

STUDENTS' CORNER

REFLECTIONS

Discovering purpose through NIRMAN: A journey beyond medicine

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Abstract

As MBBS students, we attended the 7-day NIRMAN workshop at SEARCH, Gadchiroli, aimed at inspiring youth towards a purposeful life. Immersed in sessions on public health, ethics, finance, and community engagement, we explored the philosophy of "Arogya Swaraj" and witnessed rural realities during village visits and Shramdan activities. Interactions with mentors, critical readings, and collective reflection fostered introspection, camaraderie, and a renewed sense of responsibility as socially responsive doctors. The workshop transformed our outlook, highlighting that healthcare extends beyond hospitals, and should be rooted in community empowerment and the pursuit of equitable well-being.

Keywords: discovering purpose, SEARCH, NIRMAN, public health

As MBBS students, we have spent the last few years engrossed in textbooks, clinical postings, and the structured world of modern medicine. Yet, something within us always yearned to understand the larger purpose of being a doctor — beyond hospitals and prescriptions. This collective search for meaning led us to Gadchiroli, a tribal region in Maharashtra, where we participated in a unique 7-day workshop titled "NIRMAN — Youth for a Purposeful Life," organised at Shodh Gram, the campus of its parent organisation SEARCH (Society for Education, Action and Research in Community Health). The workshop was coordinated by Amrut Bang, Programme Director of NIRMAN and son of renowned public health experts, Drs Abhay and Rani Bang [1]. We learned of NIRMAN from a peer's brief account, but curiosity and a shared desire to connect medicine with society brought us to Gadchiroli. SEARCH represents far more than a social group. It is a philosophy in action, where the vision of equitable health for underprivileged communities is translated into reality. Through its pioneering work, the organisation strives toward the goal of *Arogya Swaraj* — health in the hands of the people — by empowering individuals and communities to take charge of their own well-being [2]. This philosophy prompted us to critically reflect on the role of community engagement in healthcare. As future doctors, we realised that clinical interventions alone are often insufficient; true health impact requires empowering communities with knowledge, responsibility, and self-efficacy.

Some of the notable milestones of SEARCH include a mass movement against alcohol use (1987–93) [3], a pneumonia management field trial (1988–90) — published in *The Lancet* [4], home-based neonatal care intervention trial (1993–98) —

published in *The Lancet* (1999) [5], and the naming of Drs Abhay and Rani Bang as Global Health Heroes by TIME magazine in 2005 [6].

The calling

The NIRMAN programme was launched by SEARCH in 2006, with a primary goal of cultivating a substantial group of young professionals who are eager to and capable of understanding and tackling pressing social issues [7]. Our motivation for attending NIRMAN stemmed from a collective desire to learn how a social organisation operates at the grassroots level and how those lessons could influence our future as doctors. From the moment we arrived at the serene campus nestled within the forests of Gadchiroli, we were immersed in an environment that was both intellectually stimulating and emotionally grounding. The campus itself, built in harmony with nature, set the tone for the transformative days that followed.

Learning by living

The workshop was meticulously designed to help us internalise the values and principles of a purposeful life. Through a series of structured sessions, we explored themes ranging from the philosophy of service to the operational challenges of running a social organisation. We learned about the framework that sustains SEARCH: its governance model, community engagement strategies, funding mechanisms, and ethical compass. From their strategies in community engagement, we realised that to truly solve a problem, we must first stand where it exists — listen, observe, and learn from those who live it every day. It taught us that proximity, empathy, and participation are as essential as knowledge in creating sustainable health solutions. It challenged our assumptions about financial security and success, highlighting that beyond a threshold, the pursuit of wealth may erode freedom, purpose, and professional integrity. We also engaged in critical thinking exercises that challenged our assumptions about society. These sessions encouraged us to ask deeper questions, consider multiple perspectives, and envision creative solutions to the challenges of life. Several thought-provoking reading sessions further enriched the experience. We discussed curated articles on themes such as public health, ethics, and social issues. One that particularly stayed with us was on the consumption of alcohol, its cultural acceptance, and its devastating public health consequences.

There was also a session on our rights as civilians, where we learned not only about the power of these rights as tools for accountability, but also practised by filling out RTI applications individually. This reframed the idea of the physician as a citizen with leverage to demand system-level accountability — a role we had not been trained for. In the latter half of the workshop came one of the most awaited sessions — an interaction with Dr Abhay Bang. Here, we could freely ask questions and clarify our doubts, ranging from professional challenges to personal dilemmas.

The power of immersion

Perhaps the most profound experiences came from visits to Murmadi and Kathkheda villages, where we witnessed firsthand the realities of rural health — challenges that no textbook could ever fully convey. We observed the widespread use of tobacco and alcohol, the fragile infrastructure, and the immense gaps in accessibility and awareness. We also learned about the community's dependence on agriculture, which in turn relies solely on natural precipitation due to the lack of irrigation facilities. Yet, amidst these hardships, we also saw resilience — people living with dignity, upholding their customs, and adapting in their own ways. These visits reinforced for us that effective healthcare must not only be medically sound but also socially rooted. We also participated in *Shramdan*, an act of voluntary physical labour that instilled humility and solidarity. Working alongside fellow participants and community members, we experienced the dignity of labour and the joy of a shared purpose.

Building bonds and memories

We engaged in various activities — from jungle walks that brought us closer to nature, to songs, games, and community prayers that brought us closer to each other. Each day concluded with reflection sharing, where we articulated our thoughts, emotions, and learnings in a safe and supportive space. These sessions nurtured an essential skill — emotional articulation. We learned to identify and express our own feelings rather than projecting what others might think about us, realising that genuine communication begins with self-awareness. In the spirit of action-oriented reflection, the workshop concluded with a session on crafting our own future plans for the next few months — an exercise in committing ourselves to purposeful steps in both our personal and professional journeys.

Reflections and takeaways

What made NIRMAN stand out was its holistic approach — it wasn't just about healthcare; it was about humanity. It made us introspect about the kind of doctors we want to become — not those confined to clinics, but doctors who engage with society, understand the socio-economic determinants of health, and work to bridge inequities. We realised that meaningful medical practice is not just about curing illness — it is about enabling well-being. It is about listening,

collaborating, and empowering the powerless. While the workshop offered clarity of purpose, it also raised essential questions. How can we reconcile ideals of service with the pragmatic demands of modern medicine? Can a young doctor remain socially responsive without inner transformation? These reflections revealed that purpose is not a fixed goal but a continuous negotiation between values, circumstances, and choices.

The NIRMAN workshop gave us a language for our aspirations and a blueprint for action. It connected us to like-minded individuals, many of whom we now consider lifelong friends. The sense of camaraderie and shared vision was both palpable and energising.

A gratitude-filled goodbye

The experience at NIRMAN was not just a pause from routine; it was a turning point. We left Gadchiroli not with all the answers, but with better questions and a clearer direction. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Amrut Bang and the entire NIRMAN and SEARCH team for an experience that was pedagogic, personal, and proactive. Their work and commitment are a source of inspiration for students like us who aspire to blend service with science. In a world increasingly driven by individual ambition, NIRMAN reminded us of the power of collective purpose. It showed us that healing is not just a profession — it is a way of life.

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