Personal Statement
of Harshvardhan Agarwal (Ph.D. Applicant)

Embarking on a path in computer science has given me a set of experiences and values that continue to shape both my academic goals and the way I hope to engage with the UC Berkeley community. My motivations for pursuing graduate study today are tied not only to my interest in research, but also to the challenges I have overcome and the sense of responsibility I feel toward expanding educational access for others.

I grew up in Sonipat, a small town on the outskirts of Delhi where exposure to advanced math or science education was limited. To prepare for college entrance exams, I travelled to Delhi four days a week, often spending entire days commuting and studying. What made this period meaningful rather than overwhelming was the support of my elder brother, who mentored me through every step. Our routine of discussing problems on bus rides, correcting each other's approaches, and celebrating small improvements taught me the value of perseverance, shared learning, and building community even in challenging circumstances. These early lessons shaped how I now approach both research and mentorship, encouraging me to work patiently, collaboratively, and with a belief that effort compounds.

A turning point in my academic journey came when I represented India at the Asian Physics Olympiad and later the International Physics Olympiad. Preparing for these competitions exposed me to teachers and peers who pushed my thinking in ways I had never experienced. Competing in Adelaide and Tel Aviv introduced me to students from many cultures, and the friendships I formed helped me understand how differently people reason, communicate, and learn. These experiences expanded my worldview and made me more conscious of the opportunities I had been given and of the many students who do not have the same access.

This awareness guided much of my outreach work during my undergraduate years at IIT Bombay. Through the National Service Scheme, I taught children in nearby communities and saw firsthand how education can shift a young student's confidence. Later, in my hometown, I volunteered with the Spread Smile Foundation to support middle-school students from low-income backgrounds, many of whom were the first in their families to consider higher studies. Seeing them progress, even with basic academic guidance, strengthened my belief that expanding educational access is one of the most meaningful ways to create impact. During the same period, I served as a Teaching Assistant for four courses. Helping students through concepts I had once struggled with was deeply fulfilling, and I tried to recreate the environment that had helped me succeed: patient, encouraging, and grounded in the belief that everyone can learn with the right support.

My background has also shaped how I respond to new and unfamiliar opportunities. Coming from a modest educational environment to IIT Bombay, and later Stanford, required constant adaptation and a willingness to learn quickly. These experiences align closely with UC Berkeley's Principles of Community. I value openness, respect for diverse perspectives, and the idea that academic spaces should be welcoming to people from all backgrounds. I hope to contribute to this community by continuing to mentor students, participating in outreach, and bringing the same spirit of inclusivity that shaped my own development. My goal is not only to grow as a researcher, but also to help broaden participation in computer science, especially for students who begin their journeys with fewer resources than others.

Pursuing a graduate degree now represents a natural continuation of this path. My experiences have taught me that research is most meaningful when it is paired with a commitment to community and education. At UC Berkeley, I hope to bring my background, my values, and my dedication to creating opportunities for others to a place that shares these commitments.