

Abhyudaya

Creating opportunities for growth for under-resourced urban students

Mumbai is famously known as ‘the city of dreams’, even as it houses dense urban settlements. In its low-income housing, entire families share 10x10-foot rooms. Birth certificates, when they exist, often show only January 1 or June 1 as birth dates: placeholders rather than truths. Documentation is scarce, parents work multiple jobs and children study by streetlight when electricity fails. Students in these communities are academically capable, but their potential is constrained: not by ability, but by information gaps, limited social capital and economic vulnerability.

It was to bring opportunities to these students' aspirations that Abhyudaya was conceived in 2008 by Dr M L Shrikant, Honorary Dean of the S.P. Jain Institute of Management & Research (SPJIMR), an institute located in Mumbai's Andheri West. He also observed that India's management education had long focused on technical competence and yet the question of what makes an effective leader extends beyond analytical skills. Within SPJIMR, the presence of management students from diverse backgrounds created a context for an individualised mentorship programme that could strengthen support systems for under-resourced students while cultivating socially conscious leaders.

The programme was thus designed at this intersection: to provide supportive environments to high potential children from municipal schools in Mumbai's K-West ward (suburban Andheri West), home to over 7,00,000 people, while engaging management students in sustained, community-rooted mentorship.

Today, Abhyudaya operates as a community-focused initiative embedded within SPJIMR, serving approximately 360 students annually. In addition to providing daily after-school enrichment in multiple subjects, the programme also pairs each first-year Post Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM) student at SPJIMR with a child, known as a 'Sitara' (star), for an entire academic year, spanning their academic journey from Grade 7 through the first year of post-school education, whether it is an undergraduate degree or vocational skills training. For SPJIMR's students, this is a mandatory two-credit course worth 40 hours of engagement, including seven home visits by mentors and two campus visits for the Sitaras.

Since 2008, Abhyudaya has supported 1016 Sitaras and engaged 4046 PGDM students.

The families Abhyudaya works with are largely working households supported by modest and often informal livelihoods. Primary earners typically work as drivers, domestic workers or skilled technicians; others run small shops, work construction sites or are self-employed. Many families are first-generation urban migrants navigating an unfamiliar city system without the social networks that make it legible. Most primary earners have not completed secondary school and with an average monthly household income of ₹25,164 against expenses of ₹26,556, families operate within narrow financial margins. Despite this, they consistently prioritise their children's education and sustain participation in a programme that asks a great deal of everyone under the roof. These realities shape schooling choices, mobility and timelines and inform, in concrete ways, how Abhyudaya designs its support.



“This is not tutoring. This is not charity. This is growing together.”

Arati Nagaraj, Programme Director

At its core, Abhyudaya rests on a simple insight: *academic potential is widespread, but opportunity is unevenly distributed*. By identifying motivated students, holistically supporting their journeys and building sustained mentoring relationships, the programme seeks to ensure that aspiration and effort translate into expanded educational and life pathways.

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL THROUGH SUSTAINED OBSERVATION

Abhyudaya’s selection process for Sitaras is designed to assess sustained commitment and family support over an entire year, rather than relying on a single entrance exam. This approach reflects a key learning from the programme's history: academic potential alone does not ensure that a student can thrive in a seven-year journey that requires consistent engagement, family commitment and motivation to access the opportunity.

Outreach, Screening and Selection

The process begins with outreach to over 50 schools in the K-West ward. More than 300 children in Grade 5 are nominated annually through teacher recommendations. From this pool, approximately 225 appear for a written aptitude test: Raven’s Progressive Matrices consisting of 60 marks across five sections. The test is puzzle-based, assessing logical reasoning and problem-solving rather than curriculum knowledge.

Sections A, B and C cover foundational skills; sections D and E are progressively harder. Evaluation of papers begins within ten minutes of completion. Students who meet the cutoff are invited for immediate interviews. This entire process is conducted in person at the SPJIMR campus in a single day.

The interviews are conducted in small groups of four to six children with two interviewers present. The presence of other peers reduces anxiety amongst children and allows evaluators to observe social interaction, communication comfort and problem-solving approaches in a more naturalistic setting. The team assesses not just answers, but how children engage with one another, whether they show curiosity and how they respond to gentle challenges. Critically, the final grade maps both test performance and age-to-grade appropriateness. In government schools, for instance, one may encounter a 14-year-old and an 11-year-old both studying in Grade 5. The former faces different developmental and contextual challenges than the latter, though they are in the same grade. This nuance informs whether a child is selected for the next stage: Pre-Sitara.

Pre-Sitara: A Year of Observation and Commitment

From the initial 225 test-takers, 100-120 are invited to join Pre-Sitara, a year-long weekend programme held each Sunday at the Abhyudaya centre housed within SPJIMR. Even after this rigorous filtering, the programme retains a larger cohort than the final requirement, as dropouts are anticipated due to waning engagement over the year, given the programme's demand for continued and rigorous commitment. By year's end, 40-70 Pre-Sitaras get selected as Sitaras to begin their Abhyudaya journey.

The Pre-Sitara programme runs every Sunday from 7:45 AM to 12:45 PM, July through March. Children primarily attend three classes: Spoken English, Foundational Mathematics and Science, and Social Skills. The programme works with children from eight different language medium schools, including English, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, Gujarati, Tamil and Kannada. Pre-Sitara, however, is not solely an academic intervention. It is an observational period. The Abhyudaya team tracks attendance, family engagement patterns, behavioural shifts and motivation.

“Monday to Saturday, they are in regular school, right? Despite this, coming on a Sunday every week shows that the child has that urge to strive for something more.”

Shenaz Halai, Programme Team

There are many instances of deep dedication from both students and parents. One morning, for instance, a mother arrived with her son, whose leg had been fractured just two days earlier. The family had come by bicycle because the boy refused to miss class. What the programme offers is certainly a great opportunity and yet to access it also requires great dedication, shared among multiple family members.

“Sundays stopped being holidays and became days for personal development. The mindset that you must do something different and grow beyond your surroundings has stayed with me till today.”

Abhyudaya Alum, Batch 10



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Before the year's end, the Abhyudaya team also conducts visits to each Pre-Sitara home, primarily to ensure accessibility and feasibility of continuity in home visits over seven years. One final stage of observation occurs in the summer: a 20-day intensive camp in April-May, precisely when many families migrate back to their native villages. The camp invites students to come to the SPJIMR campus every day and offers sports, arts, lectures and other similar enrichment activities. Its complete goal, however, is also to affirm student commitment and provide engagement opportunities in a time when many students may disengage from learning due to breaks from school.

Through this year-long process, approximately 40-70 children become Sitaras and join the after-school programme for Grades 7-10.

RELATIONAL MENTORING THAT BUILDS IDENTITY AND ASPIRATION

At the heart of Abhyudaya lies a mentoring relationship that extends far beyond academic guidance. Each Sitara is paired with a first-year PGDM student from SPJIMR, creating a sustained human connection that supports the child's growth through adolescence and into early adulthood. Over time, these relationships become a source of trust, stability and aspiration.

Designing Compatibility for Meaningful Mentorship

Mentors enter Sitara homes and become part of a child's life. Compatibility is therefore treated as a core design consideration

rather than an administrative task. Each year, the Abhyudaya team manually cross-references 360 Sitara profiles with an equal number of PGDM student profiles. Both complete detailed forms covering languages spoken, school medium, academic background, interests, aspirations and practical constraints, not to find ‘perfect’ matches, but to reduce avoidable friction in long-term relationships.

Gender balance requires flexibility. While there are more female Sitaras, the PGDM cohort has more male students. Younger Sitaras (Grades 7-8) are often paired with male mentors, while same-gender mentors are prioritised for older Sitaras to ensure comfort as they grow, particularly for girls.

Language is treated as an early point of access and mentors are matched with awareness of home language and school medium. By senior secondary school, academic alignment becomes important: students preparing for Commerce pathways, including Chartered Accountancy, are matched with mentors familiar with those routes, while Science students considering engineering receive guidance from mentors with similar academic backgrounds.

“It’s like matchmaking. You don’t meet anyone. You only work with information. And yet, each decision has consequences for how the relationship unfolds.”

Alka Mhatre, Programme Team

Mentors also undergo structured preparation on cultural sensitivity, family engagement and problem-solving before their first visit by way of a lecture by Programme Director Arati Nagaraj.



Building the Didi-Bhaiya Bond

PGDM students are not called mentors. Sitaras address them as *Didi* (elder sister) or *Bhaiya* (elder brother), framing the relationship as familial rather than transactional.

“At first, we hoped I wouldn’t be selected because we felt uncomfortable about having mentors visit our humble home. But once the programme started, it was enjoyable, that guidance was crucial at an age when it’s easy to be influenced in the wrong direction.”

Abhyudaya Alum, Batch 2

Mentorship is deeply personalised and extends beyond academics. Mentors help bridge information gaps and support

decision-making in contexts where families may lack access to guidance networks.

Support varies according to need. One mentor, noticing her Grade 8 Sitara's strong academic ability but weak reading habits and English skills, began reading comics with her to build comfort with texts. Another created a spreadsheet of engineering colleges within a 15-kilometre radius, listing eligibility, fees and placement records so his Grade 12 Sitara could make informed decisions. A different mentor encouraged a student to include her singing in a résumé after recognising it as a strength.

“My Sitara didn't speak much initially, but she showed me her Pinterest boards on architecture and design. I helped her refine her search prompts and taught her about AI and prompt engineering. I realised I can guide her digitally even when I'm not physically there.”

PGDM 2024-26 Sitara Mentor

The mentoring model emphasises how to study over what to study: mentors teach study techniques, time management, problem-solving and information access. For Sitaras, mentors become a compass and a window to a broader world. For PGDM students, the experience is often transformative, building empathy, leadership and problem-solving skills.

Mentors also help students recognise their strengths across academics, arts, sports and leadership, building self-worth and expanding horizons. Conversations about careers, college life and future pathways make unfamiliar possibilities feel attainable while grounding decisions in financial and family realities.

Continuity Through Transition (Hastantaran)

Although mentors change each year, continuity is deliberately designed. Outgoing mentors prepare a detailed ‘Growing Together Report’ documenting academic progress, family dynamics, effective strategies and unresolved challenges, allowing new mentors to begin with a deep understanding of the child’s journey.

<p>What is your [redacted] big dream? (Future plans and help them plan A and Plan B. Why do they want to choose those paths? What do they need to do to reach those dreams? What else can they do?)</p>	<p>[redacted] dreams of excelling in Science & Technology, He is aspiring to become an engineer/scientist!</p> <p>Plan A:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pursuing higher studies, participating in competitive exams, and securing scholarships. <p>Plan B:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore technical skills (digital arts / applied sciences / maths) to build a stable career. <p><i>He is motivated by his love for learning, but he needs mentorship, access to quality education, and improved communication skills to make this a reality</i></p>
<p>What did not work?</p>	<p>Things which didn’t work were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> [redacted] hesitation in public speaking remained a challenge (not sure till when) Family constraints limited access to e-learning tools, slowing his progress in studies. Personal efforts lacked many times from his end due to his busy schedule. Expected pace was not matched and remained slow <p><i>Addressing these issues requires continuous mentorship, different learning methods and also identifying accessible support programs for growth.</i></p>
<p>Any unconventional or innovative methods of mentoring adopted?</p>	<p>To make learning engaging:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role-playing exercises helped me to explain healthcare and financial planning. Video-based learning through YouTube tutorials improved his English comprehension. Experiential learning methods Interactive group activities I held with his neighbourhood friends built confidence and social skills. <p><i>These unconventional methods encouraged [redacted] to learn beyond textbooks, creating a well-rounded approach to education and development of skills while making learning enjoyable and relatable!!</i></p>

Glimpses from a Growing Together Report (prepared by a PGDM Student for a Grade 8 Sitara before Hastantaran)

Each August, Abhyudaya marks this transition through *Hastantaran*, which literally means ‘handing over’, when second-year PGDM students formally pass their Sitaras to the incoming cohort. What the ceremony makes visible is a year of relationship; what remains unseen is the careful design that sustains continuity.

Through these relationships, Sitaras gain more than academic support: they gain role models, advocates and trusted guides. Students describe mentors remaining in touch years later, during exams, college decisions and job applications, reflecting bonds that extend well beyond the formal mentoring year.





HOLISTIC SUPPORT FOR SITARAS’ GROWTH

Abhyudaya recognises that academic ability alone does not determine whether a child can thrive. Students in under-resourced urban communities navigate health concerns, financial pressures, family responsibilities and limited exposure to opportunities. In such contexts, learning gaps are only one part of a larger web of constraints. The programme therefore supports each Sitara’s growth across academic, personal and social dimensions - strengthening foundations while addressing the broader conditions that shape learning.

Daily after-school sessions build core competencies in English, Mathematics and Science while introducing coding, digital learning, general knowledge and exam readiness. This consistent academic scaffolding helps bridge learning gaps, build confidence and enable students to keep pace with formal schooling. Many students describe the regularity and intensity of this support, alongside practical provisions such as uniforms and meals, as critical to building discipline and sustaining aspiration.

“Today, the Abhyudaya team is preparing us for board exams. They are putting in continuous efforts to teach us, guide us and help us perform our best. Their support has given me confidence not only for exams, but for my future as well.”

Sitara, Grade 10

Early programme experience revealed that learning cannot be separated from basic needs. When students brought uneven

or no meals to Sunday classes, disparities became visible and distracting. In response, Abhyudaya introduced structured meal support, ensuring that all students receive lunch during after-school sessions and meals during camps. This simple intervention ensured that all students ate together, reducing visible disparities and allowing them to focus on learning, while contributing to improved attendance and engagement.

Mentors and programme staff respond to everyday challenges, from illness and fatigue to access barriers, recognising their direct impact on attendance and learning continuity. Health camps and regular check-ins help identify issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Group activities and socio-emotional learning sessions are woven into the weekly schedule to build teamwork, self-belief and emotional resilience. Design thinking workshops and creative activities encourage problem-solving and help students see themselves as capable contributors rather than passive learners.

As Sitaras progress into Grades 11 and 12, daily enrichment gives way to monthly check-ins and focused transition guidance, reflecting their evolving needs. Exposure sessions, alumni interactions and career counselling broaden awareness of educational and vocational pathways, while mentors help students weigh aspirations against practical realities.

Abhyudaya collaborates with specialised partner organisations, extending its reach by bringing diverse expertise into the students' learning ecosystem. For instance, Tata Strive offers vocational training; Tech Mahindra Foundation provides healthcare pathways, Magic Bus Foundation supports IT skills; Curiosity Gym runs Design Thinking workshops where Sitaras build circuits, code robots and prototype solutions to real

problems; Creative Vision teaches Abacus and Vedic Maths to younger children; Artscape conducts expressive arts therapy to promote personal development and well-being of students.

“Through one of our partners, a Sitara secured a nursing internship, something her family had never imagined. These partnerships help convert aspirations into practical opportunities.”

Arati Nagaraj, Programme Director

Support continues beyond school through academic guidance, scholarship assistance and personalised transition support. By sustaining engagement into early college and vocational pathways, Abhyudaya helps students navigate critical transitions with clarity and confidence, reducing dropouts and enabling continuity in their educational journeys. For instance, many of the organisations mentioned above offer four to eighteen-month long vocational training, accompanied by on-the-job training and even internship and job placements. Through such engagements, students build practical skills, explore interests and encounter new possibilities.

RIPPLE EFFECTS BEYOND THE SITARA

The programme strongly believes in the potential of each Sitara to create impact within their communities. Abhyudaya balances depth of impact with breadth within the K-West Ward through a unique rule: only one child from each family can become a Sitara. While at first glance this may appear restrictive for children whose siblings have already been a part of the programme, a deeper glance at the on-ground functioning reveals something unique. Mentors, while assigned to focus on the Sitara’s nurturance, have

mentioned interacting with the students' younger siblings and even friends on multiple occasions. The Sitaras themselves also engage in knowledge-sharing with peers in school, based on their learnings from the after-school programme.

“Students are learning science and problem-solving by figuring things out themselves rather than depending entirely on the teacher. They understand that everyone has different strengths, which builds teamwork, just like in a workplace where people contribute different skills. This is our second year in the programme and it has also helped teachers upskill in domains like design thinking, with strong support throughout.”

Principal, local school in the K-West Ward

Additionally, while the programme does not formally enrol multiple students from the same family, it provides learning support to the Sitaras' families regularly. It is not uncommon for Sitara siblings who express motivation to learn more deeply, especially at critical academic thresholds (such as Grade 10 board examinations), to be welcomed to the centre at SPJIMR and be tutored by volunteers from one of the three institutes housed in Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's campus. Nagaraj fondly recalls the story of a mother who, inspired by her Sitara daughter reached out to the Abhyudaya team for support and returned to school education herself.

IMPACT AND LONG-TERM VISION

Since 2008, Abhyudaya has supported 1,016 Sitaras - 56% girls and 44% boys and engaged 4,046 PGDM students from SPJIMR as mentors. The numbers matter, but what they reveal is more consequential than scale: patterns of upward mobility, self-determination and generational change that the structural conditions of K-West ward make improbable and that Abhyudaya has made quietly ordinary.

In a ward where secondary school dropout rates hover around 17%, Abhyudaya's students follow a different trajectory. Nearly 72% of Sitaras from the most recent graduating cohorts are pursuing higher education or vocational pathways, the outcome of sustained relationships that extend beyond the school gate. Pathways remain varied and pragmatic: some pursue degrees in commerce, science or the humanities; others enter nursing, IT or technical trades; many combine study and work to meet household realities. Mentors are trained to offer guidance that is not inspirational in the abstract but grounded in lived constraints: the kind of counsel that helps a student balance ambition with what a family can sustain.

For earlier batches now in the workforce, employment rates range from 54% to 94%. More telling than the percentages is the shift in occupational mobility: children of auto drivers and domestic workers are becoming nurses, teachers, software professionals and commerce graduates. Alumni support younger siblings' education, reshape family expectations and expand what schooling is understood to make possible. One former Sitara is now a faculty member on the same campus where the programme is housed, a year after being steadied through a personal crisis by the team that had known her since Grade 7.

The programme has built infrastructure around these transitions, helping students close the gap between aspiration and action. Several Sitaras have secured full undergraduate scholarships; others have accessed internships and training opportunities their families had never imagined.

The impact flows in both directions. For SPJIMR students, home visits often become the most formative experience of their

education. Recruiters describe graduates as *zara hatke*, shaped, Nagaraj believes, by the experience of sitting with their Sitaras and understanding, perhaps for the first time, what five rupees can actually mean. This is what SPJIMR's founder envisioned: not empathy as a classroom module, but as an experience sustained over time.

In 2024, SPJIMR received the FICCI Award for Excellence in Institutional Social Responsibility, citing Abhyudaya's impact. Within the programme, however, evolution remains constant. Nagaraj describes each year as a new version shaped by what students and families need. In moments of decision, the team returns to a single question: *What is best for the Sitara?* The answer guides choices large and small, from documentation practices that ensure continuity to shared meals that protect dignity. It also shapes the programme's stance on scale. *"There is enough work here,"* Nagaraj says. Going wide is not the point. Going deep is. Yet depth has its own reach. Institutions across cities have expressed interest in replicating the model and Nagaraj's invitation is simple: come and see the work. Understand the community. Build relationships that last.

Her vision remains expansive:

"This needs to become a movement. We need more stars, more constellations, more galaxies."

Arati Nagaraj, Programme Director

Over seventeen years, Abhyudaya has demonstrated that potential is everywhere, opportunity can be built and relationships sustained with care can alter not only a life, but the lives around it.



