

India: Public Health, Traditional Medicine, Social Justice... and so much more

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There was something so special about visiting a country I essentially knew nothing about. Nothing I experienced was good or bad, it was just different—until I labeled it. This summer I was blessed with the opportunity to travel to India with a group to study Public Health, Traditional Medicine, and Social Justice through the Experiment in International Living. I really thought the health aspect was going to be my favorite part of this experience, but I was wrong...

While in India we traveled to five places all located in Northern India—New Delhi, Bahraich, Agra, Palampur, and Mcleodganj. We started out in New Delhi where we received basic Hindi instruction, a brief orientation on Indian culture, and an introduction into the healthcare system. We also went to visit notable landmarks like the Lotus Temple, Gandhi Memorial, and the Dili Haat where I first learned to bargain! In Agra, we visited the remarkable Taj Mahal. It still feels surreal that I saw one of the seven wonders of the world! After the Taj Mahal, we went to Palampur where we stayed at the Kayakalp Institute. I meditated (or at least tried), learned about and participated in Yoga, and studied traditional medicine, specifically Ayurveda, in depth by interacting with Dr. Ashutosh. By far though, Bahraich and Mcleodganj were my favorite places in India. It was in those places where I began reflecting on my life and questioning human morality.

Bahraich is a developing rural area located southeast of New Delhi. When you drive through the area, you see a lot greenery from the rice and tea fields. Malnourished cows and sheep wonder around the street and every few feet you see street vendors selling foods like corn or deep-fried foods like Pakora. While in Bahraich, we visited many different places like the Developmental Association for Human Advancement (DEHAT), girl schools promoting

education and gender equality, and different level health care centers. The discussions we had each night about what we saw proved to be some of the most important discussions I've ever had where I not only learned about other people, but myself. For instance, the night we discussed the primary and district health centers in India were very emotional. In the past, I wouldn't have contributed to group discussions fearing that people would not agree with what I had to say, but that night I realized that what I had to say was very important, relevant, and valid. Many of my peers felt the conditions of the health centers were awful and that no person should have to ever go there. They did not like the lack of air conditioning, unstable infrastructure, and unsanitary cleaning habits; they kept comparing the health centers to clinics and hospitals in the US—except, you cannot do that, both countries are economically different, and I knew that. Because of that, I felt the need to interject and give my thoughts on their critique. Almost instantly people jumped on me for explaining why we shouldn't compare the US to India, but once I explained more, it opened their minds.

Mcleodganj is a small, developing town located at the base of the Himalayas in Dharamshala, India. I did my homestay in Mcleodganj and was initially surprised that it was chosen for the homestay. All throughout the trip we were learning about and immersing ourselves in Indian culture, but in Mcleodganj it was all about Tibetan Culture. I remember the nervous feeling I had as our group was waiting to meet our families. Because, of the limited families, we were paired in two for our homestay which actually calmed our nerves a bit. When I first met my host mother, I was feeling a whirlwind of emotions. I was excited, shy, happy, nervous, and all of these other things. But, by the end of the homestay, I felt so comfortable with my family. My family consisted of a mom, dad, sister, and brother. I met all of them except my sister, Chemi, because she was enrolled in a Tibetan Children Village which is the equivalency

of a boarding school. It was a little weird waking up every morning having breakfast ready for us because my partner and I never actually ate breakfast. Sometimes breakfast would be eggs, other days our mother would make us these apple pancakes (which were exceptionally delicious). After breakfast, we would have tea with them and take our little brother, Tenzin, to school. One of my favorite days with my host family was when me and partner/sister Imani made breakfast and dinner for our family. Imani decided to make French toast for breakfast and for dinner I made this weird, cheesy pasta. It was probably one of the hardest things ever cooking for them because a lot of the ingredients I normally cook with are not found in India. My parents and brother liked it though, so I guess Imani and I did a pretty good job. Aside from eating and cooking with our family, it was nice learning about Tibetan culture from them and seeing them practice some of the rituals they talked to us about.

Another reason I was so fond about being in Mecleodganj was because it by far one of the most educational and rewarding experiences I've had the pleasure of being a part of. Prior to being there, I'll admit, I had no idea about the Tibetan Crisis—China invaded and overtook Tibet in the 1950s, there was a mass genocide, Tibet is no longer recognized as a country per the UN, over 150 people have taken part in self-immolation fighting for Tibetan rights, many people refuse or are scared to publicly aid Tibet. But after talking to families and businesses there, visiting places like the Dalai Lamas Temple and Tibetan Children Village Schools, and once again immersing myself into a culture different than mine, I learned a whole lot, about Tibetan people and myself. Questions that kept running through my mind while I was talking to different Tibetan people or visiting different places were: Why was this information never taught in school? Or, why is limited information on this topic available to the general public? Eventually you're able to deduce the issue. People don't realize how interdependent the world actually is

and how people have disregarded basic human morality. It's all become about business. No one wants to defy China because of the power they have in the world. What I learned is that it is essential to educate other people about what you learned; sometimes just talking about issues with a group of friends is enough. And, you have to continue to seek information.

In general, being in India allowed me to clear my mind and re-evaluate thoughts that I once had. I like to consider myself an open-minded person, a knowledge seeker, someone who likes to challenge other people's thoughts and have my own thoughts challenged. What I encountered while in India is beyond personal growth and development, it was a full-on transformation through experiential learning. In the past, I had difficulties identifying strengths and weaknesses of mine, but now they're more evident than ever. I need to work on things like self-doubt and vocalizing my thoughts, but I also need to realize that I'm good at keeping an open mind, adapting to situations, and coming from a place of understanding. I learned so much about questioning things and not accepting things that are considered norms. Most importantly though, I learned that it's not enough to learn all these different things and not share your new, profound knowledge with others. You also have to keep taking the initiative to learn about concerning matters. That is what differentiates knowledge from wisdom.