

Creating Global Community Through Play, Performance & Solidarity: Reflections from India

I recently returned from an extraordinary journey through Kolkata and Delhi with my [East Side Institute](#) colleagues Chris Helm, Jeff Aron, and Nancy Green. What we experienced was far more than a trip—it was a living, breathing example of grassroots globalization in action.

We were there to be with our partners, not as helpers or experts, but as co-creators of community and possibility. In every space we entered—from performance festivals and school classrooms to hospital conference rooms and women’s shelters—we were building something together. A kind of quiet, joyful resistance to the ways the world is often portrayed: fractured, fearful, and without hope.

Our first stop was Kolkata, where we reconnected with our dear friend and longtime collaborator, Ishita Sanyal, founder of [Turning Point](#). Ishita has spent decades cultivating a radically inclusive community for people living with mental illness and other disabilities.



Performing at Turning Point

We gathered in a small but brightly painted, cheerful storefront—reminding me of the storefront political and community organizing spaces of my childhood on the Lower East Side of New York. For over an hour, we celebrated the parents who made the recent Open the Door Festival possible. We sang, danced, and played. This space definitively belongs to

the people who use it—reminding me of the feeling of being at the All Stars Project headquarter on 42nd Street.

Jitender, an East Side Institute Associate, performance activist, and member of the pandies political theatre, led us in rapid-fire theatre games—moving effortlessly between Bengali, Hindi, and English. Soon, the entire room was performing, creating delightful scenes, from a simple moment on the street to a full-on fishmonger marketplace. And performance was present in more than just the games—it was at the heart of everything we did, from the performance of appreciation to the spontaneous emergence of a dance and singing party.

Play

As the morning unfolded, the center became beautifully self-organized—a loving, supportive space where people led, followed, and co-created seamlessly. In Vygotskian terms, it was a fluid, community Zone of Proximal Development, where everyone could fully be themselves, contributing to something far greater than the sum of its parts.

A highlight of the trip was to finally experience Turning Point’s annual Open the Door Festival, something I’ve heard about for over a decade! Over 500 people—children and adults with special needs, students from across Kolkata, parents, and community leaders—came together to create a radically inclusive, joyful, and deeply humane celebration of performance as development. Chris and I brought a piece of the All Stars Talent Show Network to Kolkata, helping everyone create an appreciation chorus—a beautiful moment of spontaneous performance and community building. The energy, creativity, and generosity in the room were beyond words! It was joyful, messy, unpredictable, and deeply human.



Beyond the festival, we facilitated workshops throughout the city:

- At [St. Augustine's Day School](#), led by Father Borneo, teachers and students experimented with play and improvisation as tools for learning and connection.
- At [Muralidhar Girls' College](#) we were warmly welcomed by Dr. Kinjalkini Biswas, the principal—and a childhood friend of Ishita Sanya! Students from Muralidhar, Gurudas College, and Gokhale Memorial Girls' College faculty and students reflected on how learning could be reimagined as a creative, developmental process, rather than a purely academic one.
- At the Railroad Hospital, doctors, nurses, and mental health workers explored the role of play in healing—both for those they care for and for themselves.



Each day was packed, but with plenty of time for shared meals—rice and dal, Bengali fish curry, biryani, Dosa—with our hosts. It was amazing to spend time with Ishita's family. We walked through narrow streets, crossing between the past and present of this complex, vibrant city. Conversations continued between bites and laughter, circling back to the same question: How can we reimagine care, learning, and community—not just in theory, but in practice?



We also had an opportunity to reconnect with East Side Institute Associate Prativa Segupta and her team at [SEVAC](#), a community mental health program based on the Fountain House model. We are so proud to have this longstanding humane home for people with mental illness as part of our community.



Our journey continued in Delhi with [pandies theatre](#), a longtime Institute and Performing the World partner and an anchor of political theatre in India. Fifteen years ago, I first heard of pandies when Sanjay Kumar brought a group of young actors to *Performing the World* to perform *Off Track*, a hard-hitting, deeply political play about children living and working as sex workers on India's train platforms. It was a fearless indictment of capitalism's brutality, yet infused with the radical hope that creative collaboration can help build a better world. The performance changed me—expanding my understanding of global struggles and

strengthening my belief in our collective ability to create change. Knowing that the Institute had such colleagues across the world was, and remains, a profound source of inspiration.



Since then, our relationship with pandies theatre has only deepened. Sanjay participated in our [International Class](#), followed over the years by Jitender (Jeetu) and now Diksha Lamba. pandies has become a true partner in the *Performing the World* movement, and on this trip, Chris, Nancy, Jeff, and I had the privilege of spending in-person time with them—talking theatre, politics, and life over an incredible meal from the state of Nagaland (unlike anything I’ve ever tasted!).

Yes pandies is mourning the very recent loss of Sanjay, and yet what we experienced was not just grief, but the ongoing, emerging vision of its current members, led by Anuradha Marwah. They shared their upcoming theatre projects, including the staging of *Blood Wedding*, Sanjay’s last play. In addition to this, Anuradha asked each member to share the projects they are leading highlighting the collective responsibility and commitment of the group. The *how* of that conversation was striking; it wasn’t just a listing of projects but a demonstration of how pandies members are actively stepping up, taking ownership, and building upon the foundation that Sanjay and Anu created. Their leadership is emerging in real time, with each member bringing their own voice and vision while holding onto pandies deep commitment to theatre as a tool for development, social justice, and transformation. It was inspiring to witness how they are shaping the next phase of pandies—not just continuing the work, but reimagining and expanding it.

We also traveled into the heart of one of Delhi's poorest slums, where we visited [Shakti Shalini](#), an NGO supporting survivors of gender and sexual violence and working within communities to prevent everyday violence. We were introduced to Shakti Shalini through Sanjay, and they had presented together with him at Performing the World 2024. The pandies theatre has partnered with Shakti Shalini for years, especially in their community outreach work. Now led by the formidable Tammana Basu (who studied with Sanjay at the university) and Anjali Thakur, the organization is powered by a passionate team of over 25 young individuals dedicated to providing humane, free-of-charge, development-focused care to women and children.



What struck me most was the shelter itself—alive with the sounds of children playing freely and safely and of women who, perhaps for the first time in a long while, could take a breath and begin to create choices for themselves. In addition to residents at the shelter, neighborhood children have come to use it as a place to play. It is easy to feel hopeless when confronting the persistence of gender-based violence worldwide, but the non-judgmental humanity exhibited by Shakti Shalini left me with a renewed sense of hope.



We ended our visit by sharing the grassroots history of the East Side Institute, All Stars Project, and the Independent political movement in the poorest communities of New York. We engaged in a powerful discussion about the work of Lenora Fulani and the necessity of political transformation in both our countries with these young, emerging Indian leaders. We also introduced performance and improvisation as tools for social change, playing a series of improv games, including “Woosh Woah!” and “Yes, And!”

These collaborations—with Turning Point, pandies, Shakti Shalini, and others—are not just beautiful moments. They are the living fabric of a *global developmentl community*, what we are coming to see as *grassroots globalization*, which offers a powerful, hopeful response to the crisis-laden narratives that dominate our world.

We are not “bringing help” to our partners. We are creating with them. Learning with them. Growing with them. Together, we are shaping new ways of living, loving, and leading—from the ground up