



Citi

PASSION,
PARTNERSHIP AND
PROFESSIONALIZATION

The Dani family and their foundations

 Citi Wealth



THROUGH THEIR FOUNDATIONS,
THE DANI FAMILY HAS EMPOWERED
INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES
THROUGHOUT THEIR HOMELAND,
PARTICULARLY VIA SPORTS.

BY BUILDING INSTITUTIONS DESIGNED
TO LAST, THEY AIM TO DRIVE BETTER
HEALTH AND SOCIAL INCLUSIVITY FOR
GENERATIONS TO COME.

For several thousand children across the Indian state of Assam, Sundays can't come around quickly enough. Since 2020, the last day of the week has played host to many matches within the Brahmaputra Volleyball League (BVL), where teams of excited youngsters from remote villages proudly compete on recently constructed community courts. Before discovering their new passion for this sport, many boys spent their free time playing on riverbanks, while the girls were often housebound.

Beyond providing wholesome leisure, the BVL's benefits are increasingly evident.

IN 2024, THE ASSAM GIRLS UNDER-17S TEAM MADE IT TO THE NATIONAL QUARTERFINALS – A FIRST FOR THE UNDERSERVED STATE, WHICH IS LESS KNOWN FOR SPORTING ACCOMPLISHMENTS THAN SOME OF ITS PEERS.

The experience of playing in front of cheering villagers has worked wonders for the children's self-esteem, especially for girls who have long suffered from a lack of inclusion. The league also created economic opportunities for the mothers, with many earning income by stitching team uniforms.



Formalizing a shared vision: Vita Dani signing the MoU between Assam Volleyball Mission and Dani Foundation to expand the Brahmaputra Volleyball league and unlock opportunity for youth across Assam.

MISSION

The BVL is just one initiative that has benefited from the Dani Sports Foundation, a specialist sports-focused philanthropic vehicle created by Vita and Jalaj Dani. The couple is on a mission to help their compatriots lead healthier and more active lives, drive social progress and achieve sporting excellence. Meanwhile, Dani Foundation – their broader philanthropic entity – supports causes spanning healthcare, education, livelihoods, community development, sports and heritage preservation. Its stated goal is to:

ACHIEVE A SELF-SUSTAINING SOCIETY BY EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS AND ENGAGING COMMUNITIES THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION.

“Something like less than one percent of philanthropic giving in India focuses on sports,” says Jalaj. “Health and education obviously attract the most funding because that’s where needs are greatest. But Vita and I know that sports also matter deeply in many ways. Producing national and international champions is good for communities and countries alike – it builds a sense of pride. At the grassroots level, a thriving sports scene has so many measurable benefits, from better health and wellbeing to greater inclusion to employment opportunities.”

As their own children were growing up and getting involved in sports, the Danis witnessed many barriers facing young Indian athletes. Hiring coaching staff, staging tournaments, traveling and staying over in distant places all demand funding and logistical skills. Her experience of founding India’s first professional table tennis league gave Vita further insights into the state of Indian sports. What the country’s large and youthful population lacked wasn’t prowess or passion but the right institutions to help them participate, develop and flourish from the grassroots upward.

DANI PHILANTHROPIC IMPACT IN NUMBERS

1 MILLION

students assisted through holistic learning initiatives in collaboration with Kapadwanj Kelavani Mandal (KKM)

~250,000

people treated via healthcare initiatives across Gujarat

1 MILLION+

students fed nutritious meals daily, working alongside Annamitra

20,000+

physical education teachers throughout India trained in partnership with ELMS Sports Foundation

11

athletes from DSF-backed initiatives represented India at Youth World Championships

140+

national and international medals won by athletes across partnered centers in 2024-25

72

national-level medals won at DSF-supported centers in Gujarat in 2024-25

56%

cardiovascular endurance improvement and 15% BMI normalization recorded among 8,200 students in physical literacy programs across seven districts



COLLABORATION

In a country so vast – and with many unaddressed needs – knowing where to begin was always going to be a challenge. The Danis decided that the key was to work with others. Inspiration came partly from Jalaj’s grandfather, Surayakant Dani, a committed philanthropist and co-founder of India’s largest paint maker. Collaboration had been at the heart of his extensive initiatives, serially teaming up with hospital trusts and the state authorities to amplify his efforts.

“My grandfather’s philosophy was very simple,” recalls Jalaj. “There is so much that needs to be done in the social sphere.”

“WHATEVER RESOURCES AND KNOWLEDGE YOU CAN GIVE, SHARE THEM WITH OTHERS WHO ARE DOING THE SAME.”

“There should be no competition. My model of collaborative giving was learned from him. He also embodied the principle of Gupt Daan, a sacred ideal in our tradition, where charity is done privately without seeking any recognition.”

“We have partners everywhere,” says Vita, a sports entrepreneur who co-owns one of India’s leading professional soccer teams. “There’s no point reinventing the wheel. I believe it’s best to go to people who have expertise and persuade them to bring it to the table. We have collaborated with a two-time national table tennis champion, an Indian cricket legend, a star actor, a top English soccer club and a world-leading sports university, to name but a few. We understand the potential of such partnerships to benefit society at large.”

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- JALAJ DANI





Vita Dani and Jalaj Dani taking the stage together for the first time at the RCB Innovation Lab Indian Sports Summit.

As well as celebrity experts, partnerships with kindred organizations are how the Danis seek to drive progress across the board. One of their many ventures is with Pratham, one of India's largest non-governmental organizations, to promote sports and fitness in schools, identify promising athletes and develop trainers who can keep the program running long term.

“When like-minded people come together, that’s when magic can happen,” says Jalaj. “In the eastern province of Bihar, we are striving to increase participation in sports and what we call “physical literacy,” especially for girls. Previously, there was heavy parental reluctance around girls traveling to games or wearing sporting clothes. But we overcame such issues by brainstorming with our partners at Pratham. And we’re seeing great results. School participation has risen because children have begun to see it as a place for fun and play as well as learning.”

Outside of sports, one of the Danis’ successful collaborations is the development of a novel environmental scheme in Mumbai, India’s most populous city. Their foundation has teamed up with Project Mumbai, a citizen-led nonprofit, to address the vast amounts of plastic waste that have traditionally ended up in landfills or, much worse, in open water. Citizens and businesses have received education on how to segregate plastic for recycling, with large numbers regularly volunteering to collect, sort and despatch drinking bottles, food tubs and cosmetics packaging. So far, more than a hundred tons of material have been saved from dumping grounds.

“We found a partner who could recycle the plastic into useful items,” says Vita. “The resulting benches have become iconic. They are now widespread in public settings like parks, while a lot of private individuals want them for their gardens and so forth. We’ve got some at our own home, and there’s even a leading consulate in Mumbai that has installed them.”

“SEEING OUR FRIENDS, NEIGHBORS AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY GETTING SO INVOLVED IS GRATIFYING – PLASTICS RECYCLING HAS MORPHED INTO A MOVEMENT.”

EMPOWERMENT

The other dimension of the Danis' collaboration is engaging with beneficiary communities. "Deciding from our office in Mumbai that we're going to create a badminton court, install a table tennis table or set up a training center in a faraway village isn't the way we work," continues Jalaj.

"WHAT WE SAY TO BENEFICIARIES IS, 'THIS MONEY IS FOR YOU. YOU DECIDE HOW IT GETS SPENT. TELL US YOUR VISION, WHICH OPERATING MODEL YOU WANT.'"

"This is how you empower people to take ownership, get involved and generate ideas. We know that the best use of funding is for things that the community wants, and which also align with government priorities. Without that alignment, scaling up an initiative is extremely hard."

The Danis firmly believe in being hands-on, regularly visiting communities to observe projects and hear directly from beneficiaries. From her many conversations, Vita recounts how establishing a vibrant sports scene can help bring people together and erode deep-seated inequalities. "Last month, I was in a small town where a program of ours is operating. I was delighted to see women in their seventies and eighties coming out to play alongside kids of around eight years of age. That's true community participation. There are some places where women sit separately from their husbands during games, but we are increasingly seeing them attending and becoming more visible and engaged. Over time, this sort of thing breaks down barriers."



Building for the long-term: Vita Dani and Jalaj Dani at Ultimate Table Tennis league.

PROFESSIONALIZATION

For most of history, philanthropy has been largely informal, both in India and the wider world. Wealthy individuals, however generous, tended to give spontaneously, often anonymously, with a heavy skew toward local causes, and without strategy or measurement. In contrast to such traditional charity, modern philanthropy is becoming more formalized. It emphasizes building organizations staffed by skilled specialists, developing sophisticated systems and having robust governance. The goal is to create institutions that endure beyond the founders' involvement, to the benefit of future generations. Despite this evolution, though, much remains to be done.

“WITH RESPECT, I WOULD SAY THAT THE SOCIAL SECTOR IS STILL NOT AS PROFESSIONALIZED AS IT NEEDS TO BE.”

“Passionate people can start organizations, working round the clock with often meager means. But passion alone doesn't get you there,” comments Jalaj. “You need to build whole teams. You need people in technology, branding, financial control and operations. Our goal is to create initiatives and institutions that can sustain themselves. That means attracting other people to contribute their time, talent and resources. If everything rests on a single personality, it will eventually shut down. And their volunteers and communities will suffer.”

Imparting vital knowhow and processes to partner organizations and beneficiaries is thus central to the Danis' approach. As part of Dani Foundation's longstanding association with Kapadwanj Kelavani Mandal (KKM), case studies, models and best practices were shared with those working with schoolchildren in the state of Gujarat.

SUBSEQUENTLY, ENROLLMENT IN BENEFICIARY PRIMARY AND PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOLS ROSE 50%.

A learning outreach program helped more than half a million students re-enter education after previously dropping out owing to socio-economic factors.



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Staying close to the ground: Engaging directly with the community in Kapadwanj, Gujarat, to shape a more inclusive sporting ecosystem.

In the same way, Dani Sports Foundation is at the cutting edge of designing athletic programs, setting up leagues and competitions, advising on safety, inclusion and gender sensitivity, and fostering overall governance. With committed people and the right processes in place, the Danis believe their initiatives are better placed to enhance the lives of future generations of Indians, rather than just today's beneficiaries.

"Vita and I don't want to be a bottleneck or the end of the line," says Jalaj.

"WE CONSCIOUSLY WORK WITH PEOPLE WHO WILL BE AROUND ONCE WE ARE NO LONGER HERE. THEY ARE STEEPED IN OUR VALUES, AND THEY UNDERSTAND OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES."

"Many of them have qualifications from India's leading institutions and are equally passionate about the difference that they can make in the social sector."

A shared commitment across generations – The Dani family.



NEXT GENERATION

With an eye on continuity, Vita and Jalaj are now actively involving their son and daughter, both in their twenties, in philanthropic decision-making. To create engagement, the Danis choose projects that also resonate with their children. However, they haven't waited until now to nurture a philanthropic mindset in the next generation.

“WE DEARLY WANT THEM TO CONTINUE OUR WORK, SO WE’VE MADE SURE TO PASS ON OUR VALUE SYSTEM.”

“This began in small ways,” says Vita. “When they were very young, we would keep little cookie packets in the car for them to eat on journeys. And when homeless people would approach us at junctions, we would share these snacks with them, explaining their needs to the kids as well as our duty to help others.”

The Danis know the power of being inspired in early life. Jalaj has vivid memories of his grandfather's tireless generosity to individuals and good causes. Likewise, Vita fondly recalls how during her childhood, her family would host an annual Diwali gathering for several hundred disadvantaged children, complete with entertainment, food and fireworks. A scene from one of those parties has profoundly influenced her philanthropic journey.

“All the kids were given two sparklers to hold,” Vita recalls. “As the sparklers were lit, the looks of joy, the laughter and the glow were amazing. That was the most special moment of my life. That's the day I decided that this is it – I am going to do something that is going to make a difference in this world. It doesn't necessarily have to be big; it could be two sparklers that bring about light and laughter.”

Being raised in a philanthropic family culture has indeed shaped the Danis' next generation. “When we've asked our children what they would like for their birthdays over the years, they have often suggested doing something special, say, for our employees and their families rather than a gift for themselves,” says Vita. “I can't tell you how much it means to me when I hear things like that from them. They put others before themselves, which makes us proud.”



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Committed to perpetuating the family legacy, the next generation also aspires to evolve and augment it. The Dani children have highlighted preventative health as their overarching priority, while retaining sports as the main vehicle for seeking impact.

“Sports is ultimately so much more than competition,” explains Vita. “It’s a bridge between people of every background, which can also impart lifelong habits that feed into better physical health and mental wellbeing. So, our children will elevate sports within their response to an even bigger need: enhancing preventative health.”

The next generation’s vision addresses an unfortunate development. While malnutrition is far from conquered in India, the nation is also seeing a rapid rise in lifestyle diseases such as obesity and diabetes. Physical activity levels have dived amid the switch to urban living and, increasingly, screen time. “If we don’t address preventable conditions now, the future costs to individuals and society will be painful,” concurs Jalaj.

The next generation proposes integrated Sport × Health initiatives, combining athletic development with nutrition education and wellness programs. This maintains the family’s commitment to collaboration, empowerment and institution-building, but applies them to building public health infrastructure through sport.

“WHAT EXCITES ME IS SEEING HOW
OUR CHILDREN HAVE INTERNALIZED
NOT JUST WHAT WE DO, BUT WHY.”

“They understand that sustainable impact requires building institutions that outlast individuals,” says Vita. “We are determined that our mission does not end with us. Our children can help to improve many more people’s lives.”

THE DANI MODEL OF MODERN PHILANTHROPY

KEY INSIGHTS FROM VITA AND JALAJ

COLLABORATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Partnership: Joining forces with others can be immensely powerful. As people and resources come together, there is a compounding effect – it becomes a virtuous cycle.

Engagement with communities: Talking to the community is vital to understanding needs, deploying resources effectively, and driving lasting impact.

Readiness to pivot: Government and community priorities change, and some projects won't work out. We are always ready to adapt, shift approach, or fund different things.

TALENT & LEADERSHIP

Make it about the team: When causes become too closely associated with one individual, others who could make important contributions may get crowded out. Sharing the credit is essential.

Attracting talent: Recruiting great people to a cause is harder than raising money. Making them feel empowered helps attract them and strengthens their commitment.

Hands-on involvement: Giving grants is important, but it's not enough for us. Getting involved, offering knowledge, and leading by example add value.

INSTITUTION BUILDING

Inspiring by example: Establishing an organization, putting in processes, and developing governance methods give us great joy – especially when others feel inspired and want to replicate it.

Scaling up and sustaining: Achieving scale has enabled us to help many people. But an organization can only achieve scale and become sustainable when others contribute their time and money.

Selecting causes: There is so much to do in the social sector. The key is to pick areas you really care about, perhaps starting with something small, close to home.

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