

Claire Hammerton internship personal report

On 22nd September 2008, I arrived at the headquarters of PRIA in Delhi, a development organisation based in India, with an assortment of vivacious young interns from across the globe in fact, this is not how my trip began. This is how it should have begun. Some weeks earlier, I had been the grateful recipient of a scholarship from the Centre for Social Impact, Chain Reaction Foundation and Jobs Australia to participate in the PRIA International Internship Programme in India for 8 weeks commencing on 22nd September 2008. Suitcases had been packed, immunisations received and PRIA's pre-departure guide re-read for any detail I might have missed. However, at the very last minute, an unanticipated visa hurdle resulted in me arriving in India 10 days late, after the other interns had completed their one-week of theoretical training and departed Delhi for their respective field projects. But what is an adventure without setbacks? Not one to be deterred, I reminded myself that it was these very obstacles that often made a journey all the more rich and fulfilling.

Due to my tardy arrival, I spent a very 'sheltered' first couple of days at PRIA's headquarters hurriedly updating myself on the handouts and power point slides I had missed during the first week of the program. My internship coordinator gave me my 'official program' for the internship which had been catered to each intern's particular interests. I was to be based in Jaipur in the State of Rajasthan for my field project with two other interns and would be regularly leaving the base in Jaipur for field visits to remote locations of 3 to 4 days in duration. Being 'sheltered' didn't last for long. From the moment I stepped out of the taxi to take my train to Jaipur, I was immediately overwhelmed with a conglomeration of noise, smells, colours, heat, dirt, people and animals. Prior to leaving Australia, my friends had told me that India was 'intense'. However, this description didn't do justice to the dizzying extremes I would soon experience as part of daily Indian culture and society. My comfortable life in Sydney felt further away than ever before.

Thankfully, I arrived in Jaipur to find two very welcoming and well-adjusted interns, one from Nigeria and one from Switzerland, who helped me acclimatise to the disconcerting chaos of India. We spent many hours chatting, travelling, sightseeing, and debating the logistics of how cows, dogs, motorcycles, rickshaws and people could travel in different directions on the same strip of asphalt and durably co-exist. With the other interns, I took part in five field visits to various locations within Rajasthan which included Govindgarh, Jodhpur, Jhunjhunu, and Karauli. Each of these field visits focused on different development issues, such as rural self-governance, violence against women, employment guarantee schemes, child education programs, right to information legislation, discrimination against dalits, waste management programs, and urban development. Each field visit offered a unique learning experience, particularly when it came to the method of learning. For example, in Govindgarh we learnt about the effectiveness of rural development schemes through meeting government officials on the one-hand and hearing about the 'success' of these schemes and, on the other-hand, visiting villages to hear the villagers talk about failed implementation, lack of community consultation and corruption. In other places, we had one-on-one conversations with people working in the field, such as in Jhunjhunu where we spoke in depth to

an NGO worker who had in the past two years lodged in excess of twenty 'right to information' applications to uncover local government corruption.

My learning curve during the internship was incredibly steep and the immensity of my learnings much greater than I had envisaged. My predominant learning objective prior to commencing the internship was to gain exposure to poverty and grassroots realities and, in India, such an objective is rapidly satisfied. The poverty I encountered in India was more prolific and confronting than any developing country I had ever been to. At every set of traffic lights, our rickshaw would be approached by homeless people begging us for our loose change. Visiting people's mud hut homes in the middle of the desert and attending schools with no electricity or toilets was, needless to say, very eye-opening. To some extent, PRIA's interns also had the opportunity to gain 'real' experience of Indian life through PRIA's policy that interns would use local transport to travel. Although sitting on a crowded bus for 6 hours in sweltering temperatures sandwiched between luggage and whinging children was not a pleasant experience, it was nonetheless a valuable part of the internship as a whole.

One of objectives I also had in mind after receiving the scholarship was to gain from the internship a deeper insight into and greater knowledge and skills in the area of community engagement and participatory development. PRIA's core mission is to empower communities to plan and implement their own development and to participate in their own governance. During our field visit to Karauli district, we fortunately had the opportunity to see this philosophy put into practice through assisting with the implementation of the first stage of PRIA's "Improving Quality of Elementary Education" program. This involved facilitating community workshops in various villages within Karauli with separate groups of school children, parents and teachers. These workshops involved PRIA staff members asking the groups a series of open-ended questions relating to quality of education in general and the quality of education in the particular village. Group members were encouraged to engage in open debate and discussion. Some responses collected from these workshops were anticipated, however many responses came as a surprise even to PRIA staff members with many years of experience in the field, demonstrating the exceptional value in conducting such sessions before formally devising a program.

Although each field visit was, in its own way, a fascinating and thought-provoking experience, it was my experience in Jodhpur in relation to atrocities committed against women and dalits which captured my interest more than anything. Dalits, who are often referred to as "the untouchables", are the group of Indian people positioned at the bottom of the harsh Indian caste system. Very soon after arriving in India, I learnt that dalits and women suffered the most extreme prejudices and hardships in Indian society as a result of historically entrenched discrimination. Dalit women are in a uniquely disadvantaged category in the sense that, as well as suffering discrimination and economic hardship, they are frequently the victims of sexual violence. In villages around Jodhpur, in collaboration with PRIA's partner organisation Unnati, I had the opportunity to: talk with local dalit people about the discrimination they have experienced; visit Dalit Resource Centres run by local NGOs where social programs are initiated to redress discrimination; attend the home of a female dalit activist to talk about legal action she had taken against local shopkeepers and government authorities; and meet with a local human rights lawyer who had acted pro bono in a number of dalit rights cases.

One of the requirements of the internship program is that the interns prepare a 10,000 word dissertation centred on a topic of our choosing. After my experience in Jodhpur, it was an easy decision for me to focus my dissertation on discrimination against women and dalits. For this reason, I returned to Jodhpur for a second visit without the other interns to gather more information for my dissertation and explore in further depth the effectiveness of both the law and social programs in redressing these inequalities. On my second visit to Jodhpur, due to a grave set of circumstances, I found myself embroiled in a dowry-related murder case. A couple of days before I arrived, a dalit woman had been found dead near a pond in a remote village and, along with staff members from Unnati, I embarked on a fact-finding mission to determine whether the death of this woman was a case of violence against women which Unnati would want to become involved in. Although the couple of days I spent investigating the murder were quite shocking and emotionally-draining, the experience was highly worthwhile and taught me more about Indian society, Indian bureaucracy, oppression and corruption than any textbook or expert could possibly have taught me.

However, in the midst of such dismal surroundings, we still found time to have fun and there were many lighter moments during the internship which were the source of great amusement for us. A monkey jumping from our hotel balcony to snatch our barely-eaten lunch, being asked by a 10-year-old child how I became 'white', and singing 'Waltzing Matilda' at a women's workshop in the middle of the desert were a few of these moments. Of course, the experiences which I gained the most value from on a professional and personal level were those experiences which took me completely outside my 'comfort zone' and exposed me to new realities and different perspectives. Fortunately, such experiences during the internship came in abundance. Of all that I experienced, however, it is the local people I met during the internship that have made the most indelible impression on me. The ability of these people to find joy and humour in the most despairing of circumstances was a true demonstration of the irrepressible capacity of the human spirit to rise above the most ubiquitous of oppressors.