

IE3 Final Internship Report

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Introduction

Many Indians personify their country as a goddess: her head is crowned by the mighty Himalayas, her two arms outstretched reach from Pakistan to Bangladesh, her life-giving bosom is the fertile Indo-Gangetic plain, and her feet are lapped by the waves of the Indian Ocean. This is Bharat Mata, Mother India, and my new home for three months. Over the course of my time in India, I lived in the country's capital, New Delhi and the northern state of Uttarakhand. New Delhi, home to over 16 million people is loud, chaotic and dirty. But behind the dirt and grime lies a beauty that only reveals itself with patience and a good eye. Uttarakhand is a northern state home to many holy cities with deep spiritual traditions. Over my three months in India I observed how public health issues are addressed and how traditional medicine is integrated into the health care system. It was a life changing experience that helped me grow personally, professionally and spiritually. India taught me so much about myself and strengthened my pursuit towards a career in medicine.

My First Day

Prior to my internship I prepared by reading plenty of stories about the busy and bustling life of India, so I was not surprised on my first day when our cab driver weaved in out of traffic blaring his horn at any chance he got. The ride would not have been so nerve racking, but the loose screw holding my seatbelt in place fell out. This was the first of countless things I came across in India that just do not work.

As we entered our first program site, we left the loud and dirty street and were overwhelmed with peace. Behind the white walls of Sulabh are green lawns and perfuming roses. It is a sanctuary for the women who live and work here. Founded by Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, Sulabh's mission is to eradicate the inhumane job of pick up and remove the human waste from village homes. Known as scavenging women, they were once considered the lowest form of human life in Indian culture and considered "untouchable". Our day spent with the women of Sulabh consisted of touring their school where students learn trades such as sewing, embroidering, beauty care, computer skills, and reading and writing English. It was quite an astounding first day of our program that left a deep impact on me. I was prepared to see women suffering, but I witnessed strong women learning to be independent on their own.

Language Development

Upon arrival to New Delhi I had no knowledge of Hindi. I had read that English is widely used in the major cities and can be sufficient for general communication. Over my five weeks in Delhi, I was able to pick up a few essential words, mostly the names of foods and "thank you". My transition to the north required a bit more use of the language. Luckily, my peer intern was learning Hindi and taught me some more phrases. Not everyone is so lucky to have a walking and talking Hindi dictionary on hand so I would recommend to someone studying in the North to be prepared with some useful phrases.

Important Benefits

My internship exposed me to countless situations where I was challenged to think and act in a way that I would not have normally back at home. This new way of thinking and cultural sensitivity was the main benefit from my internship. CFHI took me to some

pretty horrifying locations that made me want to roll up and hide. I spoke with men as they injected drugs on the side of the road, I watched a woman negotiate with a man the price for twenty minutes alone in the back room and I saw girls my age balancing bundles of grain on their heads rather than sitting in a classroom receiving an education. All these experiences forced me to take a peek into what the life is like for so many people. I was poked and prodded with scenes of poverty and injustice that made me angry. From this anger I grew and became that much more motivated to alleviate these injustices.

I am thankful for these experiences and never want to forget them. The people I met and the stories of their lives of hardship drive me to improve these serious issues. Unfortunately, the only way to make any improvements on a large scale is to convince politicians and government officials to see the importance of clean drinking water, a fully functioning waste disposal system and education for the nation's children. There are programs in place to begin the process, but with the overwhelming size of the population, India is struggling to balance quality over quantity of programs.

Biggest Challenge

The biggest challenge of my internship was witnessing severe poverty and sanitation issues while performing our daily tasks. I was in India with the priority and mindset to observe how public health issues are being addressed and aid in the delivery of traditional medicine. Images of shacks and homes in alleys lined with human feces, children playing on mounds of garbage, open sewer flowing into major rivers where a funeral procession slips a body into its murky waters are all too common scenes in the capital. I hoped to see improvement in sanitation as I moved to a more rural city, closer to holy sites and rivers, but I was greatly discouraged. Even in the holy city of Riskishesh

blessed with the steady flow of the sacred Ganga River, I witnessed open sewers and discarded trash in the riverbanks. This was the most difficult and frustrating part of my whole experience. It was nearly impossible to connect my purpose of promoting health to seeing a nation's people have little initiative towards its huge sanitation issues.

Becoming an Asset

Because our program in Delhi and Dehradun was not at one consistent location, there was no time to create roots in a single organization. To be an asset to all the different locations we visited it was vital that we arrive with a willingness to learn and curiosity to ask questions and explore the different aspects of the organization. Keeping an open mind was important to recognize how and why a program is structured and what their goal is for their target population. For example at a needle exchange site, men with serious drug addictions could exchange their dirty syringes for clean ones. The harm reduction initiative of the program is to reduce the spread of HIV, but there is little done to motivate these men to end their drug use. Once the men received their new syringe they sit in the park right next door and shoot up. I struggled to see the benefits of this program while they allow people to feed their addictions. I had to accept it and keep an open mind. I had to realize the peer educators and field workers know what is best for this population, because they were once in their shoes. This was a major turning point for me. I set aside my differences towards drug users and started to see these men as people with a disease called addiction and they deserved just as much help and support as anyone else.

Guidance & Support

The support from my local coordinator and fellow interns was invaluable. During the ten weeks of my program there were times of sickness, doubt, and frustration. It was so helpful to have friends experiencing the same situations as me and share my issues with, because they fully understand the situation. The local coordinators also did their best to assist in any discomfort during the program and I appreciated their support. I felt the most important support was talking to family back at home during my time away. As an independent child I was never expecting to need major support from Mom and Dad back home, but it was a boost of confidence when I got to connect with them via Skype or phone call.

Impressions of India

Before arriving to India I sought out as many people as I knew that had traveled to South-East Asia to learn about their experiences. I got mixed reviews from an equal number of people, either India was a filthy place that should only be visited for a short time or it is a magical country with rich culture and healing powers. I knew to keep an open mind when arriving to Delhi and hoped to hold on to the latter impression more closely. Unfortunately, New Delhi did not give me a convicting argument for India's beauty. It is an overpopulated city riddled with pollution, open sewers and a serious waste disposal issue. Furthermore, the people of Delhi were not as welcoming as I hoped. Rides on the metro were always guaranteed to be uncomfortable situations with unwanted looks from men. After a fascinating conversation with Mr. Anil Gupta from SWACH, the program site for week three, my impressions sank further. I was troubled to hear the lack of "public will" in India and how conditions are sure to worsen. I wanted so badly to hear the exact opposite. I wanted to hear of an up-and-coming motivated generation ready to

take India's congested systems by force and revamp the social conditions. Rather, I was forced to accept the likely potential of an even more disconnected population with little to no initiative to improve society.

Over my ten weeks I struggled to see the beauty of India. I searched for it in the sanctuaries but found people are just as likely to dump their trash outside the temple gates. I searched for it in the hospitals and the work of the doctors, but I saw patient dirty rooms and stains of human waste on the walls. It was difficult to watch as tired doctors struggled to manage the overwhelming amount of patients each day. Upon reflection, I eventually found the beauty. It is in the subtle way my host mother nurtured me when I was sick, the offering of a seat on a crowded metro, or the motivation of those tired doctors and program directors to keep their mission alive. Behind all of the chaos and filth of India's streets are a select few who shine the beauty of India. Their kindness is rare in this world but appreciated beyond measure. It is these simple acts that resonate the deep beauty of India and made my experience worthwhile. Hopefully, their love is contagious and spreads to others so eventually India can relieve itself of poverty and celebrate its own beauty.

I wish I knew...

I do not think I could have prepared any more for my journey to India. It would have been useful to learn some Hindi prior to my experience, but I was able to pick up phrases along the way. I knew before the internship that my time would be spent mostly observing doctor patient interaction, so I brushed up on a few medical terms and researched the major disease in India. It was useful getting familiar with the geography of

the country as well and exploring some cultural differences between the different states of India.

Daily Routine

As mentioned before, each day was fairly different as we visited different program sites throughout the ten weeks. A typical day in Delhi was a 9am metro ride for around 40 minutes to the organization's location. After an hour of sipping on chai and waiting for the doctor or location director to arrive we received a tour of the facilities and a brief overview of the site's mission and goals. We had an opportunity to ask various questions regarding funding or how successful their facility is in the community. Finally, we were sometimes given the opportunity to interact and talk to individuals who the program supports. For example, at a juvenile rehabilitation center we met a young man who arrived at the center six months prior. He shared with us his amazing transformation and his spiritual growth. He now works full time as the center's cook and supports his entire family including the dowry for both of his sister's weddings. This young man was just one success story we got to witness in Delhi's chaos.

Tips!

My recommendations to anyone interested in studying in New Delhi or Northern India are as follows:

- Research weather conditions weeks and days prior to departure. Things can change very quickly with the unpredictable climate of the Himalayas.
- Only pack essential items. Many things can be purchased in India for a fraction of what you would pay in the US. There is no need to bring a large amount of toiletries or extra

clothes. I found myself leaving behind articles of clothing along the way because it took up too much room.

- Prepare to pay for all of your transportation between location sites. For my five weeks in Delhi I estimate I spent around 2,000 Rupees or 40 US dollars on transportation. This includes rides on the metro and auto-rickshaws. You must also be prepared to pay for any auto-rickshaw ride on your own. Your local coordinator in Delhi may be in the rickshaw with you, but it is your responsibility to pay for the ride.

- If you have any food allergies make that very clear in the beginning of your home stay. I came to India as lactose intolerant and could not eat milk, cheese or yogurt. This concept is completely foreign to most Indians so I had to be very cautious about all the meals that could contain dairy products.

- If you are concerned about always keeping communication with friends and family at home you may want to look into “unlocking” your smart phone. By doing this you can buy an Indian SIM card and get 3G to your phone. This allowed me to have internet for a period of time on my phone and let me Skype with my family a few times. It was not as reliable as I hoped, but it did make home feel a bit closer. Because Delhi and Dehradun are only about 200 miles from the Pakistan border, Internet cafés do not usually allow people to video chat. There is a large security risk and they monitor it very tightly.

- Bring a good book or music to escape to at the end of the day. You will see, hear and smell things that will trouble you. It may be difficult to forget those things and you'll want an inviting book to lose yourself in or music to unwind.