

A hand across the ocean

In an effort to promote international understanding of India's grassroots realities, the Tata group has sponsored internship of international students at their community initiative projects

As Jamal Khan looked out of the window of his train compartment, travelling from Jamnagar airport to Mithapur in western India, he saw tribal women in their colourful attire walking in the distance, balancing huge pots of water on their head. "It was so incredibly hot and the women were carrying this heavy weight on their heads," he recalls. "It was something that I'd seen only in *National Geographic*, but now I was experiencing it first hand." It was a moment of epiphany for the senior from Berkeley, one that has profoundly changed his attitude and way of thinking. "I realised how critical water, which we take for granted, is to these people."

Mr Khan is one of the nine students who travelled from California and the UK to spend eight weeks in India (during June-August 2008), working with Tata companies on various social development projects as part of the Tata International Social Entrepreneurship Scheme (TISES). TISES, launched in January 2008, aims to give international students an opportunity to work on community initiative projects undertaken by different Tata companies, and thereby promote international

understanding. Tata Sons has signed an agreement with the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Cambridge, UK for three years.

Shernavaz Colah, a consultant at Tata Services who has been coordinating this programme, says: "We hope TISES will help these interns gain insights on how the Tata group is committed to building the community and how Tata values are reflected in its corporate sustainability projects. It will also bring an international, and fresh perspective to our corporate sustainability projects."

All the nine students, the others being Liza Cirolia, Shu Shang, Annemieke Wilcox and Pedro Rosado, from University of California, Berkeley and Grant Jackson, Selene Gittings, Lee E Nordstrum and Valerie Fitton-Kane from the University of Cambridge, UK, were selected after an intensive process. They were then taken through a pre-induction orientation programme, which included briefings about the projects that they would be working on as well as some background on the culture and languages of India.



Berkeley students working with villagers in Babrala in northern India



The Berkeley and Cambridge students working actively with the communities

Surmounting taboos

Ms Cirolia, currently pursuing a graduate degree with a major in development studies and social welfare, and Ms Shang, who will be completing her graduation in molecular and cellular biology and environmental studies, travelled to Jamshedpur to work with Tata Steel's regional initiatives of sexual health by today's adolescents (RISHTA) project. Their objectives were to set up a school session curriculum to impart education and awareness about sexual health issues to rural adolescents in the 14-16 age group, develop staff training modules, and ensure the project's sustainability.

Ms Cirolia and Ms Shang often had to drive long distances to reach the schools for their sessions. "We found that there were many misconceptions about sexual and reproductive health care, and this had more to do with local traditions than any lack of knowledge," says Ms Cirolia.

Adds Ms Shang, "It was a very sensitive topic and one which is generally taboo in most rural areas. So, it was not easy for us to teach it, but we tried to include a lot of information in our sessions. We used different techniques to make the programme as interactive as possible." The two interns are hoping that the work that they did will help strengthen the youth resource centres that will eventually take on the role of community resource centres, where the community itself will play a major role in bringing about social change.

Action through interaction

Further north, at the Tata Chemicals' fertiliser plant at Babrala, Mr Rosado, who recently graduated from University of California, Berkeley and Ms Wilcox, a student of peace and conflict studies and economics, worked with a team from the Tata Chemicals Society for Rural Development (TCSRSD) to develop a sustainable livelihood model through agriculture-based interventions.

Meeting the farmers and villagers from around the plant, they looked at various ways in which agricultural outputs and incomes could be increased — better utilisation of resources, cooperation among farmers, crop diversification, etc — while also exploring alternative means of livelihoods for village communities. Based on their research, they recommended the need to further strengthen the already established self-help groups (SHGs) and micro-credit societies. They suggested a three-tiered approach to facilitate and promote cooperation among farmers, at the individual, village and community level.

Mr Jackson, a final year student of Biological Natural Sciences at Cambridge, worked on an income enhancement project through animal husbandry. It was his first visit to a country outside Europe, and the contrast between urban and rural India was a revelation for him. "One day we were visiting a huge mall in Noida (a suburb of New Delhi), which was similar to what you would find in the west. The next day we were in a village, sitting on the floor drinking buttermilk," he exclaims. What will stay with him however is the compassion, the sense of sharing and friendliness displayed by the rural folk, which he found refreshing.

Ms Gittings is a final year Bachelor of Arts with honours student in archaeology and anthropology at Churchill College. She worked with TCSRSD on a project to enhance economic development of the village communities in Babrala, and in particular focused on the economic empowerment of women through SHGs. Through data gathering, focus discussions and PRA (participatory rural appraisals) exercises, she was better able to understand the prevailing scenario and make recommendations to help increase the bargaining power of women within their households.

Her appreciation of the group's significant contributions towards communities' social development increased



Students from the University of California, Berkeley: (From left) Shu Shang, Liza Cirolia, Jamal Khan, Pedro Rosado and Annemieke Wilcox

during her two-month stint. Her most memorable experience was during the celebration of *teej* (a local festival) when, in the middle of a focus group discussion, she was suddenly pulled away and invited to participate in singing on swings along with the entire community. “I felt like I was one with the community. I realised that interaction is all it takes to dissolve boundaries between people from different countries,” she says nostalgically.

Helping to change the world – one village at a time

At Mithapur in western India, where Tata Chemicals (TCL) operates India’s largest inorganic soda ash complex, Mr Khan, a senior at University of California, Berkeley who is majoring in economics and political science, was moved by his eight-week interaction with the people from the Tupni and Poshitra villages of the Okhamandal block.

Mr Khan was assigned the task of developing a ‘water code’ for rural areas in the Jamnagar district that have implemented the integrated watershed management project initiated by Tata Chemicals. “I started by quantifying the amount of water used, as opposed to the water available to farmers, finding out the shortfall and trying to find a way to decrease this,” he explains. The plan was to initiate a total package of water use and understand the economy of water harvesting, water management and optimum agriculture production. This would finally lead to the creation of a rural water code that is generated by the community itself.

“My experience at Mithapur has been a life-changing one,” says Mr Khan. “The generosity, kindness and large-heartedness of the villagers, despite their problems, have had a profound effect on me. The community togetherness we saw in these villages is something we see little of in the US. It was also good to be able to put a face to a community that is facing socio-economic problems in a way that cannot be compared with any knowledge gained from a classroom lecture or a textbook. I would definitely recommend this experience to others.”



Students from Cambridge University: (From left) Grant Jackson, Selene Gittings, Valerie Fitton-Kane and Lee E Nordstrum

Both Mr Nordstrum, an MPhil student at Cambridge pursuing education research, and Ms Fitton-Kane, an MBA student, did their stint in Mithapur. Mr Nordstrum worked on two projects — economic development through SHGs and developing a business strategy for the TCSRSD bag-making unit specialising in leather and rexine products. Ms Kane developed financial linkages and monitoring systems for the Rural Entrepreneurship Development Programme (REDP), for which she did a lot of groundwork and gave many suggestions.

Mr Nordstrum humorously lists his India experience as: visited 10 villages; drank 250 cups of *chai* and 200 litres of bottled mineral water; had three motorcycle rides and 11 people invited themselves to my home in America! His biggest learning was the realisation that, “There is a tendency for us to say the villagers don’t have this or that, but look at what they do have. They may not have physical capital or assets like we do in the west, but they have social capital which we do not have so much of back home, but which is as important in social development.”

After two months in India, Ms Kane has gained a deeper understanding of the subtleties of poverty and appreciates the fact that there is a lot of hope in the villages of what can change further and what has already changed. Her friendship with young Margi Kanani, who had volunteered to be her translator and whose father is a TCL plant employee and mother a REDP trainer, is one she will cherish forever. “I have never met an 18-year-old that loves a company so much. She told me: ‘I want to work only for the Tata group and live in a Tata township.’ It showed me the value of taking care of employees.”

As the students head back home to Berkeley and Cambridge, the words of Mr Rosado sum up their thoughts, “Earlier I used to say, let’s help one person at a time. Now I want to help the world — one village at a time. I say, let’s help the world, let’s all get together and work together to make the world a better place. This is a good way to do it.” ●

Jai Wadia