

Experience Report - Internship in the Western Ghats forests, Karnataka, India

Identification Code: Ind-2020-NP194-w

Degree: Master in Gender Studies

Semester: 4th

Destination Country: India

Objective of stay: Research Internship

Duration: 25th of February – 31st of March 2020 (5 weeks)

Host institution: Snehakunja Trust

1. My experiences concerning the living, working and research conditions and useful advice for future scholarship holders

Personal and academic interest in the host country

My decision of seeking out an internship in India was largely influenced by my interest in the unique eco system of the Western Ghats forests and the equally unique, holistic and gender sensitive forest conservation project carried out by my internship supervisor. Already within my studies and my work as an academic assistant in Gender Studies, I had been interested in combining gender and environmental aspects.

The Western Ghats forests are among the ecosystems with the highest bio diversity in the world and many species there are critically endangered. In the area around Sirsi, where I was staying, the majority of the population is directly or indirectly dependent on forest resources and lives below the poverty line. Therefore, finding sustainable methods of securing the local's livelihoods and at the same time establishing active and effective nature conservation strategies, is of high importance. In the Western Ghats it becomes clear once again how social, economic and environmental issues are always intertwined.

India is a fast developing country where contrasts between rural and metropolitan living, progressiveness and tradition could not be more extreme. Especially when focusing on gender aspects, this becomes visible. While many young women in the cities are walking their paths with independence and confidence, gaining high academic qualifications and occupying leadership positions, many others are clearly bound to strict gender roles which tie them to the home and largely exclude them from public life. It is no secret that India has continuously been struggling with sexual and domestic

violence against women and that most communities are organised in strict patriarchal structures.

Therefore, it was especially interesting to be part of a forest conservation project which focused on women and their unique knowledge about the ecosystem to help establish more sustainable harvesting methods of non-timber forest products. These conservation practices enabled the rural women to organise into groups for the first time, breaking away from the isolation of their domestic duties while they were also given a louder voice and more decision making power within their communities.

Preparation and organization of your stay abroad

Within my occupation as academic assistant to my Gender Studies professor, I had been working on gender and environment topics. We created a web documentary where my internship supervisor contributed some input about his gender sensitive conservation practices. Processing his input and reading up more on his project, I became curious and interested to join the project for a research internship.

As my internship supervisor and my professor were in good contact, it was not hard for me to reach out to him. I was immediately invited to come to the Western Ghats.

My internship supervisor was extremely helpful with organising my stay. He organised accommodation for me and even booked the right train for me to get from Bangalore to the Western Ghats. Before my arrival, he sent me plenty of academic papers that would help me understand his approaches.

Visa:

Attaining my Visa for the Internship caused me a lot of stress and frustration. In India it is not allowed to work (even if unpaid) with a tourist visa, so receiving the right visa for being allowed to work is important.

I suggest to start with the visa process more than three months in advance since you might need to rely on the International Visa Services on telling you what type of visa you will need and for them to figure this out can take a long time. In my case they were not very cooperative, giving me very little and unclear information, taking a very long time to respond to emails and somehow never being reachable by phone. Everything had to be sent in the post which also slowed down the process and all guidelines have to be strictly followed when filling out your visa documents (eg. They will not accept standard German passport pictures, you need to send in a picture in a specific square format).

Flight:

I took a flight from Frankfurt to Mumbai and Mumbai to Bangalore. Changing in Mumbai was a little stressful as I had to pick up my luggage and check in again. If your arrival is

slightly delayed as mine was, a lot of running might be required. Otherwise the flight was smooth. (Cost for a return flight about 600 Euro)

Insurance:

I had a contract with Die Würzburger Versicherungs-AG (Product: Travel Secure Young) which included travel health insurance, travel liability insurance, accident insurance and emergency insurance. (Cost for two months about 75 Euro)

Accommodation search:

Accommodation was organised by my internship supervisor. I was invited to stay with his family and another family who was also involved in forest conservation and lived on a small farm in the jungle. I switched between these places occasionally depending on my tasks and I felt very comfortable and well looked after in all of them. Staying with the family cost me about 10 Euros a day with home cooked food included.

Practical advice and where to find useful information

Talking to people that have already had some experience in India is the most useful way to prepare yourself for such an experience. However, I also bought a Lonely Planet for the area I was in and followed travel blogs and vlogs to get additional information.

What did you like or dislike about your host country and your host institution?

My stay in the Western Ghats was an incredible experience all in all. I was met with great warmth everywhere I went and living with the locals, I was able to personally witness their daily lives and their interaction with nature.

In my experience, navigating rural India as a non-local seems virtually impossible if you do not have locals to take you in and help you organise your days. This means that I had to give up a lot of my independence and had to fully rely on my hosts, co-workers or internship supervisor to help me carry out my research. Due to the language barrier (the local language was Kannada and many people only spoke very little English) I was also dependent on translators which was not always easy.

Often I found myself confused as to what was happening around me and where people were taking me or what plans they had for me this day. Usually the plans were also changing multiple times and I was rarely updated on the change of plans. It took me some time to get used to and it often forced me to be very good at adapting and to step out of my comfort zone.

It did not take a long time for most people in this area to know about me as I was probably the only European there and me being a young woman traveling on my own was also viewed as very unusual. I was met with great curiosity which was sometimes

uncomfortable when groups of people gathered around me but on the other hand I was also happy to answer peoples questions since I was also curious and asked especially the women many questions for my research. It made me feel like there was more of a mutual exchange rather than me, a westerner, just intruding and conducting research on locals.

There is a large culture around hospitality and I was always invited to people's homes and they offered me food and drinks. For me this was great most of the time as I love trying food and getting to know how people live. However, sometimes it can also be overwhelming and it is not possible to say "no" to food. Unfortunately, as a guest you are never really allowed to help with cooking or cleaning up afterwards which, having been socialised into wanting to make myself useful as a guest, was a little difficult for me.

This was also a problem when conducting my research with the women's groups. Initially I was planning to participate in the women's work, document my work with them in a research diary and then use this as data for my academic work. However, in the beginning when I was meeting the different women groups they were more seeing me as a guest and would not let me do actual work. They ended up demonstrating to me how they were processing their forest fruits and showing me around their farms and houses, but when I tried to join in with fruit cutting for example I drew so much attention to myself that everyone gathered around me in fear I was going to hurt myself somehow. It was hard to explain that I was here to work along with them and that I know how to use knives and work with my hands.

I am sure this would have changed eventually, however due to the global crisis cutting my stay short, I was never able to integrate enough to be viewed as a worker.

Project participation at SNEHAKUNJA TRUST - involved in promoting rural health, livelihoods and nature conservation

My tasks for the internship were to understand and engage with the multiple, socially differentiated groups of forest-dependent people and their respective knowledge on native fruits. Participate in gender and forestry related activities like value addition, value chain development. Participate in organizing collective action in domesticating, cultivating and promoting sustainable harvesting practices for threatened forest species. Assist women's groups on value addition of fruits in the common facility centre in association with Snehakunja, Parna FPO, village forest committees and IFHD. Initiate and promote innovative processing, value addition and packaging techniques.

Due to my stay having been shortened I was only able to touch on some aspects of these tasks and mostly was only able to observe and learn about them. However, some environmental aspects also played a role in me not having been able to actively work as much as I wanted to and accompany the women from harvest to final product. During the month of March, it would have been the season to harvest wild mango and jackfruit

for making pickle and other products. However, this year due to changing weather conditions these trees did not produce enough fruits and so there was no harvest.

In the start of my internship, I spent a lot of time with my internship supervisor who explained all the projects they have initiated to me. The gender sensitive conservation work he has been carrying out is very complex and multidimensional.

I was also taken to farmer conferences and meetings with the producer companies and learned about funding and how the products were marketed. Together we visited multiple women's groups who talked to me about the products they were making, how they have switched to more sustainable harvesting methods and how them organising into groups, changed their social life and standing within their community.



Image 1 and 2: Women from the Sarguppa Women's Group with their products: candied gooseberries, garcinia butter and baskets weaved from vines

2. Feedback

Generally I just stayed long enough to get an overview on all the projects that were going on within my Institution and I was never able to join the women's groups from harvest to final product. I had many enriching conversations with the women and also carried out some interviews with some of them. However, fully joining in on their work and making myself useful did not really work out the way I planned. The fact that my stay was cut short certainly prevented me from getting into a routine with the women and losing my status as a "guest".

Already from mid-march restrictions due to the spread of the corona virus were issued. From this point onwards the Indian population was asked to start social distancing. Of course my internship supervisor and I immediately reacted to this and I stopped my research to not put anyone at risk. Soon it became clear that this crisis would not pass by quickly and so I was forced to come home a month earlier than planned.