

# CDSAA Newsletter

## Centre for Development Studies

Alumni Association

April 2026



**D**ear Friends,

We are happy to bring you the second issue of the CDSAA newsletter. In this edition, you'll find updates on the alumni association's activities, reports from a selection of academic events organized by CDS, and highlights from campus life shared by current students.

Since the last Annual General Body Meeting in September 2025, CDSAA has launched several new initiatives and continued the thought-provoking alumni webinar series on topical issues, started in July 2025. Special Interest Groups have strengthened interactions between alumni, with expertise in specific areas, and current PhD and MA students. The Association is also helping mobilize funds for the CDS Student Welfare Fund. None of this would be possible without the engagement and encouragement of our alumni community.

We are delighted to announce a two-day, in-person alumni event on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> September 2026. The programme will feature a National Conference on the theme "**Development and Structural Transformation in India: Evidence and Policy**" on 25<sup>th</sup> September and the forenoon of 26<sup>th</sup> September; a gala dinner and cultural evening for alumni on the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup>; and the Annual General Body Meeting of CDSAA on the afternoon of 26<sup>th</sup> September 2026. Kindly mark these dates in your calendar, set aside time to be in Trivandrum for this event, and encourage your batch-mates and other alumni friends to do the same. We eagerly look forward to welcoming you to the CDS campus.

As we move forward, we invite you to stay connected with

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CDS by actively engaging in CDSAA's activities, participating in webinars, mentoring students, offering internships and career guidance, and contributing in other ways to CDS's development. Do return to campus when you can, join our events, share your news with us, and help us build opportunities for those who will follow in your footsteps.

With warm regards,  
**Members of the CDSAA Executive Committee**

## Two Sessions with CDS Alumni Economic Journalists

**T**hrough two consecutive online events (January 31<sup>st</sup> and February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2026) the CDSAA was privileged to bring together a total of eleven economic journalists (EJs) who once upon a time belonged to the CDS as M Phil/PhD scholars. For convenience's sake, the two events were organized as follows:

**EJs 1 : Narendar Pani (Chair), Sukumar Muralidharan, Cherian Punnathara, V. Sridhar , Sudha Mahalingam and Ram Garikipati**

[Watch Recording -Seminar on \ January 31<sup>st</sup> -2026](#)

**EJs 2: Sanjaya Baru(Chair), Nadela Chandramohan, Rammanohar Reddy, Bharat Bhushan and Sarita Varma**

[Watch Recording -Seminar on February 28<sup>th</sup> 2026](#)

All these journalists and more have had distinguished careers in public life, academics and policy domain at the national level.

In the free-flowing 'unstructured' sessions these stalwarts

shared a wide range of personal experiences (especially, what had driven them to take up the challenging career, even for some time) and proffered deep and insightful reflections on changing macro policy regime (particularly, the shift to economic reforms) and the growing instances of control/interferences by corporate giants in media affairs.

Discussions also focused around rising concerns of dominance by information technology and social media platforms which have undermined the print media and distorted the voice and value of reliable and verifiable news and analysis. The informal yet informed sharing of ideas and experiences by the invited speakers underscored challenges, thrills and hopes that mark the fast-changing profession. The sessions were further enlivened as some of the speakers reminisced about their days at the Centre during its very early years.

Centre for Development Studies Alumni Association  
Presents  
**CDS-EJs-I**  
**The Economic Journalist: Personal & Professional**

**NARENDAR PANI (CHAIR)**  
JRD Tata Chair Visiting Professor, MAS, Bengaluru

**SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN**  
Freelance Media Scholar

**CHERIAN PUNNATHARA**  
Deputy Editor, Hindu Business Line

**V. SRIDHAR**  
Associate Editor, Frontline

**SUDHA MAHALINGAM**  
Adjunct Professor, NIAS, Bengaluru

**RAM GARIKIPATI**  
Managing Editor, IIP Publications, ICFAI Group, Hyderabad

January 31, 2026 (Saturday)  
5.00pm to 6.30pm

Centre for Development Studies Alumni Association (CDSAA)  
Presents  
**CDS-EJs-2**  
**The Economic Journalist: Personal and Professional**

**SANJAYA BARU (Chair)**  
Former Editor, The Financial Express and Business Standard  
Distinguished Senior Fellow, Tata Institute

**N. CHANDRA MOHAN**  
Editorial Writer, Financial Express  
Business Correspondent

**C. RAMMANOHAR REDDY**  
Former Editor, Economic & Political Weekly  
Former Editor, The Daily Mirror

**BHARAT BHUSHAN**  
Chairman, The Media Foundation  
Former Editor, The Telegraph (India) & Express News Service

**M. SARITA VARMA**  
Former Senior Assistant Editor, The Indian Express Group

FEBRUARY 28, 2026 (SATURDAY)  
5:30 pm to 7:00 pm

Join here: <https://zoom.us/j/8588888888>  
and <https://www.linkedin.com/company/cdsaa>

## Meetings of the Special Interest Groups of CDS Students

The Special Interest Groups (SIGs) were formed to create focused discussion forums around key research areas and to provide structured mentoring support. Following a suggestion at the Annual General Body Meeting (AGBM), the CDSAA helped facilitate these groups and organized regular interactions between current students and alumni, as well as invited experts. They create spaces for in-depth discussion, peer learning, and intellectual exchange beyond the classroom, while also providing mentoring support.

CDS alumnus Dr. A. Azeez (Abdul) Erumban, currently at the University of Groningen, had an informal interaction on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2026 with PhD students working in trade, macroeconomics, industry, and labor. Each student briefly presented their research interests, after which Dr. Erumban offered constructive feedback. In addition to discussing the students' research, he also spoke about post-PhD job opportunities abroad in various capacities. He suggested potential international conferences where students could present their work and shared advice on approaching doctoral and postdoctoral opportunities overseas. Overall, the session was very insightful for the students.

Prof. Neetha.N from the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) led a similar online session on 11<sup>th</sup> December with PhD scholars working in areas related to gender, labour and migration. Each student explained their research area to the professor, followed by a detailed discussion on different ways to strengthen their work. Students in the early years of their PhD sought suggestions on formulating and narrowing their research questions and received helpful guidance. Final-year scholars received advice on developing chapter conclusions and making broader theoretical and policy contributions. These constructive

inputs helped participants reflect on and enhance the analytical rigour of their research projects.

Dr. Satyaki Dasgupta, currently at Christ University, Bangalore, led an online session on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2026 with PhD scholars working in the areas of labour and gender. He began with a brief overview of his PhD thesis submitted to Colorado State University, along with his ongoing and upcoming research projects.

In the latter part of the session, each participant presented their PhD work, followed by Dr. Dasgupta's insights and suggestions. The discussions covered working with national-level datasets such as PLFS, EUS, and ASI, as well as themes including the feminisation of agriculture and the situation of sanitation workers.

Beyond research-related discussions, Dr. Dasgupta also shared useful suggestions on how to use social networking platforms, like X, strategically—for placement opportunities, to access information on conferences and publications, and to expand academic networks. Overall, the interactive session was timely and beneficial for all participants.



Dr A Azeez (Abdul) Erumban  
University of Groningen



Prof. Neetha N  
Centre for Women's  
Development Studies



Dr. Satyaki Dasgupta  
Christ University

## Student Welfare Fund

**F**ollowing a discussion with the director, it was decided to support the CDS students, especially Master's students in financial need. CDSAA would be involved in facilitating the mobilization of funds from alumni and other well-wishers through the Students Welfare Fund (SWF), a fund that was set up by CDS to help students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary objective of these contributions is to support MA and PhD students for a wide range of academic and non-academic needs. Immediate priorities include assisting MA students who are unable to meet their tuition or mess fees.


Students seeking assistance are to approach the Director, who will refer the case to a three-member committee including representatives from students, faculty and a member of the EC of CDSAA. The Committee based on

prescribed eligibility criteria will decide whether and how much funds are to be disbursed. Financial support is provided for one semester, and continuation of support in subsequent semesters will be decided at the beginning of each semester.

So far, requests have been received from three MA students. Assistance has been provided to meet the canteen expenses of two students, however the third request could not be met due to insufficient funds.

At present, an estimated Rs.75,000/- will cover tuition fees, while Rs. 1,50,000/- would cover both tuition and mess expenses for an MA student for the full two-year programme. Donations to the SWF can be made through the link given below.

*Support the Student Welfare Fund →*



**Centre for Development Studies Alumni Association  
(CDSAA)**

**Welcomes YOU to the**

**ALUMNI MEET**

at

**CDS, Thiruvananthapuram**

*Cultural Programme & Gala Dinner - September 25, 2026*  
*CDSAA General Body Meeting - September 26, 2026*

**Contact Details:**

*E-mail: [cdsaa@cds.edu](mailto:cdsaa@cds.edu)*

**Keshab Das: 94275 27884 | Meena Abraham: 9447396553**

## Trivandrum Chapter Meet

**T**he alumni members of the Trivandrum chapter of CDSAA met on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February at “The Shamiana” in CDS. Ten members attended this first chapter meet, representing different decades. The gathering gave everyone an opportunity to get acquainted and to renew old connections.

The president and secretary outlined the association’s completed projects and future plans. The planned alumni meet and conference generated particular interest and enthusiasm, and many members expressed their willingness to help.



**Alumni Members at the Trivandrum Chapter Meet**



“CDS is a place that can give you an experience of a lifetime.” This was how my father spoke to me about the Centre for Development Studies for the first time. The happiness and pride in his eyes as he clicked pictures of me standing nervously in front of the massive K. N. Raj library building on my admission day remains my fondest memory.

I always dreamt of studying at CDS. Its legacy, exposure, and alumni network deepened my interest. After completing my B Sc Economics at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, I explored various facets of economics. The Master’s training at CDS opened new horizons. The compulsory technical courses in the first year were tough yet fascinating, and as I near the end of my final year, this training has helped me think more deeply and specialize in emerging areas of economics.

Academic discussions, seminars, and conferences at CDS are a melting pot of widely varying ideas.

The first K. N. Raj celebration, I attended was lively. Interactions with alumni and a packed series of lectures were an eye-opener to what lies ahead in economics. Conducting podcasts with Prof. Maitreesh Ghatak and Dr. Arvind Subramanian on inequality and India’s economic growth, as part of the Monsoon School, was surreal.

The nature, architecture and people of CDS are another fascinating part of my journey. The silent corridors, leafy pathways, and unexplored corners of the green campus are perfect for a treasure hunt, a game that becomes unavoidable at every fun event.

While acknowledging the immense academic and policy achievements of CDS, I see scope for further growth. Many areas aren’t wheelchair-accessible. Important discussions



held in Joan Robinson Hall remain inaccessible to some, a serious limitation. In an era of rankings and performance metrics, academic spaces risk being driven more by competition than by curiosity. As an institution dedicated to Development and Economics, we must ask how strongly we center equity and inclusivity. If even a single student feels left behind, it is our shared responsibility to foster an environment where everyone feels welcomed and encouraged to engage.

Despite the vibrant seminar culture, it is important that academic dialogue does not become an echo chamber. Secularism may be better understood not as the absence of religion but as respectful sharing of traditions and viewpoints. Similarly, the spirit of feminism lies not in limiting participation but in expanding inclusivity and collective engagement.

As members of an institution with a rich legacy in development thought, we must remain open to questioning and dialogue. Such openness will sustain CDS not only as a center of academic excellence but as a genuinely inclusive and reflective learning community.



# A Small Campus & Some Big Questions: Reflections of a PhD Student

~Srimanjori Guha

I left my corporate job in one of the biggest MNCs in India to pursue a PhD. Soon after, the COVID-19 lockdown happened. Suddenly, everyone had an opinion about me leaving a “lucrative job” to pursue a PhD. It’s just another degree... you already earn... isn’t a degree about getting a job? was the undertone in most murmurs around me.

As I prepared for PhD interviews amid a worldwide crisis and mounting family pressure, I wasn’t sure about my exact research interests. But I was sure that this time, I wanted to understand the people behind the numbers. My curiosity about why some people have better access to information than others led me to the concept of social capital.

The CDS interview was the first one I cleared, and the interviewers’ curiosity and encouragement gave me some assurance amid all the uncertainty. As I prepared to leave my hometown for the first time, all I wanted was for my PhD not to be just another degree. On a February evening in 2021, I arrived at the CDS gate with a large suitcase and the baggage and privilege of leaving a certain life behind.

## The changing campus

The blue sky, the pink bougainvillea, the spiral staircase, the library tower, and the brick walls of CDS may have remained constant over the last five years, but I have experienced different versions of the campus. I started my PhD on a panic-stricken campus with little activity. Gradually, the campus came to life again with the community’s help. In 2023, we had some event or activity almost every other day.

In my Master’s, I studied on a large campus with thousands of students, always buzzing with activity, where individual students like me remained invisible. At CDS, with only around a hundred students, extreme visibility is inevitable. This visibility sometimes stressed me, but it also taught me to take responsibility. I learned to show up for community activities in my own small ways: arranging reading sessions, volunteering at events, caring for campus animals, organizing Women’s Day with my peers, and serving as a community representative. I learned so much from the lectures, discussions, and workshops on campus. For the first time in my life, I felt deeply involved in community life.



Most importantly, I have made some unforgettable and unlikely friendships. They may be few, but they showed me that research can be a collective activity where we learn together to ask uncomfortable questions about ourselves and society. On this campus, I started learning that “if you want a village, you must become a villager.”

## Is it just another degree?

As the campus changed, my understanding of economics also evolved. Our PhD coursework began with the fundamentals of neoclassical economics, but as it progressed, we saw more clearly why economics is a social science.

In the second semester, I was introduced to gender and labour economics, which helped narrow my research interests. Combining my earlier curiosity about social capital with this new lens, I arrived at my topic: women’s work and networks. Through the fieldwork course and exposure to diverse qualitative methodologies, the people behind the data no longer felt so unreachable. Now, as I write my thesis chapters, I find myself asking better questions, even if I don’t have all the answers. As job market uncertainty looms, I reassure myself that this is not turning out to be “just another degree.”

Of course, CDS has its own fault lines. Better funding, more opportunities for collaboration, and more institute-sponsored scholarships could make students’ lives much smoother. As we navigate the strengths and limitations of CDS, while the world stands at the crossroads of multiple humanitarian crises, I hope that, if nothing else, we continue—as a community—to ask better questions.

## Workshop on Quantitative Research Methods at CDS

The Centre for Development Studies (CDS) has long been recognized as a space where multiple methodological approaches come together, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of economics and the social sciences. Research in these areas increasingly requires engagement with both qualitative and quantitative methods. While qualitative approaches help in understanding context, narratives, and lived experiences, quantitative methods provide tools to measure, test, and generalize findings. This blend is essential for producing rigorous and policy-relevant research, and CDS actively nurtures this methodological diversity.

In line with this vision, CDS has been organizing workshops that strengthen students' methodological foundations. Last year, a qualitative workshop focused on interpretive methods, fieldwork practices, and critical analysis. The Workshop on Quantitative Research Methods held from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> December 2025 continued this effort, emphasizing the importance of quantitative tools in contemporary research.

The timing of such a workshop, especially for students at the beginning of their academic journey, is important. Quantitative methods can seem intimidating due to their technical nature, but early exposure helps reduce this barrier. When students are introduced to statistical reasoning, data analysis, and econometric thinking at an early stage, they gain confidence and develop a stronger foundation for future research. This workshop aimed to motivate students to engage with quantitative tools and to see them as accessible and essential rather than difficult or abstract. The workshop covered a carefully curated set of core topics delivered by experienced in-house faculty members. The opening session, led by Prof. Vinoj Abraham, encouraged students to consider their research questions carefully and to choose methods that would lead them to answers rather than get lost in methodological debates. He introduced fundamental concepts such as descriptive statistics and regression analysis, which form the backbone of most empirical research.

This was followed by Dr. Chidambaram Iyer's sessions on panel data analysis and Principal Component Analysis (PCA), both essential for handling complex datasets. Later, Dr. Amartya Paul's lectures on causal inference methods,

including Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT), Difference-in-Differences (DID), and Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD), showed how researchers can move beyond correlation to establish causality—particularly important in policy-oriented research. The workshop further expanded into advanced econometric and time-series techniques through sessions led by Dr. Srikanta Kundu, Dr. Ritika Jain, Mr. Jijin.P, and Dr. M. Parameswaran. Topics such as time series analysis, Vector Autoregression (VAR), Endogeneity, Instrumental Variables (IV), Two-Stage Least Squares (2SLS), Propensity Score Matching (PSM), ARDL models, Structural breaks, and Co-Integration were covered in a structured manner. These methods are indispensable in modern research, especially when dealing with dynamic data and complex real-world relationships. Together, these sessions equipped participants with tools widely used in academic research and in applied fields such as policy analysis, finance, and development studies. The workshop was attended by PhD students from all years, along with a few MA students, making the learning environment especially enriching. Early-stage PhD and MA students built a foundational understanding, while more advanced PhD scholars revisited and strengthened their technical skills. The workshop demonstrated that quantitative methods are not reserved only for specialists but are relevant for all researchers working in interdisciplinary domains. For many participants, it helped demystify quantitative analysis and encouraged them to incorporate these methods into their own work.

In conclusion, the Quantitative Workshop at CDS was not just a training program but part of a larger pedagogical approach that values methodological balance. By organizing a qualitative workshop one year and a quantitative workshop the next, CDS is creating a sustained and complementary learning experience for its students. This cycle ensures that researchers are comfortable with both approaches and better equipped to tackle complex research problems, strengthening CDS's interdisciplinary, methodologically diverse research culture.

The CDS organized a daylong symposium on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2026, to mark Development Researcher's Day. [1] The symposium theme ("Development Research and Practice: Connects and Disconnects") was directly inspired by the life and work of K. N. Raj.[2] There were nine speakers who have keenly observed the interface between research and practice. Between them, they represented considerable experience across the state and non-state sectors as well as diverse aspects of development (environment, health, and so on). Two speakers were CDS alumni (Sundari Ravindran and N. C. Narayanan) and a third had previously collaborated on CDS studies (Sridhar Radhakrishnan); besides, N. C. Narayanan also helped to organize the event. Attendees were mainly students, scholars, faculty members, and other researchers. The symposium discussed the three sets of questions:[3] (1) Development research and practice: Are these two worlds? How and why does development research-practice dis/connect occur? (2) What are the relative roles of problem-solving and "enlightenment" functions of research in the context of practice?[4] (3) How can networks strengthen research-practice connects? What are the key criteria for such networks to form and sustain? What is the role of boundary organizations? Below is a sprinkling of ideas from the symposium.

There was some discussion about research practice disconnects being structural rather than accidental. It may not be that past research relevant to specific policies does not exist- rather, it could be that policymakers do not seek or use it for other reasons.

This implies that besides research on development patterns, perhaps we need to research disconnects themselves. This raises issues of power: which knowledge is allowed to count, and who decides it? Epistemic justice requires that we visibilise forms of knowledge outside the mainstream and include lived experience. As a proverb goes, "until the lion tells the story, the hunter will be glorified." Thus, often research from the outside is given more value than practice and practitioners' understanding, on the false premise that ordinary people cannot adequately think, interpret or create knowledge. It then becomes important to close this distance with more deliberate interaction between these worlds. For researchers, it calls for epistemic humility and pluralism as well as transdisciplinary orientation. Speakers also discussed the different orientations of researchers and practitioners. Researchers prioritize publications and abstractions while practitioners prioritize scale, speed, and measurable outcomes, and are accountable to politicians and funders.



Participants at the Symposium

Policy practitioners sometimes have a “crisis mentality” that looks to research only for “curative” purposes after a failure occurs. Policy practitioners often register signals oriented only to regulation—hearing and seeing only what seems relevant for immediate administrative needs — and researchers must find ways to connect on these matters and beyond them.

Researchers should also move beyond derived discourses to develop categories and grounded interdisciplinary research that are relevant to Indian realities. Sustained engagement requires researchers and practitioners to acknowledge and respect different positionalities. Further, practitioners are not a monolithic category as the state is very heterogeneous, and so is civil society. Platforms for long-term dialogue—involving academia, governments, consultants, civil society, activists—can strengthen connects across differences. Another point of discussion was that research-practice connects become valuable when they are continuous rather than one-shot. The limitation of a problem-solving approach in research is that the relationship ends once a “solution” is proposed. However, in fact solutions and interventions create ripples and it is important to track and understand them. For instance, an intervention may sow the seeds for collective leadership in a community, or it may highlight internal contradictions within the community.

If such ripples are ignored, we merely move from one problem to another without cumulative understanding and relationship-building. In a sustained engagement, what may start as a problem-solving approach can lead to “enlightenment” as patterns beyond the immediate context come to light. The practice of co production through iteration

brings accountability and “co-reflexivity” (shared reflexivity cutting across conventional boundaries of research, practice, and community). Further, research then itself becomes a form of practice, and this opens new identities for researchers.

While boundaries between research and practice are but notional and fluid, the idea of boundaries may serve the purpose of thinking beyond them (that is, the “box” is helpful if for no other reason than to aid “thinking outside the box”). In this sense, it is helpful to see boundary organizations (and groups and individuals) not as gatekeepers or for purposes of policing, but as facilitators to sustain networks.

[1] In 2024 (K. N. Raj’s birth centenary), the Kerala government declared Feb 10<sup>th</sup> (Raj’s death anniversary) to be Development Researcher’s Day

[2] See <https://cds.edu/wp-content/uploads/K-N-Raj-and-Development-Research-Practice.pdf>

[3] For more details, see <https://cds.edu/wp-content/uploads/Concept-Note-for-Symposium.pdf>

[4] Carol Weiss (1979), “The Many Meanings of Research Utilization.”



**M**alhar 2026 was envisioned as a celebration of the diverse cultures of India. With people hailing from different parts of the country within the CDS community, it presented a promising opportunity to share, learn, experience and enjoy one another's cultural expression through music and dance.

The event which took place on the first of April, with the students, faculty, non-teaching staff and families coming together, turned out to be exactly that. Everybody was dressed in his/her traditional attire to align with the theme of the event. There was a Sambalpuri dance by our friends from Odisha which was as soothing as the rhythm of fields swaying in the breeze. Our friends from Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Odisha, Assam learned the Bhangra from those among us from Punjab and Haryana and put together a spectacular, well-coordinated performance.

Another energetic performance with peppy cinematic numbers got the crowd rolling. There were also many brilliant solo performances such as a Malayalam naadanpaattu (folk song) by Chythra, semi classical performances by Anagha, soulful melodies by Ardra and Devika. The enthusiastic participation of the teaching and non-teaching staff added more color to the event. Prof. Vinoj performed a Punjabi song along with a guitar performance by his son Aaron and Ajikumar sir sang a Malayalam song.

The mood became even more festive with lively anchoring, fun games such as freeze-unfreeze, musical chairs with dance and tasty crispy samosas and melt-in-the-mouth Gulab

Jamuns. While the evening unfolded beautifully with the entire CDS community together, it was made possible by careful coordination, effort and the spirit of cooperation within the community. Despite tight schedules, students held practice sessions post-dinner until midnight, with seniors joining to encourage the performers.

The faculty and their family also accepted our invitations and put together their performances in between their tight schedules. The organizing committee worked enthusiastically under the direction of the Cultural Secretary, with a careful division of responsibilities across fundraising, sending invitations, venue decoration, arranging the tracks, gifts, refreshments and waste management. The event would not have been possible without the generous support of the faculty and the Centre, or the constant cooperation of the Program Office and the non-teaching staff, who made our work smooth. While we thoroughly enjoyed organizing the event and were happy with the outcome, we also recognize the importance of better time management for smoother implementation in the future.



**M**y name is Aathira Prasad, currently Partner at a boutique consulting firm based in the UAE, working as Director of Macroeconomics. Before moving to the UAE, I was working in Singapore as part of the Research Team at DBS Bank. I completed my M.Phil from CDS during 2002-04, and looking back, that time really helped shape my career and how I think about the world. It was a key period in my life that significantly shaped both my career and my view of the world.

Before joining CDS, the only place I was familiar with was the wonderful library. But once I joined as an M Phil student, I quickly realized there was so much more in store. What began as an academic journey turned into an experience rich in people and perspectives in addition to economics.

Ours was a close-knit class group: we were from different parts of India but had so much in common that made the two plus years rush past like a few weeks. Besides discussions of economics, politics and sometimes religion, there were plenty of lighter moments too: the many trips to Shashi chettan's kada for chaaya and kadi, that one truly terrible Hindi movie we watched during the Diwali holiday (because it was the only one playing then in Trivandrum!) and also lots of cooking (and eating!) sessions in the hostel along with some amazing seniors - you know who you are :) . In hindsight, those informal moments often turned out to be just as memorable as what we learned in the classroom.

One of the highlights of CDS was the culture of being able to grab "oru chaaya" (a cup of tea) and strike up a conversation with senior researchers and faculty without the usual academic stuffiness (no formality, no barriers). It taught me that some of the best ideas come from just being curious and willing to listen. Thankfully, I have carried this openness to dialogue into my work and it has been genuinely helpful.

The program was also great at making sure we didn't just stay buried in textbooks. We had to apply the theories learned in the classroom to real life situations. I particularly remember our field trip to survey employees in the coir industry - and of course the last-minute panic when PCs in the Students Bay crashed, causing us to lose our reports just minutes before the deadline! :). Such experiences have definitely stayed with me.



**AATHIRA PRASAD (2002-2004)**

Even though I did not go down the academic route, CDS helped me develop the ability to look beyond the surface and understand how policy changes and geopolitical shifts affect everyday people – something that feels even more relevant in this day and age when rational expectations don't always seem that rational! To this day, I find myself going back to the basics - always asking why and looking at the raw data than just following the crowd. But whether I'm looking at shifting trade routes or emerging tech trends, I continue to rely on those same analytical skills I developed during my M Phil days.

At the same time, analysis is only part of the job. Making sense of the data and underlying economic theory is one thing; translating those findings and insights to give a picture of the long-term impact on an economy is another. It is even more crucial to communicate it clearly such that even a layperson can understand. CDS played a significant role in helping me build that skill set and also in shaping a way of thinking that continues to guide me. I am truly grateful for that.

## An Academic Pilgrimage

While browsing the noticeboard of the Department of Analytical and Applied Economics at Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, I came across an admission announcement for the MPhil and PhD programmes at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS). I knew little about the institution then, but I applied nonetheless, drawn largely by the modest monthly stipend of Rs 2,500 per month.

I requested the application form by sending a bank draft, but when it arrived, the envelope had been tampered with—the form was missing, leaving only the prospectus. Concerned, I called CDS from a university STD booth. The reassuring voice on the other end asked me not to worry and promised to send another form.

I later learned that it was Mr. Philroy, known for his warmth and care towards students. On the day of the interview, while searching for a place near CDS to iron my clothes, I could not find a laundry. Instead, a local resident kindly invited me into his home and offered his help. This small but generous gesture left a lasting impression on me. My interview took place on Guru Purnima in 2004, chaired by Professor K. P. Kannan and attended by several distinguished faculty members. What struck me most was their friendly and encouraging demeanor.

Despite being selected, I remained uncertain about joining CDS. Back at Utkal University, most of my teachers advised me to prepare for competitive examinations, even though I had no clear plan. It was Professor Kumar Bar Das who firmly encouraged me to join CDS. Once I took that step, I never considered any profession outside academia. Life at CDS soon became deeply enriching.

The Onam celebrations following the foundation course were particularly memorable, with faculty and friends inviting us to their homes for Onam Sadhya, creating a strong sense of belonging. At the same time, certain cultural shifts were not easy—for instance, being asked by senior PhD scholars to address them by their first names felt unfamiliar.

When I joined CDS, I had no knowledge of computers. During econometrics and statistics classes in the computer centre, I initially relied heavily on my friends. With their help, I gradually gained confidence. Under the guidance of professors such as Chandan Mukherjee and K. Navaneetham, I developed a deep appreciation for the integration of theory and empirical analysis in statistics and econometrics respectively. Learning from distinguished



AMARENDRA DAS (2004-2006)

faculty members including N. Vijaymohan Pillai, K. P. Kannan, R. Nagaraj, Pinaki Chakraborty, J. Devika, Sunil Mani, Irudaya Rajan, K. N. Harilal, K. T. Rammohan, P. Sivanandan, K. Pushpangadan, John Kurien, and others was intellectually transformative. Term paper presentations rigorously trained us in literature review, data analysis, and critical discussion, while fostering respect for diverse and even opposing viewpoints. My MPhil dissertation under Prof. V. Santhakumar was initially challenging. His feedback was often brief—“this is not clear, read more and think.” Though frustrating at times, I gradually realized that he was training me to think critically and independently. He was also prompt and dedicated; on one occasion, he returned my draft by leaving it in my hostel room when I was away.

For my PhD, I worked under Prof. V. Santhakumar and Prof. M. Parameswaran as co-guides. They required several rounds of presentations of my work on semi-parametric modelling using the Levinsohn and Petrin methodology until every aspect was clear and convincing. This rigorous process ultimately led to my receiving the Global Development Network Medal and a prize of USD 10,000 in 2009. As I grow older, my respect for my mentors continues to deepen.

After completing my studies, I joined Utkal University in March 2010, where I came to fully appreciate how distinctive CDS had been, particularly for its supportive and student-friendly administration. Following a brief deputation to the Fourteenth Finance Commission, I moved to NISER Bhubaneswar in December 2015, where I have been working since.

Looking back, CDS feels like an academic pilgrimage in my life. It shaped my capacity for critical thinking, independent research, and appreciation of intellectual diversity. It taught me to respect scholarship, distinguish between personal relationships and ideological differences, and strive for academic excellence. The degrees I earned opened doors to meaningful opportunities, and the recognition I received strengthened my confidence. My five and a half years at CDS, from August 2004 to March 2010, remain the most formative and cherished phase of my life.

## The CDS DNA: A Brand of Our Own

**M**oving from JNU to CDS is a well-trodden path, often described as a rite of passage. For me, it marked an internal shift-one I deeply associate with CDS.

In my professional life, I often feel like I carry a “different brand” while everyone else wears a uniform. As the social development world shifts restlessly from one framework to another—from Log Frames to Theory of Change to building narratives- I find myself adapting with ease. For a CDS student, the core remains unchanged. Political economy, inequality, and redistribution aren’t just topics we studied and discussed; they are the DNA we carry.

Even as contexts evolve, our questions remain relevant. The Technology and Society journal I read for an assignment left a profound imprint. Today, even as behavioral economics dominates the sector, our classroom discussions on “chulha” acceptance and dissemination still resonate-whether the conversation is about clean energy, AI, or the digital divide.

At CDS, I was surrounded by people who had spent decades immersed in one slice of the world—the agrarian crisis, industrial policy, labour shifts. That quiet, stubborn dedication taught me something invaluable: any passion, pursued with rigour, is worthwhile. CDS gives you that passion to grow slowly. It doesn’t demand instant “deliverables.” But once it takes root, it keeps you happy, generous in your approach, and productive for a lifetime. CDS was ahead of its time in fostering non-hierarchical relationships- valuing the weight of an experience and perspective over the position of the person speaking. Long before “flat hierarchies” became a corporate buzzword, we breathed them in our canteen talks, tea times, walks, and parties. That lesson-to look at the person, not the position-remains my most enduring lessons.

While my M Phil was a formal academic exercise, my “life thesis” was written in the mud and bamboo of Wayanad. I remember meeting an emerging indigenous leader of the 1990s. We sat in her small house, supported by bamboo. She whispered an instruction to a young boy, who returned with a tiny package wrapped in a scrap of old newspaper. It was borrowed tea powder. She made me tea. For the first time in my life I had to swallow a cup of black tea without sugar. There was no apology-only a quiet, dignified hospitality. As she walked me to the bus stop, she mentioned she was trying to mobilize enough “liquid cash” for a trip to the state capital to fight for her people. Suddenly, an elderly man on the road seemed to “fall” into a muddy paddy field. I gasped and rushed to help, but she stopped me. With a calm voice, she said: “He didn’t fall. He jumped because of me. He is an upper-caste tribal.”



PIYUSHANTONY(1993-1995)

In that moment, poverty measurement and cash transfer theories ceased to be academic modules; they became lived, layered, and deeply complex realities. It became the lens through which I view every project I work, and every state I serve.

Over time, I developed a habit of peeping into kitchens (with consent) during field visits, looking for the stories data often misses. The number and diversity of jars on a shelf reveal more than many standardized indicators. There is a profound difference between a shelf holding only the essentials-salt, oil, a single dal, rice, and wheat- and one filled with a diverse array of spices, dals, and masalas. Those jars are the true ledger of a family’s well-being, far more accurate than any standardized measurements. CDS gave me the tools to be a professional, but the environment grounded my conscience- it gave it depth and discipline-anchoring it in rigorous inquiry and making it far less vulnerable to shifting trends or easy arguments. It reminded me that development is not about frameworks alone, but about people who struggle to mobilize even sugar along with a little tea powder and some liquid cash. When big numbers show achievement and progress, I am the one-we are the ones-who will keep worrying about who is yet to be covered and what their struggles are.

Perhaps the most understated gift of CDS is contentment. The ability to be content with what one has - a quality I see in many CDS alumni, including my partner (CDS – M. Phil- 1989-91). With time, one realizes how valuable it is- to remain generous and quietly fulfilled. Above all, I feel that the kindness I received at CDS from everyone needs to be passed on to everyone I meet. And, how can I not be grateful for the CDS family members in every city, ready to welcome and help, regardless of whether you have been in touch or not? There is this assurance that, wherever we go, the CDS community is never far away.

## CDS in my life

Perhaps I am among the few who have had the distinction of qualifying for admission to the CDS M Phil Programme twice. I was selected for the 2001–03 batch but did not join. At that time, I did not fully appreciate the difference an institution like CDS could make to my life.

After five continuous years in Delhi, I had absorbed a snobbish academic culture that considered Neoclassical Economics the only serious tradition in the profession. As a result, I remained blissfully unaware that a small group of economists at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula had already made a substantial difference to teaching and policy thinking within India's economics profession.

When I began exploring topics for higher research degrees, I started noticing numerous contributions by CDS scholars, particularly in the Economic and Political Weekly. As I discovered more about CDS, I realized the opportunity I had lost. I contacted the CDS Academic Programme Office, specifically Phil Roy, to ask if I could join the M Phil Programme, which was already in its fifth month. He politely replied that I could apply for the 2002–04 academic session and suggested that I write a note explaining why I had not joined earlier and why I was now so keen.

This is exactly what an institution ahead of its time does. Phil Roy's suggestion allowed me to tell my side of the story to the selection committee, so they could understand the constraints and deprivations I had faced in my academic journey, despite being in cosmopolitan Delhi. I was eventually admitted to the 2002–04 M Phil batch and joined the programme with great enthusiasm.

After joining CDS and moving to Kerala, I immediately noticed a noticeable difference in how people treated me. In Delhi, especially in administrative offices, I hardly saw people smiling back at me; in Thiruvananthapuram, almost everyone did. People were extremely comfortable with my Muslim identity. In fact, I met more Christians sharing my name than Muslims. I was often summoned to the reception for phone calls, only to discover that they were for Prof K. C. Zachariah. During this time, I formed precious lifelong friendships and developed a deep love for Thiruvananthapuram—my second home—despite its very different cuisine and language.

The academic training I received at CDS was distinct from the rest of my research education. Under Chandan Mukherjee's approach, we thoroughly explored the data before considering modelling it using pre-existing theories. In retrospect, this anticipated machine learning long before most institutions adopted similar methods. While much of the economics profession relied on a deductive approach, CDS was already committed to an inductive path, long before the rest of India—and perhaps much of the world—followed.



ZAKKARIA SIDDIQUI (2002-2004)

The coursework included numerous modules on the Indian economy, ensuring that we studied the economy itself rather than only economic models. This gave us a bird's-eye view of India's economic structure and the inter-linkages across sectors. I still treasure those notes. Even today, many economics departments focus on teaching models rather than the economy, which makes the CDS approach stand out.

CDS emerged as an important centre of economic thought in India despite being located far from the traditional metropolitan hubs. This was due to the vision of people like Prof K. N. Raj and Laurie Baker. I was fortunate to see them walking around the campus. The first generation of CDS scholars interacted with economists of global repute such as Nicholas Kaldor and Joan Robinson—engagements that are less common now.

The distinctive features of CDS training gave my imagination wings. They gave me the courage to explore rural poverty in Bihar and urban poverty in Kolkata as I travelled between these geographies. My work on modelling the Indian electricity market, the calorie puzzle debate, and nutritional outcomes clearly reflects the influence of CDS.

In my research, I have been able to tackle diverse problems and methodologies largely because CDS equipped me to ask meaningful, foundational questions that go to the root of a problem. This may slow the pace of publication, but it leaves a more lasting impression on the literature.

Currently, at Jamia Millia Islamia, I am fortunate to work with another CDSian, Dr. Mohammed Kashif Khan, as we train undergraduates majoring in economics. I teach econometrics to UG students in a style very similar to what we experienced under Chandan Mukherjee. The intellectual legacy of CDS continues to shape how and what I teach.



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- Abstract Acceptance: May 15, 2026
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**PS: If you have not done so yet, we invite you to enroll as a member of CD-SAA through the following link:**

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