



Shubham Pottala's inspiring journey

Shubham Pottala's journey is a powerful testament to resilience, vision, and the transformative power of education. Emerging from the remote Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra—an area marked by both socio-economic challenges and a legacy of community leaderships. Rooted in humble beginnings yet profoundly inspired by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's philosophy of dignity, equality, and social justice, as well as his parents' unwavering emphasis on discipline and entrepreneurship, Shubham rose as a first-generation learner to secure prestigious international scholarships and admission to Durham University.

Born into a humble Scheduled Caste family in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, Shubham grew up amid the challenges of a region long recognized as part of India's Red Corridor and an aspirational district needing focused development. His ancestral roots lie in Gummalkonda village in Sironcha tehsil, Gadchiroli, where his family holds a historic legacy of community leadership. The position of Police Patil has been passed down through generations, originating from the colonial era when the British recognized local leaders. A family figure named Rajam served as a respected leader, contested in India's first post-independence parliamentary election from the then Chanda district, and maintained close ties to the Ambedkarite movement—including personal interactions with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar at the residence of Barrister Khobragade. Rajam also served as Sarpanch, embedding a tradition of public service that continues through the family's Rajam Foundation, dedicated to community development and social welfare.

Seeking better opportunities for his children, Shubham's father, Thirupati Bakkaiha Pottala, relocated the family to Chandrapur. A strong advocate for education, awareness, and entrepreneurship, he urged his children to become job creators rather than job seekers,

especially for marginalized communities. Shubham's mother, Shobhana Thirupati Pottala, provided the emotional anchor, instilling discipline, humility, and moral strength. This balanced upbringing—bold dreams grounded in responsibility—shaped Shubham's worldview.

His schooling began at Vidya Niketan High School in Chandrapur, followed by science studies at K.G.N. Junior College, where he scored 72.96% in higher secondary. He then earned a Bachelor of Engineering in Civil Engineering from Rajiv Gandhi College of Engineering, Research and Technology under Gondwana University, graduating with 76.40% (CGPA 8.39). As a first-generation learner, he relied on self-study, discipline, and parental encouragement, without private coaching or extensive resources.

Childhood vacations in Gummalkonda left lasting impressions. Family trips to the village involved walks to the Godavari River—which his father reverently called "Mother Godavari"—swimming across its waters, enjoying fresh river fish, traditional foods like ambli (a probiotic drink from jowar or maize), and tasting toddy in a cultural context. His father taught him to fish, read river flows, and appreciate the environment, planting early seeds of interest in nature, sustainability, and community life. Nearby Somnur Sangam, a scenic river confluence, added to these dreamlike memories



of rural rhythms, sandbanks, and open skies—experiences that later fuelled his passion for sustainable development.

Despite early challenges—including social awareness of marginalization during visits to more affluent areas, financial constraints, and limited guidance—Shubham pursued entrepreneurship in civil engineering and construction, focusing on sustainable infrastructure while engaging in social initiatives and NGOs. He balanced practical work with ambitions for higher education.

Inspired profoundly by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar—who rose from a marginalized background to study at global institutions and shape India's Constitution—Shubham aspired to international education as a tool for dignity and societal change. With scarce local guidance, he self-researched universities, courses, and scholarships using a laptop his father saved to buy and mobile internet. Support from the Bhujade family, the Global Employment Network Group, and individuals like Jay Choudhary (from Ballarpur, then at Edinburgh) proved invaluable. He also encouraged and assisted his sister, who excelled at National Law University, Aurangabad, became a student leader advocating for scholarships for marginalized students (leading to government-funded opportunities), and pursued her LLM at the University of Edinburgh.

Shubham's persistence paid off spectacularly. He secured admission offers from prestigious universities in the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and the US—including Yale University for the Master of Environmental Management, accompanied by the Bekenstein Climate Leaders Program Scholarship (\$20,000). Other accolades included the University of Glasgow Scholarship, UWA Global Excellence Scholarship, and Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj Foreign Scholarship 2024 from the Maharashtra Government.

The defining opportunity came with the fully funded Commonwealth Shared Scholarship, enabling him to pursue an MSc in Sustainability, Energy and Development in the Department of Anthropology at Durham University, UK. This scholarship, awarded to students from developing countries committed to contributing to home-country development, aligned perfectly with his goals.

Arriving in Durham felt surreal. The historic city—with its UNESCO World Heritage Durham Cathedral and Castle, collegiate system akin to Oxford and Cambridge, and Russell Group status—evoked childhood memories of Harry Potter films watched at a friend's house. The campus's ancient architecture, stone

bridges, and river views were mesmerizing. Academically, the program's global ranking (37th in QS for Anthropology) and faculty like Dr. Ben Campbell (Cambridge-educated, fluent in Tamang from Himalayan fieldwork) were humbling. County Durham's coal-mining history added depth to his understanding of industrial legacies and social change.

First experiences included seeing snow for the first time—an unforgettable winter landscape—and reflecting on his path from rural Maharashtra to this renowned institution. He felt profound gratitude to his parents and supporters, alongside responsibility to maximize the opportunity for his family, region, and communities. The journey was far from smooth: financial limits, social biases, self-reliant learning, and balancing entrepreneurship with applications demanded resilience. Yet these hurdles reinforced his belief in education's accessibility and power.

At Durham, he noted stark differences: seminar-based learning emphasizing independent reading, critical discussion, and evidence-based reasoning (versus lecture-heavy styles at home); cultural politeness, respect for personal space and rules; and greater personal independence in daily life (cooking, budgeting, routines).

Freed by the scholarship to focus deeply, he immersed in libraries, workshops, conferences, and networks—evolving from a civil engineering technical base to a socio-technical perspective integrating social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of development.

Looking ahead, Shubham plans to return to India post-graduation (per Commonwealth expectations) to gain on-ground experience in sustainable development, environmental governance, responsible infrastructure, CSR, ESG, and community initiatives—particularly in Gadchiroli and Chandrapur. Combining his engineering expertise with anthropological insights, he aims to drive inclusive, environmentally responsible progress in underserved regions.

In the longer term, he aspires to contribute globally—perhaps with the United Nations, international organizations, or NGOs—advancing sustainability, climate resilience, environmental justice, and equitable development. His story underscores that education, when rooted in service, dignity, and resilience, can bridge humble village origins to global platforms, creating lasting impact for marginalized communities and society at large.

As told to UV
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