A Reflection on a Semester: My Time in India

I had the fortune to spend 17 weeks studying and working abroad in Pune, India. During my time there, I was selected to intern with a nonprofit organization called Parvati Swayamrojgar (PSW). This organization is founded on the ideals of self-employment and the empowerment of Pune’s urban poor. There are several core components to PSW, including a microcredit program, a mutual health insurance fund, a financial literacy program, and a comprehensive family development arm. While ultimately all of these programs function in tandem, I was tasked with evaluating the health mutual fund and reviewing their internal structure and cost function after collecting extensive qualitative data from the team and community members.

Throughout my time at PSW, I was welcomed by the community in Lohiya Nagar and found that the entire community was very receptive to the work I was doing. My daily efforts consisted of interviewing women in the community to better understand their experience with PSW. Interviews were facilitated by an interpreter and typically lasted an hour, and the interview questions focused on their insurance history and sought to understand any claims that they had filed during their time as a member. The purpose of my data collection was to help the organization determine whether current participants were satisfied with their current exposure
to the organization and their thoughts on the premium structure that was currently in place, as PSW was seeking to propose an updated premium structure in 2014. My internship culminated in the creation and presentation of a comprehensive feedback report for the PSW team that contained several components, including a historical comparison of microinsurance, a report of the community’s sentiments towards PSW, and my recommendations for how they can most effectively structure their premiums.

I found the work I was doing to be meaningful yet challenging. Upon learning of the nonprofit for which I would be working, I was quite averse to starting work, as I thought it would be inappropriate for me, a foreigner who did not speak a word of Marathi, to be coming into a community and speaking with people in the hopes of making changes to an organization I barely understood. Throughout my time at PSW, the team consistently made an effort to help me feel included and supported me in the completion of my deliverables. Despite this support, I did face significant challenges. On some occasions, I would arrive to the office and have to wait for multiple hours before someone would talk to me and help me reach that day’s interviews. Other times, I would be reprimanded because I had been unable to communicate what I was doing to add value to PSW and I was accused of not working hard enough. Ultimately, these frustrations were far outweighed by the positive outcomes I found from this internship. The recommendations I made were well received by the team, and, more importantly, the feedback that I had garnered proved to be very valuable and meaningful to the team. There are few opportunities
for the PSW team to hear from the community how they are doing and more often than not the team found that community members complained and seemed unhappy. My findings showed that the community feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and this information had a huge impact on PSW team morale.

My decision to go abroad was founded primarily on my desire to live and experience a culture drastically different from my own. As a student that had spent twenty years in Ithaca, New York, I was almost desperate to find a change of pace in life that would demonstrate to myself that I was both willing and capable of diving out of my comfort zone. The component of my abroad experience that most drastically led to my personal development was my internship. Working abroad added a level of complexity to my abroad experience and ultimately gave me a sense of ownership over my time in India unlike any other aspect of my semester.

To this day, I still do not have an answer to the commonly asked, “so how was India?” My time abroad and my international internship have shaped my behavior, personality, and core beliefs in a way that no other time of my life has. I struggle to articulate this to others, and struggle even more deeply with the fact that so many of my fellow students will not have the same experience that I did. While I understand that everything about my decision to spend four months in India was self-selecting (I came to Cornell to study International Development, chose a program that requires you study abroad, and actively sought out an abroad program that would
challenge me), I cannot help myself from feeling sad for other students who will never have the same constructive opportunity.

I believe that the most inspiring aspect of my time abroad was the ability to explore the human experience. Both through my internship and my daily life, I was constantly reminded that despite all conceivable differences, there is a very distinct and universally binding thread of human nature. In my coursework at Fergusson College, a relatively grim picture of India’s future had been painted; however, my daily interactions with incredible people and students eager to drive growth and change kept me constantly excited. My time in India and at PSW was truly a period of my life that I hope will stay with me forever, and I will continue to look back on that time as a formative four months.