

2013

Anudip and iMerit blog

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Recommended Citation

Eukel, Phillip, "Anudip and iMerit blog" (2013). *Global Social Benefit Fellowship*. Paper 9.
<http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/gsbf/9>

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Anudip and iMerit experiences

Phillip Eukel

Civic Duty

I stand out in India. The most obvious trait is my appearance. I have blue eyes, blonde hair, and white skin, but strangely enough my pants give me away as well. On my first weekend here, I went to the local department store, Pantaloons, and bought two pairs of thin dress pants to wear to work. The khakis I brought from home were thick and durable making them a nice long term investment and the last thing I want to wear in India. As I shopped in Pantaloons, a problem soon became very present. All the pants I could find were "Slim Fit". A large portion of the male population in Kolkata is rail thin, making this particular lean design a desirable choice. I am not a slim fit kind of guy. When I was young, my mother often had to ask the sales assistant in department stores for "Husky" sized pants. Today, I no longer have to ask for "Husky", but I am not asking for smalls that is certain. After a long game of charades, due to the ever present language-barrier, the sales assistant understood my request, pulled out a measuring tape and to my chagrin quantified my waist size. I doubt most of the looks on the metro are for my classic cut pants, but it is clear I am not a local.

This difference has its perks and benefits. People are incredibly helpful when I get lost, engage me in friendly discussions, and often try to offer me their seat. Conversely, I get charged far more for routine things, most notably taxis. Mostly, all of the interactions make me hyper aware of what I represent, The United States of America. Almost every interaction on the street begins with the question, "From where are you coming?" Inevitably, this leads to questions comparing India and America. Many of the questions are easily answerable and are gracefully set up to engender friendship. Some dig deeper. As an undergraduate college student, my interests are not always politically or civically oriented, though a certain certainly should be. I can throw in an opinion or two on major issues, but am a toddler without floaties in the deep end of a swimming pool discussing the housing market.

On the train ride back from Darjeeling, an Indian co-worker and good friend, Ankur, began to ask me questions about American foreign policy: "Why did America invade Iraq?" "Why does America have such an aggressive military policy?" "What was the public opinion of George W. Bush at the end of his second term?" Man, did I want some floaties. I answered the questions as best I could and got help from a few of my American companions traveling with me. I hope I gave useful and explanatory answers, but my gut tells me that had those questions been on a class final, my answers would not have been satisfactory. I can explain my personal choices on pant designs quite well, now the goal is to be able to explain the choices of my country as fluently.

Guest is God

My companions in India have pointed out my tendency to use phrases they've never heard and don't understand, such as "the straw that broke the camel's back". I believe India has provided me with another phrase to add to my rotation, "guest is god". Yesterday, I was lucky to be invited, along with my SCU companions, into the houses of a few of the female workers at iMerit. As we entered the houses, about the size of two dormitory rooms pushed together, we were warmly welcomed and given the seat of honor, the bed. As the houses do not have space for a sitting room, the bed doubles as a sort of sitting room, again not unlike a college dorm room. With each visit, there was a small social struggle. We wanted the residents whom we were imposing upon and interviewing to sit upon the bed, while they persistently gestured us onto the bed. In the end, there ended up being a compromise of sorts. At first, we sat criss-cross applesauce on the bed during introductions and pleasantries, and when interviews started we swapped places.

During our second home visit, Mehuli and Sarala, the trainers who were translating for us, explained the idea of guest is god. If they, as locals, were in the unfortunate situation of needing to ask for a rupee, they would be refused. If we, as guests in India, asked for a rupee, we would be given ten. I never asked, but I believe that the same charity would be provided regardless of my skin color, gender, or nationality, though I am sure being a white American male helps here.

In our second interview, we had a chance to talk with the father of one of iMerit's female workers. During our initial questions, he praised iMerit and claimed it was a good place for his daughter to work. Further probing revealed that though he supported his daughter working at iMerit, where she is a team leader, her family's financial need was the only reason she was allowed to work anywhere. If the family did not need the income she provides, she would not work at iMerit, but stay at home. By the end of the interview, it was clear, despite the language barrier, that my viewpoint on women working differed from his. Yet at the end, my companions and I were offered wonderfully cold 7up in tall glasses. A man acting against his assertions on women due to financial restrictions provided a man encouraging female independence a luxury. Guest is god.

When I was young, I never understood why my mother got in a tizzy when guests were coming over. I had to clean my room, make my bed, sweep the patio, get food from the grocery store, vacuum the sitting room, set the table, put drinks in the refrigerator, take a shower (that probably should have happened even without guests), put on nice clothes, turn on the light by the door, and wash Peewee, our dog. In hind sight, both Peewee and I smelled, and as Indian hospitality moves me to reflection, I only hope the hospitality my family provided lived up to Indian standards.

The other two rupees

As I sat in an auto rickshaw barreling down a rural Indian road, stuffed in with five other people, heavy rain pounding the windshield, spray from the wheels wetting my pants, and the blue tarps, serving as rain covers, flapping noisily, my co-worker Souraj leaned over and laughingly declared that this would be a trip I would not forget. Twenty minutes later we arrived at our destination. We hurried through the rain up the stairs to a dry room where we were greeted by roughly twenty five Indian women dressed in beautiful Saris smiling and welcoming our contingent.

I had arrived in one of Anudip's DREAM (Developing Rural Entrepreneurs Through Adoption and Mentoring) centers for women in Harindanga. One of my partners, Lauren, and I had come to this center along with a few co-workers in order to interview the women about the center, what it does and why. This particular center focused on teaching tailoring. The women were learning how to make traditional Indian clothes in order to open shops in their respective local villages. The group assembled before us had just started, and were still learning to make very basic articles of clothing, petticoats and simple drawstring pants. We sat down with the women and began our interview. In an attempt to draw out the best answers we made the interview "popcorn style". We asked the questions to the entire group and anyone who wanted to answer need only raise their hand or reach for the microphone. As we inquired about their lives, the women passed the microphone around and told us about their lives and family. Some were local, but many came from long distances to receive training at the center. Many were shy, but all were clearly passionate about learning a new skill.

In my experience with interviews during my fellowship, the 'why' question always elicits the most interesting answer. The question seems to be open ended enough to garner interesting answers I wouldn't have otherwise discovered, yet focused enough to keep the answers relevant. It was no different today. When we asked why the women wanted to learn tailoring, one woman gingerly reached for the microphone and explained her motivations in very simple logic. If the family needs five rupees, but the husband only brings home three rupees, where will the other two come from? The other women echoed her sentiment in subsequent responses. Learning tailoring through Anudip's DREAM program gave them an opportunity to earn the other two rupees. Driving away from the center, we somehow managed to fit a personal record of eight people in an auto rickshaw. It was, as Souraj said, an experience I would never forget. The ride, however, was nothing compared to the blunt wisdom given to me by a prudent and empowered Bengali woman.

Hello, Goodbye

Today is our last day in the office here in Kolkata. I'm not really sure how we managed to keep it together to get to this moment or truly realized until the end approached how blessed we were with co-workers who became good friends and that India, at least for a bit, became home. I can only speak for my experiences, but I believe India defies any expectations produced by a western mindset, and is more brilliant for it. Many people told me our initial days would be a struggle due to language barriers, logistics, and cultural differences, and they were. Yet when I finally surfaced and absorbed my surroundings I got handed a gift more than worth the struggle of the initial clash. India is gloriously green, bamboozlingly busy, unwaveringly hospitable and kind, implausibly hot, and now a place I'm quite sad to leave. It is a wonder to behold, and treasure to experience. The sub-continent contains nearly every climate and ecosystem, and amazes in its raw beauty and vastness. The people, however, like everywhere else are

what make India truly special. As I interviewed people throughout the Anudip and iMerit organizations, when I asked what they liked most about working at Anudip or iMerit without pause everyone replied, "It's a family."

So thank you to Anudip, iMerit and everyone who has allowed me to be a part of their family here in India. It has been an unbelievable experience, and the people are what has made it so amazing.