cent from both, rural and urban areas, have pursued litigation or activism action against discrimination faced by them or for the aggrieved person.
  - 2.It was found that only 39% of the sample group received training in effectively using assistive devices. Such training is crucial as it empowers individuals with disabilities to pursue independent learning and livelihood opportunities.
  - 3.According to the study, 25 students enrolled in central universities and private institutions are able to benefit from cells/clubs/societies/NGOs/associations. And six students are unaware of any kind of such facility.
- He prepared an appraisal report on University of Delhi - Enabling Unit website.To ensure the creation of a comprehensive informational website for the University i.e. the website content should extend beyond academic notifications to enrich the students' college experience. This includes uploading internship opportunities and information about accessible marketplaces near the college.



- He wrote a letter to the Ministry of Finance for ensuring equitable reservation for Locomotor Disability in the Indian Economic Service examination - Examination have reserved seats only for visually impaired candidates. Contacting the concern authorities for a reason) -
- Detailed petition in the link: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tmG0kMwCPZm\\_V4I2X3KJXYp-XL6ZMrAcGwkcxuM3p84/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tmG0kMwCPZm_V4I2X3KJXYp-XL6ZMrAcGwkcxuM3p84/edit)
- He presented at a roundtable conference on vocational training, organized by "MUSKAAN PAEPID"

### **NOVEMBER 2022 TO APRIL 2023**

- Nikhileshwar wrote several articles and conducted case studies (including story) to proliferate knowledge and awareness amongst the masses about the discourse of disability, especially disability amongst students.
  1. Building a proper connection among SwDs and Students without Disabilities
  2. Report from ground zero - lives and livelihood of marginalised areas:
  3. "Disability Visibility in Leadership" : Aman Singh's Inspiring Journey to Student Council Victory -
- Interaction/field visit with the following:
  1. Campus learning of each department at NIEPVD - [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv-PD1HJsYR/?next=%2Fdisability.cult%2F&img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv-PD1HJsYR/?next=%2Fdisability.cult%2F&img_index=1)
  2. Field visit to GOONJ
  3. Visit at Padhar Hospital, Betul for learning from their Shifa Campaign (for learning disability)

These field visits at different NGOs or institutions helped Nikhileshwar to learn experiences of different segments of social work, explore the different aspects that can be implemented in his work, and also help in networking.

## **MAY 2023 TO OCTOBER 2023**

- Participation of Students with Disabilities in Activism and Students leadership
- Amendments in Lyngdoh Committee Notification
- Introduce '(Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) DEI Manager' Designation in Universities Students Union
- Include Compensatory and Reasonable accommodation in the Lyngdoh Committee for Students with Disability
- Awareness to Students with Disability on their [voting rights](#).
- Ensuring accessibility in Elections of Delhi University Colleges.
- Nikhileshwar was selected for the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum Leadership Course. This remarkable opportunity comes as a part of the Commonwealth Year of Youth, and Nikhileshwar is honored to be among the 9 candidates chosen from India to take part in this transformative journey. "This course not only symbolizes personal growth but also aligns perfectly with my passion for making a positive impact in the disability sector".
- Nikhileshwar mentioned a special thanks to [@ncpedp\\_india](#), Arman sir & Sumit sir for their unwavering support and for introducing him to the vibrant world of the disability sector.
- Nikhileshwar Gugnani, a Javed Abidi Fellow, was awarded the prize for their piece on campaigning for [civic participation of youth with disabilities](#)
- He was interviewed by RadioUdaan at BadaltaDaur . In the episode, Nikhileshwar delved into the theme of his work: "Empowering Students with Disabilities Through Inclusive Higher Education." He shares insights and findings from his research, which explores various dimensions of inclusive higher education, including government initiatives, college-level efforts, the transition to tertiary education and employment, and the pivotal role of student-centric organizations. Discover the challenges and opportunities in creating an inclusive environment for students with disabilities - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39YV5-yoZ9o>

# ACHIEVEMENTS

- Nikhileshwar was selected for the [Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum Leadership Course!](#)
- National Winner at Social Narration Challenge by Institution Innovation Council- Ministry of Education  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/C65RiCIJmQI/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/C65RiCIJmQI/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==)
- Finalist at Case competition by IRSC, an initiative with Ministry of Road Transport & Highways, Govt of India
- Top 5 Finalist at [Case competition by State Bank of India](#), organized by Faculty of Management Studies

Please click on [Impact and Policy Change](#) for details.



# EXPERIENCE IN THE FELLOWSHIP

During his fellowship, Nikhileshwar undertook significant initiatives to promote disability inclusion and accessibility in education. Conducting in-person surveys in Betul and central universities, he assessed and aimed to improve the status of accessible resources and inclusive education for students with disabilities. He organized disability awareness classes and established Disability Related Service Centers in three colleges. Although the UGC 12th Plan was halted, he created an informal network to facilitate disability-related services. His petitions for accessible election polling booths and the establishment of the platform 'Disability Cult(ure)' showcased his dedication to empowering students with disabilities.

Through these activities, Nikhileshwar experienced substantial personal growth, developing resilience, leadership, and advocacy skills. His efforts resulted in increased awareness and dialogue about disability inclusion, and while not all initiatives were immediately successful, they laid the groundwork for future improvements. The fellowship reinforced his commitment to creating an inclusive society and demonstrated his ability to drive meaningful change despite challenges.

# RESOURCES

**Follow Nikhileshwar's  
work on their social media**

