

Indian Summer

Twelve weeks. Over the course of a lifetime, this may not seem like much. How many people have made a New Years resolution in January but have not made any real changes come March? How much can you really change after only three months time? At the risk of sounding too bold, and possibly a little pretentious by answering my own question, I am going to just come out and say it: a lot. If we could measure this change in a physical unit it would be the size of India itself. When I began contemplating participating in an internship program in Palampur, a rural town located in the foothills of Himachal Pradesh, India, I felt that twelve weeks would be an ideal amount of time to explore the region and learn more about the culture. I expected to find out a lot about water contamination and related illnesses, the focus of my internship, and to pick up on some Hindi phrases. Little did I know, twelve weeks is enough time to challenge you to reevaluate how you define yourself as a person and in relation to the world around you.

I was aware that spending my summer abroad would be a great learning experience. I would have the opportunity to immerse myself in a completely different culture, one so colorful and unique, held together by historic ties and long-standing traditions, yet also heavily influenced by the effects Western ideology and globalization. As a Comparative Cultures and Politics major, I felt like I finally had the chance to apply the theories and concepts that had been pounded into my mind in the classroom to real-life situations; this was a chance for me to implement the anthropological definitions to the world beyond my own backyard. From the moment I left the airport in New Delhi, I was surrounded by enough stimuli that it would take me a lifetime to process. Indeed, everyday I tried to soak up as much of the experience as possible, and at times I felt

mentally drained from the effort to hold on to everything at once. India was a whole new world to me, from the tiny vehicles that honked and sped past the cattle that roam the streets, to fragrant scent of spices from food being made in various shops in the market. I was afraid of missing anything, or worse, to have it slip away before I could fully understand it, much like water slipping through the cracks of your fingers. Everything I saw I tried to break down to fully grasp its meaning and significance, and I was constantly asking questions about anything and everything. However, throughout the course of the twelve weeks I spent in India, I learned so much more about myself and the person I want to become.

It seems ironic that I should learn more about myself when looking to learn about people in another culture. Many of these self-discoveries came from interactions I had with the people I worked with during my internship. For most of the twelve weeks I spent in India, I worked on an epidemiology project which focused on water contamination issues in Dhared, an extremely rural village near my residence. I would visit Dhared with a translator and interview families about health concerns and water-related issues; I also worked with a local private doctor to administer medication and organize a health camp for the villagers, complete with free examinations and prescriptions. Everyday I spent in Dhared was a humbling experience. The residents live in houses made of mud and clay with only a couple of rooms, and there is no plumbing system, contributing to the large amounts of bacteria that seep into the communal tap systems. The average annual income per family in the village is equivalent to about six hundred U.S. dollars; I have written checks for more than this amount before. Seeing the conditions these people lived in was an eye-opening

experience for me. It is one thing to read about poverty, but it is completely different to see it first hand. It made me reflect upon how privileged my life is, and how much of this has been unearned; I was simply fortunate enough to be born into the United States with all of its luxuries. Even in our current situation, when most people have taken economic blows as a result of the recent recession, there is hardly any comparison. I may complain and stress out about the student loans I have to take out or how I have to stretch my biweekly paycheck to pay for groceries, but these seem like problems of entitlement compared to worrying about obtaining worms from the local water supply and earning enough money to afford fruits and vegetables to sustain a family.

Other experiences in India helped me to prioritize my life appropriately. I am guilty of standing in front my closet, which is packed with a full wardrobe, and complaining about having nothing to wear. On average, the residents of Dhared each own around three full outfits. After spending twelve weeks dumping buckets of cold water over my head to bathe, it was almost a shock to use hot water and a shower-head after returning to the states. I began feeling grateful toward things that I had never even given a second thought to in the U.S., such as waste management systems, which I had never completely appreciated until I was in a nation that burned their piles of trash on the side of the road. I have come to realize that there are many trivial things that exist solely for comfort and are not crucial to my self-definition.

Perhaps the most pivotal self-realization I had in India was how much of an impact I can have on others. This may sound incredibly cliché, a typical 'one person is all it takes to make a difference' statement, but in a way, this is true. It truly amazes me that I was able to form such deep relationships with the families in Dhared over the twelve

weeks of my internship. Even with the language barrier, we were able to communicate with the help of a translator. The residents of Dhared came to trust me and began to open up during our interviews, asking questions and really becoming concerned with the health topic. On the day we held the health camp, nearly the entire village made the trek up a significant portion of the mountain to the village center to attend. I drank tea with the adults and played with the children, who came to refer to me as their friend. I instructed them on the importance of everyday health procedures and in turn they showed me how to appreciate what I have in life, and to use every advantage I have to reach out to others.

It seems strange that all of the experiences I had in India can be packed into a twelve week time frame. The person I was when I departed on the trip is surely not the same one who stepped off the plane three months later. I have gained a deeper perspective on what exists beyond the comforts of my life in the United States, and I am more aware of the unearned privileges I possess. The interactions I had with the people in Dhared and the relationships I built have truly impacted my outlook on the world, and have encouraged me to put my life into proper perspective and use the advantages I have to reach out to others.