

# Bridges across boundaries

The Tata International Social Entrepreneurship Scheme stands out as a unique and innovative effort to connect humanity across communities that are geographically, demographically and culturally apart

The Tata International Social Entrepreneurship Scheme (TISES) acts like a bridge, connecting students from the academic circles of the UK and the US to underprivileged communities in India. For two years now, TISES has enabled students from the University of California, Berkeley, US, and the University of Cambridge, UK, to come to India and participate in Tata companies' community projects and, more importantly, take away unique experiences and an understanding of how the developmental sector operates.

This year saw TISES enabling the second round of students — 11 in all — from Berkeley and Cambridge to spend two months (between June and August) in India working on Tata corporate sustainability (CS) projects.

Eating in a local *dhaba* (roadside food joint), wearing traditional Indian clothes, visiting temples, sharing meals with villagers in their homes, etc, were just a few of the unique experiences that these young students went through; at the same time they also realised the hardships that the villagers face and how they maximise their limited resources in their daily lives. Adapting to a new culture, new people and a different way of working

in a foreign country was a bigger challenge and is in fact one of the most important lessons many of them claim to have learned from their experience.

## Connecting with new cultures

Tall, blond Andrew Panton, a law student from Cambridge, stood out among the tribals in Saraikela-Kharswan, in the East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. But he was soon able to connect with the people in spite of the cultural differences. His journey was a learning experience and one that greatly affected him “in terms of personal growth and an abundant takeaway value, especially for my career in international relations and diplomacy”.

The TISES interns are selected through a structured process by their colleges. Helen Haugh, director of MPhil management and senior lecturer (community enterprise), Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, has been associated with TISES since its inception. She says, “We look for students who are enthusiastic and prepared to embrace new experiences without getting frustrated. Being able to adapt and a willingness to try things are key qualities that are also required.”

The 11 students worked with six Tata companies — Tata Chemicals, Tata Steel, Tata Power, Tata Motors, Indian Hotels and Tata Consultancy Services — in diverse areas, bringing a lot of value to the projects through sharing of knowledge, new perspectives, data collection and useful recommendations.

## Forging new friendships

Elizabeth Schneider, who is doing her PhD in bio-engineering from the University of California, did not have any prior community work experience when she



(Second from left): Sian Herschel, Rosalynn Watt and Andrew Panton of Cambridge University during their visit in Mumbai



Jacqueline Barin of the University of California worked on a project on reproductive and child health



Elizabeth Schneider of the University of California planning for the Tata Power watershed management project



Saad Karamat (extreme right) with local folks he worked with on enhancing accessibility to water in rural communities



Rosalynn Watt conducting qualitative research for a Tata Motors' water management project in Jamshedpur

applied for TISES but was keen to work hands-on. She worked on Tata Power's integrated watershed development and management project in the catchment areas of Maval near Lonavala in Maharashtra. Ms Schneider thoroughly enjoyed the time she spent living in a rural area and the bonds she forged with some of the village girls; she was also one of only two interns who could speak Hindi. About her India *anubhav* (experience), she says, it is important "to be patient, to make friends, be confident about yourself, not be afraid to interact, be flexible and finally be cautious but try something new". She knew very little about the Tatas when she first came to India but learned to admire them when she saw how pervasive the brand was.

Jacqueline Barin, a fourth-year public health student from Berkeley, was involved in the Tata Chemicals project on reproductive and child health. She says, "I learned to be more positive, adaptable and open, and I became more independent. TISES has also sparked my interest in reproductive health and helped me discover my goals."

Equipped with prior work experience in community development and gender studies, Julie Gamble, who is also from Berkeley, recommended that the women self-help groups (SHGs) project of Tata Chemicals in Okhamandal, Mithapur, be expanded. She strongly felt that "the project should also help these women to gain basic literacy skills, build leadership qualities and create more gender awareness and a sense of ownership among them, rather than only focus on income generation." This, she felt, would further help empower the women.

### Cracking the language barrier

For most of the interns, the language barrier proved to be a tricky hurdle to overcome, even though they had local people or staff members to act as interpreters. Emmi Beck, a bachelor of arts student from Berkeley, worked in Chennai and in the village of Kovalam in Tamil Nadu, as part of the Tata-Loyola Tsunami Relief Programme of Indian Hotels. Her tasks entailed documenting various social projects as well as suggesting an upgradation plan for the community skill-training college. To gather data and feedback, she had to interact with the beneficiaries



Julie Gamble of the University of California (fourth from right) at the World Environment Day celebrations at Tata Chemicals

who did not speak much English. "Tamilians are proud of their language and things would have been much smoother if I knew how to speak Tamil," she explains. Ms Beck also had to contend with, and find innovative ways of working around, the deeply entrenched gender biases in the communities there.

Interestingly, Ms Beck and Omead Barari, a student of chemical biology from Berkeley, took it upon themselves to teach English to the communities they were working with when they realised how keen the people were to learn and to get access to newer opportunities by learning a new language.

Mr Barari volunteered to teach English to students at a secondary school in Waze, Maharashtra, where he was working on TCS-Maitree's project on informational empowerment through relevant health education for rural women, men, children and youth. He describes his experience as an incredible one, and adds, "There were many things that challenged me. The chaos and the ambiguity of the situations we had to deal with on a daily basis gave me an appreciation of how things work back at home in the US."

### Development lessons in the hinterland

Saad Karamat, a public health student from Berkeley, also worked with TCS in Waze village. His project dealt with enhancing the availability and accessibility to water in the rural community of the area. This entailed holding focus group discussions, surveying the water sources and usage patterns, collating data and getting feedback on the problem of water scarcity. He



Some students from the University of California, Berkeley: (From left) Julie Gamble, Elizabeth Schneider, Emmi Beck, Omead Barari and Jacqueline C Barin with R Gopalakrishnan (fourth from left)



Students from Cambridge University: (Clockwise standing) Andrew Panton, Nicholas Evans, David Nefs, Rosalynne Watt and Sian Herschel

also helped to spread awareness about water conservation, especially in the local schools, through *rangoli*-making, essay-writing and drawing sessions. After spending two months in Waze, Mr Karamat says, “I have gained more from it than I have given. It’s amazing to see the simple villagers who are happy with so little. Seeing people taking a bath with half a bucket of water adds a whole new perspective on how scarce a resource it can be.”

An MBA student from Cambridge, Sian Herschel worked with women SHGs on an impact assessment study of their social and economic development as part of Tata Steel’s project in the villages in and around Jamshedpur. She found the women, and especially the Mahila Vikas Kendra Samiti group, to be very inspiring. These women make bamboo products for income generation. “They are not worried about costs or earning more money. They enjoy their lives and are so content,” she says.

Rosalynne Watt, who is doing a PhD in chemical engineering at Cambridge, worked on a water management project of Tata Motors in the rural areas of Jamshedpur. She conducted participatory rural appraisal exercises and did some qualitative research for this. Her experience has helped her develop better skills in communication. It has also taught her about teamwork and respecting people. “The people here really respect you since you are their guest. When I go back, I will treat my guests in a similar way,” she says. Ms Watt feels that TISES is a great programme to strengthen relationships between India and the UK.

### Learning for life

One of the reasons why David Nefs, an economics student from Cambridge, applied for TISES was to have the unique opportunity to work on development issues in a community rather than in a regular office in a big city. His project with Tata Chemicals in Mithapur involved drawing a blueprint to improve the Human Development Index of core command villages there. After working with the villagers and seeing them happy and contented in spite of the difficult lives they lead, he says, “You definitely

get a sense of appreciation that you didn’t have before and realise that money certainly doesn’t buy happiness.” He was very touched and moved at the warm and genuine hospitality shown to him by the villagers, who invited him into their homes and also took him to visit their temples.

Twenty-one-year-old Nicholas Evans, an anthropology student from Cambridge, found the TISES experience very useful since he plans to return to India to do research. Mr Evans interned with Tata Chemicals in Babrala and worked with farmers on wasteland reclamation. “My best experience was going into the fields, interacting with the farmers, sharing ideas and cracking jokes. I will always remember them,” he says, adding, “We had great fun but I also learned a lot from them about rural India, which will be valuable to me as an anthropologist.”

The presentations by the interns at the end of their project period were insightful. A few suggested that the induction period be reduced as they were keen to begin the actual field work. Some of them felt that having two interns working on a single project would help in terms of support and companionship in a milieu far removed from their own. Overall, they said it was an experience that they would cherish for the rest of their lives.

R Gopalakrishnan, executive director, Tata Sons, shared his views while addressing the interns: “Our founder stated more than 100 years ago, with great elegance and simplicity, that the very reason for which a corporation exists is for its society and community. Most of the corporate leaders I have met think this is a very intriguing and mystical eastern idea. But when you grow up with that thought, it becomes part of your being. It’s a kind of truth, from which you cannot depart. While all your experiences may not be satisfactory, we hope some of you will have the conscience and feel for those who are in need and become ambassadors not just for Tatas and TISES but for India and more importantly for humanity.”

In a world where it is becoming necessary to bridge the gaps between cultures and increase the connections between communities, TISES is indeed playing a very significant role. ●

*Jai Wadia*