

Reflection of a Trip to the Other Side of the World

Months of planning, hours spent completing forms and scholarship applications, worries about money, arguing with parents, academic research, cultural research, last minute doctor visits and psychological preparation were just a few of the hoops I had to jump through before landing in the spiritual land of red soil and magnificent trees they call India. The trip that took me half way around the world was part of a three week study abroad course titled, “International Development: Social Entrepreneurship in Tamil Nadu”, organized by two Geography professors at the University of Iowa, and composed of 20 odd individuals ranging from finance to engineering majors, undergraduate, masters, and PhD students, including one videographer, were all part of the adventure that was chock full of insights, struggles, new experiences, questioning and mind expanding experiences that will last a lifetime.

During my travels through Southern India I was exposed to a multitude of environments: head-splitting urban streetscapes, rural paradises, struggling villages, spiritual communities, landfills, schools, beaches, temples, street markets and farmer’s markets. The people being equally if not more interesting, I had the opportunity of interacting with drivers, fruit vendors, textile workers, house maids, NGO’s leaders, high priests, students, musicians, ecologists, artists, dancers, homeless, wealthy, French folk, German folk, Jamaican folk, Belize folk and Chinese folk. Not forgetting the lower species of the animal kingdom, wandering cows, kleptomaniac monkeys, goats, stray dogs, cobras, spiders and you can’t forget your occasional elephant.

Focusing in on the main reason for going on this trip, I will now share some experiences and lessons learned while interning with a local non-profit organization named Shuddham. For those of you who are not familiar with India, you should know that there are no litter laws set into policy and as a result people pollute common space by throwing trash, food waste and used water in the street. Shuddham’s mission is to clean up this mess by educated students and citizens, petitioning local governments and organizing neighborhood waste management programs to collect, transport, segregate, and recycle/dispose the material that would otherwise line the streets. Shuddham’s system for making change was quite impressive and I found it quite inspirational to see everyday citizens take it upon themselves to do the work that should be managed by the government.

Other than dealing with waste, Shuddham is also involved in protecting their beach front from coastal erosion by petitioning to stop the construction of a large marina that would further disrupt the natural motions of sand migration— results being loss of coastal villages and ecological diversity. In combating this money driven unplanned development, Shuddham’s main tool to portray these accurate truths are geographic images combined with environmental analysis. Seeing these geographic tools applied first hand in helping people to protect their environment was an eye opening experience. It’s not that these tools were new to me, since I am a geography major by the way, but it was the *context* in which the tools were used and how the locals praised the benefits of having them that took me a back and made me fully appreciate my skills in geography.

So what’s next for me? Well, before coming to India I had thoughts of pursuing some sort of career in agriculture or possibility even getting a MBA in Sustainability, but now my plans have changed. With my last semester at the University of Iowa, I plan to focus my energy

on acquiring and fine tuning practical geographic knowledge with the aim of working/helping people who need the aid of geographic services to conserve their local environments. There are too many people who are observing the destruction brought by poorly planned development, and now that I know that I have the skills and opportunity to help empower others to make change, I cannot help but travel down this path to see what future challenges, rewards and experiences that it may bring me. Thanks India.