

Alicia Mollaun internship personal report

I was fortunate enough to win a scholarship to complete an eight week internship with PRIA. My experience was sponsored by The Centre for Social Impact, in collaboration with the Chain Reaction Foundation and Jobs Australia.

India, the world's largest democracy and second most populous nation is one big contradiction. Between rich and poor, different levels of society and technological advancement India has constantly surprised me, yet at times has been quite predictable.

An eight week internship with the PRIA International Internship Program has provided an invaluable insight into Indian society, culture, development and governance. While the internship placement in Bihar has been useful (on Comprehensive District Planning (CDP) and Women's Political Empowerment projects), I have gained an even more valuable insight into Indian culture, social structures, values and norms.

When I found out that I would be placed in Bihar for 6 weeks I did a quick search of Wikipedia (and Lonely Planet) to see what I would find out. I learned:

- Bihar has a per capita income of \$148 a year against India's average of \$997
- 30.6 per cent of the state's population lives below the poverty line against India's average of 22.15 per cent
- Bihar has the lowest literacy rate in India, with women's literacy being only 33.57 per cent
- At the time of independence (1947) women's literacy in Bihar was 4.22 per cent.

These statistics indicated to me that Bihar would be a challenging development environment and that development policy in the State would need to be integrative. As such, many programs would need to overlap - from programs to improve people's livelihoods to programs to improve literacy. However, I found that this did not appear to be the case and policies did not appear to be integrative in their approach.

It was interesting (and sometimes immensely frustrating) living in India as part of such a patriarchal society. Women are often spoken for by their men folk. I even had to write either my husband's or father's name on my application to get a SIM card in India.

There were two things that really stood out to me as big problems in India and while they may seem like small issues, they underpin many difficulties that society faces: lack of sex education and the need for improved public health practices.

There is little or no sex education in schools. In discussions with PRIA office staff we looked at the lack of sex education in India and the problems that it causes. We were told that the lack of sex education was compounded by distorted views of sex. This is because only informal sex education existed in India. One very informal method of delivery was 'blue' movies. At local cinemas in the middle of the advertised feature films 'blue' movies would be screened (perhaps as a substitute to intermission?). It is imperative Indian children receive sex

education in schools. Part of the problem is compounded by the fact that not every child goes to school or stays in school into their teenage years. It is important also that sex education is accurate and does not gloss over issues. Teenagers need to be taught formally about sex education to combat problems like sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDs, population issues and on a more familial level, marital relationships. HIV/AIDS is still a big problem and is very taboo. The stigma around the disease is so bad that people don't admit they have it or get tested because they will not be able to get employment, will get cast out of their village etc. We were told a story about a family in a village where a husband was infected with HIV and his wife was subsequently infected by her husband. The husband developed symptoms of the illness and needed medical treatment. So his wife would carry her husband on her back to another village for treatment. However, when the wife began exhibiting symptoms her husband threw her out of the house because of the stigma of having a wife with HIV. There are some really heartbreaking stories that we have heard and a lot of situations are tough on the women.

The importance of public health and public health promotion should be emphasised to the Indian public. India needs more public health campaigns. It is very difficult to disseminate information to the billion-odd people in India. Not everyone engages with traditional media (newspaper/radio/television) and so the role of local government officials is essential to disseminate these messages. I was pleased to see promotion of Global Hand Washing Day in Patna on October 15th. According to the Global Hand Washing Day website "The challenge is to transform hand washing with soap from an abstract good idea into an automatic behavior performed in homes, schools, and communities worldwide. Turning hand washing with soap before eating and after using the toilet into an ingrained habit could save more lives than any single vaccine or medical intervention, cutting deaths from diarrhea by almost half and deaths from acute respiratory infections by one-quarter." Such a simple public health campaign needs to be disseminated in villages, though the poverty experienced in villages means that soap is a luxury that few can afford.

Eight weeks in India as a 'resident' rather than a 'tourist' presented several personal challenges for me. When I previously visited India in 2005 for one month as a tourist I thoroughly enjoyed my time in India and could not wait to visit again. When the opportunity to undertake an internship with PRIA I jumped at the chance to spend two months here. However, the reality of residency in Patna, Bihar was different from what I had anticipated. Despite wanting the experience of living in India a bit 'off the beaten track' I now realize that being in a city rarely frequented by tourists presented enormous challenges.

It was extremely difficult for us to get around and we were not at all independent which was immensely frustrating. Even a simple thing like going out for dinner was difficult as we had to call the PRIA state manager to organise a taxi for us because there is no official taxi service in Patna and we were told to avoid auto rickshaws because more often than not the drivers drink at night and do not speak English. This meant an extra cost for dinner. We were also told that it was not that safe for us to be out alone after 8pm. Being an independent woman in Australia, able to drive and come and go as I pleased this was quite a depressing facet of our stay.

Secondly, not being a tourist destination, Patna locals were not used to seeing foreign women and the staring was incessant. Wherever we went we would cause people to stop what they were doing. Shopping at local markets was trying; buying anything from teacups to bangles, men, women and children would crowd around and watch. I realize it is merely curiosity and people meant us no harm but it was exhausting always being at the centre of attention.

I really enjoyed my time in India and the hospitality and friendliness of my work colleagues will be remembered fondly for a long time to come. I just might have to have a break from Indian food for a while...