

AFTER A YEAR IN INDIA

by Sachin Chanchani

In October, just two months after arriving in India, I had my first experience with Pratham in the real world. Priyanka, a Pratham staffer, escorted me, my dad and my brother through two different Balwadis.

It was a huge culture shock for me, and I was pretty silent for most of the trip. We first scoured through narrow crevices between buildings and poked our heads into the little houses asking for any kids under the age of six so that we could sign them up for a free balwadi program. We stepped through the most ungodly surfaces to just get through these places, and I loved every minute of it. It was very fun for me, and my love for this kind of adventure extends throughout my stay in India.

To this day, I would rather walk through a slum than take a main road to get to my friend Leo's house just because of how eye-opening it is to see all the different people and the different lifestyle -- and it makes me all the more appreciative of what I have. When we finally climbed the stairs to an old, run-down building, we began to hear the kids learning. The classroom was no more than the size of a closet and there were eight kids and a teacher crammed inside with books, papers and other school supplies.



Although I was shocked at the whole experience, I did take the time to notice a few things. All the kids were engaged in whatever activity was going on at the time; there weren't people refusing to pay attention, being lazy, not giving their best effort, etc. All the negative stereotypical students that I know all too well from my schooling in the US were nowhere to be found! These kids truly were excited,



This is my man, *little Amu*.

He loves math, and when I asked him what he wanted to be when he grows up, he told me with the sweetest grin that he wanted to be a superhero like Krrish!

I met Amu while visiting a Balwadi in Bandra with my school's Community and Social Responsibility (CSR) Club. As I was observing the lesson, Amu and I went about exchanging winks and smiles. He was quick to answer any question the teacher asked, and when a volunteer was needed to speak out loud, Amu was up for the task.

and had a true, deep desire to learn. The teacher was using methods to teach that I recognized from mind-mapping to show ideas related to the festival of Eid. For example, kids connected getting new clothes, holidays and other ideas to the main idea of Eid.

In the next few months, I settled into school and started the very long process of attempting to start a Community and Social Responsibility (CSR) Club at my new school. The idea behind the club was that I could use being at the American School of Bombay to be a link between the donors in the US and the beneficiaries here immersed in the projects -- I would do this through multiple means of communication: blog posts with pictures, vlogs and maybe a skype call.

In March, I demonstrated what the new CSR club would be doing. I visited a preschool in Bandra, took pictures and wrote a blog post. There I met my buddy little Amu, and from that point onwards I had my heart 300% set on doing this. Standing in that classroom, watching the kids learning, I realized that I was witnessing the foreshadowing of a brighter future for India as a whole.

After March, I focused on exams, and when school ended, I interned at the Pratham office. My task was to standardize more than 70 Facebook pages. This involved mainly calling the different staff from all the states Pratham operates in, and some data entry.

I became great friends with my colleagues, Priyanka and Karishma. Their enthusiasm for Pratham rubbed off on me, and I learned a lot not only from my project, but from just being there at the office and observing. On top of waking up at 5:00 to go to basketball practice, I spent an hour in the car getting to and from work -- and now I have newfound respect for everyone who has a job. It's really tough! By the second week of this schedule, I was napping every day!



I also volunteered and helped plan an Iftar Party where we held a feast for all the Muslim students in the Pratham programs who were fasting for Ramadan. It was fun to see the kids saying their prayers and then diving into the cutlets, chicken, and fruits.