STEER India

5 – 20th December 2013

Places visited: Ahmedabad, Gujarat and Udaipur, Rajasthan

Organized by the College of Alice & Peter Tan, NUS

STEER India team, in front of the City Palace of Udaipur with college students from the Indian Institute of Management Udaipur.

NUS inaugurated its Study Trips for Engagement and EnRichment Programme (STEER) programme to the Middle-East (Saudi Arabia, UAE) and to India in Dec 2010. STEER trips are designed to familiarize students with the diverse socio-cultural-economic-political-business management environment of fast-evolving regions through classroom-based learning and experiential site visits. With the support of admin staff Ms Nuraini, as well as support from IE Singapore, the College of Alice & Peter Tan organized its second STEER Trip to India from 5-20 Dec 2013. The trip was led by Dr. Tan Lai Yong, Dr. Joelle Lai and Dr. Kevin McGahan, fellows of the college.

First stop: Ahmedabad, Gujarat

<u>Day</u>

1. Evening flight to Ahmedabad
2. GIFT City (Gujarat International Financial Tec-City)
3. Learning about the Bus Rapid Transit system (BRTS), Sabarmati Riverfront, and Kankaria Lakefront
4. Ahmedabad Heritage Trail, Gujarati Bazaar, and Disaster Management presentation by Dr. Thiru
5. Stepwell and Gandhi Memorial Museum
6. A day with SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association)
7. A day with SEWA at the salt mines

In Part II of the STEER travelogue, we headed to Udaipur in Rajasthan, known as the City of Lakes and "Venice of the East"

8. 6-hour bus ride, check-in to hotel, cultural dance performance in the evening
9. STEP (Skill Training Employability Placement for Youth) Academy
10. Interaction with MBA students from the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Udaipur; finding out more about Udaipur's Urban Economy through a city tour
11. Interaction with MBA students from IIM; learning about the Rural Community Economy through a 13 km mountain hike
12. Session with a technopreneur; graduate of Indian Institute of Technology (New Delhi)
13. A day with Seva Mandir
14. Vishalla Restaurant and Pottery exhibit
15. Flight back to Singapore

Day 2, 6 December 2013

Gujarat International Financial-Tech (GIFT) City

By Daryl Chia, Joan Tan and Yvonne Loo

Figure 1. GIFT City Corporate Cover Image

In view of India's exponential growth in the financial service industry, **Gujarat Urban Development Company Limited** and **Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Limited** have come together in a joint venture to create GIFT City, armed with the vision of creating a niche international financial centre in India. Gujarat is chosen as a

Figure 2. Top-down view of the land under construction

prime location because of its availability of space, its strategic location to an international airport, where the city is also easily accessible via state and national highways; henceforth, the city can cater to huge human traffic in the future.

The city has three components: the processing and non-processing areas, and social facilities. To create a holistic living space for the families of employers, highly efficient land use comprising of residential, social facilities, commercial and transportation has been implemented. Iconic buildings (ie. the Diamond Tower, Exhibition Centre) have been included to make GIFT stand out. An impressive network of transport lines aims to achieve an ambitious 9:1 ratio of public to private transport, via a mass transport system that integrates public and internal tracks.

Figure 3. A tour of the GIFT ONE tower and other

regions undergoing construction works

Environmental innovations are tailored to the climate of Gujarat to maximise reliability and sustainability of the infrastructure. For instance, GIFT has its own power plants, water supply and sewage system with zero discharge, and a highly efficient solid waste management. We were very much impressed by how well the innovations are tailored to overcome pre-existing environmental limitations such as the state's dry, arid climate.

We were also introduced to the project's corporate social responsibility (CSR) vision, specifically talent development so as to bridge the skill gap of the local population. GIFT is used as a platform to promote the skills level of the current Gujarat workforce and the future talent pool via its own range of schools and agency for talent development.

We found that GIFT City has many similarities to Singapore, especially in its aim to provide for the international financial service domain. Many modern state-of-the-art innovations in this project planning were adapted to the unique needs of Gujarat, on top of lessons learnt from their case studies of other prime cities such as Hong Kong and Dubai.

Figure 4. Internal view of the GIFT ONE tower

Development projects like GIFT City can prove to both a boom and a bane for residing villages in the area. Throughout the speedy implementation of this project, the developers were careful not to displace the local villages; moreover, it has greater potential to provide hundred thousands of employment opportunities for the local populous, both formally and informally. However, there can be a greater social segregation between the professionals as some form of tension may arise for locals who fall through the gaps and do not enjoy the benefits that GIFT City claims to bring to Gujarat- for one, there will be an inevitable rise in costs of living and inflation of land prices. Also, there are inherent risks involved, especially since such a macro project is exposed to the temperamental and volatile international financial market. Given the financial crisis of 2008, it is apparent how difficult it is to ensure stability, and to produce results which financial intermediaries desire to achieve. Only time will tell whether this project is truly sustainable and successful in achieving its various objectives.

Day 3: BRTS, Ahmedabad Heritage Board

By Ray Chew, Carol Look, Dave Lee

We went to the municipal town center and met with officials from the municipal council, the Jagmarg corporation behind the city's Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS), and the Ahmedabad Heritage board. We then proceeded to the Sabarti Riverfront Development Project to witness the development of a project currently underway to transform its precincts into a distinct area for leisure and commercial use. It was hard to imagine the full impact of the project involving the displacement of slum dwellers because the compound was tidy and neatly kept.

After lunch, we boarded the BRTS that we had been briefed about earlier. The BRTS is the city's main mode of public transport – a fleet of buses that runs through the city in dedicated lanes. After that we visited Kankaria Lake, which resembled a small theme park, and toured the area on a train encircling the lake. Dinner was had at Seva Cafe, an eatery with a novel concept – we could pay any amount we wanted; the place was run by volunteers. Some of us had the opportunity to dine with an Indian lawyer, Arjun, who works for an NGO involved with the tribal Dang community in southern Gujarat. He shared his experiences and views on Indian cultures and politics.

The presentation about the BRTS provided some insights into the difficulties of implementing a workable transport system especially in a crowded historical city that had no prior mapping of underground lines. An underground metro was not feasible due to the haphazard locations of the telephone and electricity lines, as well as the heavy disruption to preexisting roads and the presence of slum dwellers. Nevertheless, transport is crucial for any city that aims to be economically viable and as we rode on the BRTS, some of us felt that there was room for improvement to address the growing needs of the inhabitants.

The Kankaria Lake and the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project highlighted the Government's emphasis on providing a common ground for social and recreational activities, as well as preserving the city's heritage and culture. This was a rather refreshing change because the previous corporations we encountered seemed to be primarily concerned with economic growth. Thus, it was encouraging to witness throngs of people at Kankaria Lake enjoying the cool of the day as the sun descended above our heads.

We had an unexpected guest for dinner; we were privileged to have dined with Arjun, a charismatic lawyer working with an Indian NGO. He shared his thoughts about India and the way things were ran; his opinions thus offered a refreshing take of things.

The STEER team enjoying an afternoon stroll along the banks of the Sabarti Riverfront

Visiting the Ahmedabad BRTS station and listening to an explanation on the workings of the Ahmedabad public transport system

Day 4 – Ahmedabad heritage walk & dinner session with Dr. Thiru

By: Rubini, Lim Wei Jie, Ng Hui Min

In the morning of 8 December, we had a heritage walk through the old city of Ahmedabad, observing its architecture, religious places, culture and traditions. The heritage walk was launched in 1997 to create awareness on the heritage of Ahmedabad and is now replicated in many historic cities of India. The walk spans 2km, which starts from a temple and ends in a mosque, and have a total of 20 stations of interest.

First stop was the Swaminarayan Mandir Kalupur temple, where we saw people doing their morning prayers. We also saw some men on the streets coating their glass kite strings with pink powder, in preparation of a kite festival to be in January. Some of the buildings we saw were works of restoration, or a facade of the actual building in the past.

Man coating the kite string with pink powder

Steer Team 2013 at the end of the heritage walk

We also visited the Ahmedabad's Gujari Bazaar to see the active part of the city's cultural heritage. This trader-organised market is almost 600 years old and trading in this market contributes to the livelihood of various families for generations. Situated beside the Sabarmati Riverfront, this Sunday-only market sells a whole range of items. From a nail to a bed frame, this market has them all.

The visit requires us to use multiple senses to respond to the overwhelming stimuli in the environment. Our sight is filled with an array of goods of which colourful clothes and beautifully-arranged fruits catches our attention. Aroma of street food excites our taste buds while the smell of spices reaffirms that we are at an Indian market and not any pasar malam. Not forgetting the buzz of the crowd bargaining for better prices with the vendors, we learn to observe the vitality of this informal market. This traditional flea market will soon undergo rehabilitation under the Sabarmati Riverfront Development and is expected to be more organised, with larger walking space and public shelters at the new location. We look forward to see how the authorities can strike a balance in this project.

The Gujarati Bazaar on a Sunday morning

Future plans in the Sabarmati River Development project

We ended off the day with a seminar with Dr V. Thiruppugazh, Commissioner and Secretary of the Rural Development Department, Government of Gujarat. He had great insight into the needs of the rural people in villages especially during the aftermath of the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, which killed 12,300 people and left many homeless. The Gujarati government is now looking into how they can make disaster management and relief plans work best for the state as the lack of planning may lead to widespread loss of lives.

Dr Thiru's presentation showed us many ways in which the government was trying to prepare for future disasters but what really stood out to us from it all was the community lead disaster management plans. Aside from disaster plans and educating the people, another aspect often neglected by governments is the needs beyond the basics such as food and shelter that help people mentally to accept the tragedies and move on after an earthquake. In the Gujarati example, he highlighted the villager's wanting a hot cup of tea especially in winter when it gets chilly. People forget to send sugar and milk to the villages and hot meals are not catered for. People cannot live off canned food for long and in order for some sense of normality to resume, such needs need to be met. The government has learnt from its previous experiences and now has the foresight to stockpile and have services such as mobile kitchens that can serve at least a hot meal a day.

Dr. Thiru giving his presentation on hazard management

Day 5: Visits to Adalaj Stepwell and Gandhi Ashram

By: Pearl Goh, Marcus Tan

Day 5 was well spent visiting famous places of interest, specifically, Adalaj Stepwell and Gandhi Ashram.

Built in 1499 by Muslim King Mohammed Begda for Queen Rani Roopba, we learnt that the stepwell, otherwise known as the unique Hindu 'water building', was once integral to the regions of Gujarat as it provided basic water needs for drinking, washing and bathing. This crucial function is clearly evident in the structure of the stepwell; it is dug deep to access ground water, accounting for seasonal fluctuations in water level due to rainfall over the year. The temperature inside the well is also cooler than outside, specifically important for summer times. This gave a reason for women who came to fetch water in the past to spend more time in the cool environment during summer to worship the Gods and also to gossip. Thus, it can be inferred that the stepwell also served as a platform for communities to bond and interact in the past. These many important functions of the stepwell inspired us all.

Today, the intricately carved five stories building is an extremely popular tourist attraction of the Ahmedabad city, with visitors from all over the world and we are no exception! Build in sandstone in Indo-Islamic architectural style, all of us were mesmerized by the beautiful building and its unique features. Graphics of Islamic architecture blended well with symbols of Hindu Gods carved at various levels of the well and we discovered that such Islamic architectural style could be attributed to the Muslim King who built it. The walls were also beautifully carved with women performing daily chores such as churning of buttermilk, scenes of performances of dancers and musicians and the King overlooking all these activities.

Following that, we headed to visit Gandhi Ashram - located near the banks of the Rier Sabarmati. It was one of Gandhi’s residences, in which he lived for about twelve years with his wife, Kasturba Gandhi. Significantly, it was the base from which Ganhi started the Dandi march, (also known as the Salt Satyagraha) in 1930. Acknowledging the significance of this march on the Indian independence movement, the Indian government has established it as a national monument.

Today, the ashram is a museum opened to locals and tourists, featuring many galleries and exhibitions. Among the many museum features, what captured my group’s attention most was the gallery, entitled “My life is my message”, consisting of 8 life-size paintings and more than 250 photo-enlargements of some of the most vivid and historic events of Gandhi’s life. As cliché as it sounds, we felt that these pictures were worth a thousand words since they successfully communicate the entire life journey of Gandhi. Furthermore, the various furniture and architecture of the building effectively made the learning more real and vivid. Such learning experience can only be gained beyond the classroom.

Inspired by his life story and leadership, we made purchases at the Ashram book store, a non-profit making business which sells literature and memorabilia related to Gandhi and his life's work, which in turn supports local artisans.

Adalaj Stepwell

Statue of Ghandi at Ghandi Ashram

STEER Team at Stepwell

Day 6: Visits to a market, a bank and a training school

Gujarati Vegetable Market

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is an organization registered in 1972 for poor, self-employed women workers, dedicated to bringing work, food and social security to its members. Members generally earn a living through small businesses or labour and do not enjoy welfare benefits like workers in the organized sector.

We visited the wholesale market that is tended by the SEWA ladies. This is the only section of the vegetable market where women take charge. SEWA sells about 40,000 rupees worth of produce a day and can fetch about 10 rupees for a kilogram (KG) of greens with a minimum purchase of 20 KG. Through this initiative, 12,000 women are employed. SEWA acts as a middlemen to offset the taxes farmers have to pay in order to sell their vegetables. Instead, SEWA collects 7% taxes from the buyers to pay for their daily expenses (the shop is rented). The market operates 24/7.

We also toured the retail market. The ladies tending the stores buy their vegetables from SEWA and can earn up to 100 rupees in profits a day (working hours from 5am to 1pm).

It is an uncommon sight for women to sell vegetables but the SEWA ladies now have their own regular stalls in the background of the picture.

SEWA Bank

Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank was opened 2 years after the establishment of SEWA, in 1974. It is SEWA's largest cooperative, the first of its kind in India. It is started by women, for women.

Hence, the goal of the bank is to help women to save, with no minimum savings requirement. India does not have a 'saving' culture and as a result, many have to live on what their daily wages offer.

Additionally, SEWA Bank's passbook is written in the Gujarati language, and SEWA Bank has appointed official bank members located in various locations; they collect money and issue receipts on behalf of the bank.

In contrast, banks in India have a minimum deposit of 500 rupees which most women are unable to maintain. Their passbook are written in English which many women could not understand. If one were to take a loan, they would need to take a whole-day leave in order to travel to the bank to repay it since the bank only operates from 1030 to 1530 hours and transportation fees have proven to be too expensive for some.

Furthermore, if they take a whole day leave, they are unable to buy daily necessities. Therefore, they often have to borrow from their local money lender (better known as loan shark) with high interest rate. As a result, many are trapped in the viscous cycle of poverty as they can't pay for the interest. SEWA comes to the picture as an alternative saving platform.

SEWA Manager Ni School (SMS)

We visited SMS which was founded in 2005. It is a resource for building managerial capacities among grassroots women, by equipping them with skills to successfully run small enterprises and businesses. Learning is mostly demonstrative and emulative and the master trainers are trained in imparting technical skills, life skills and management. Within the school, the Sewa Gram Mahila Haat was established. Through this charitable trust, rural producers can find markets for their products, such as those under their local brand RUDI.

The team shopping at the RUDI store.

Reflections

After visiting the different organizations under SEWA, we believe that SEWA has achieved its main goal of promoting self-reliance among women. It is really heartening to witness how they encourage women to have confidence and venture out, despite the fact that 60% of them are illiterate. This also helps to erase certain stereotypes that the Indian society has of women. By increasing social empowerment among women through economic empowerment, we are looking forward to see how the association further develops and helps more women in the future.

The team at SEWA's main office.

The team also visited the milk corporation where SEWA purchases milk from the farmers. This machine above measures the amount of fat in the milk and generates a receipt on how much money the farmer should receive.

Day 7 (11 December): SEWA @ Rural salt mining communities

By: Janice Goh, Vong Shi Ting and Farhan Dino

Who we visited

On April 5th 1930, Gandhi led a salt march from Ahmedabhad to a small coastal village in Dandi. On day 7, we visited the same salt mines to understand how mining is done, and how SEWA has benefitted the people there.

About salt mining

During the monsoon season, the fields are flooded to some seven feet high. However, during the May to October dry season, the ground dries up and salt mining begins.

(Above: a man working the water pump)

To mine salt, the workers first pump salty ground water into the fields. Over time, water evaporates leaving behind the crystalized salt, which is then raked.

(Above: Janice raking salt from the fields)

Salt mining is tough, as miners leave their homes and travel to the salt mines during the dry season, only to return home after that. Lodging near the mines is transient, so homes are badly equipped, with fresh water scarce and electricity non-existent.

(Above: salt crystals)

Also, social facilities such as schools are not available for the kids; while the adults are out mining salt, the children are left to their own devices. To combat this, SEWA started a day care to provide for children of all ages

SEWA Day Care

The day care is not just a respite for the working parents, but also provides basic education and feeding programmes for the children. It provides simple health checks such as height and weight, and keeps a growth chart for children in its charge.

(*Above: children and STEER team members interacting)*

Overall, it was an eye opening experience to drop by the kindergarten. We felt that they were ever so hospitable and welcoming even through our presence was quite disruptive to their usual lessons.

SEWA Office

At the office, we heard first-hand from the women salt miners about SEWA, the organization that provides jobs and extra income for women through Rudi products. The Rudi brand has established itself as one known for its good quality and fair market practices for both consumers and sellers.

(Above: SEWA members in a meeting)

SEWA gives a 10% commission for each purchase to their members who sell the Rudi products, which are mostly food and spices. Initially, these women faced distrust from their neighbours, but as RUDI carve a reputation for itself, sales started to soar, with some members earning up to 50,000 rupees per month.

We loved their openness and joy as they shared their struggles and successes. Another thing that struck us was the wide use of mobile phones. One woman proudly showed us her Nokia phone, which she used not just to take pictures and make calls, but also to keep track of current market prices using a SEWA app.

To help combat the electricity shortage these women were trained in repairing solar lamps, which they both kept for their own use, and resold. It was heartening to know that these solar lamps not only provided a light source, but could also be used to charge electronics, such as mobile phones.

Overall, we found the visit to be an eye opener for both our hearts and mind.

Day 9 (13 December 2013)
Skill, Training, Employability and Placement (STEP) Academy
By Daryl Chia, Joan Tan and Yvonne Loo

Figure 1. Application centre at a remote village

This project started off as a research study on the livelihood patterns in Rajasthan. An internal migration rate of 80% across India was perceived as a negative indicator of development for sources of migration. The rocky terrain and lack of rainfall characteristic of Rajasthan has made mainstream livelihood such as agriculture unsustainable. Moreover, rising aspirations of youths further boost outward migration.

The objective of this project is not to stop migration but to reduce exploitation of migrant workers by providing various services such as identity cards processing, training, legal protection, collectivisation of workers, financial services, health services, and empowerment programs for non-migrating family members.

Figure 2. Visit to STEP Academy for the Youths

The academy targets under-educated youths who are searching for employment (at threshold of migration), migrated youths who are unskilled and returnee migrant youths. Thus far, STEP has trained more than 2900 people (as of March 2013). These people are offered various industry-catered courses ranging from construction, hotel and hospitality, electrical and mechanical, and other skills such as marketing. In addition to technical education, students are taught life skills to better equip them for life in the migrant destinations. The courses are typically one month long, and are taught by experts from the various sectors. Costs incurred per person are Rs. 6000 for residential, Rs. 2500 for non-residential. However, students are required to pay a nominal sum of Rs. 800 to 1000 as there are private donors sponsoring the academy- the nominal sum is collected to ensure commitment throughout the course of training.

Figure 3. Volleyball game between STEER participants and the youths at STEP Academy

The impact of this project is tremendous: trainees receive higher salaries than before and enjoy greater stability in their employment. Also, the placement initiatives offered by the academy facilitates job search. For instance, employment fairs are held at village centres. However, the retention rate, though improving, ranges from 49% to 77%, averaging at 53% across the various industries. The rates are tabulated via correspondence with the alumni.

The visit to the academy was enlightening as we caught a glimpse of the community life of the youths. It was heartening to hear that the youths forge friendships that last a lifetime. Also, the residential component of the academy's

courses facilitates comprehensive learning and ensures that students complete the full course.

Figure 4. Cooking classes

Despite the benefits of the program, there are obstacles such as the insignificance of certificates in those industries (in the context of India), resulting in inertia in gaining satisfactory wages.

STEP goes beyond just serving as a training institute as we saw how it evolved into a platform for rural migrant communities to support each other, as the migrant youths went on to pursue decent jobs outside their villages. Some played the role of volunteers in creating essential documents while others provided family support and health services for remaining family members. In addition, youths who have successfully found stable employment in the cities help recommend employment opportunities to fresh job seekers.

This learning journey has evoked a sense of respect and responsibility towards migrant workers, which is something we can work on as there is a large population of migrant workers back home in Singapore. Knowing the disadvantages and hardships that these workers have to deal with on a continual basis is pivotal in discovering the needs and appreciation of the differences. This way, we can cater to their needs more appropriately in our future efforts in community engagement.

Figure 5. Visit to a nearby rural village, beneficiary of STEP Academy

The strong community formed on the basis of adversity is inspiring; despite negative circumstances, communities can thrive and achieve synergistic strength.

DAY 10 (14 December): Interaction with MBA students from the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Udaipur; finding out more about Udaipur's Urban Economy through a city tour

Ray Chew, Dave Lee, Carol Look

We had 10 students from the Indian Institute of Management, Udaipur (IIM) join us on a city heritage tour around the old town of Udaipur. We visited the temple and a palace that was built centuries ago yet is still in use today.

The Jagdish temple is a beautiful centrally located place of worship. The architecture was intricate - it was hard to imagine how the temple could have been carved more than four centuries ago. When we entered the temple, some of us spotted the local shop owners bowed solemnly in prayer who, just a day before, was joking with us as we bargained for their wares. We also noticed that a large proportion of the devotees were women and while the men worshipped alone, the women gathered to offer prayerful songs together.

Visiting the palace within the old city of Udaipur was an experience. We were told that the last king of Udaipur still resides in a part of the palace that he retained for himself and his family, while the other portions were converted into a museum and hotels for the purpose of tourism. The architecture of the palace was strategically planned. The corridors of the palace was purposefully kept narrow to slow down invading enemies who would have to travel in a single line, and the doors were kept low so that enemies had to bend their heads to enter, which would enable the soldiers to easily chop off their heads.

Certain parts of the palace were built with materials imported from countries as far away as China and Holland, indicative of the extensive trading that took place in this ancient city. Every room had a story to tell, and even the arrangement of furniture had a peculiar reason behind it. The preserved rooms and artifacts made it easier to imagine and construct a viable historical consciousness of how the royal family and their servants lived and roamed the very same space so many centuries ago. Artist impressions depicting the elaborate parties held at the palace and the war scenes of defining battles gave us a clue as to who and why and how they fought. The surviving pieces of art on display from that time pointed to a thriving culture which would have been possible with a flourishing economy.

We lunched with IIM students and talked to them about pertinent issues such as the implications and import of the caste system in the 21st century. The IIM students were mature and offered us valuable insights on Indian society from their vantage points. We appreciated the extent of differences in culture among different areas, groups, and castes in India.

We then visited IIM briefly. IIM is a new campus with state of the art lecture theaters and a very conducive learning environment. One of the students explained a model of the completed campus to us, highlighting that the campus will be eco friendly with completely no vehicles at all except for bicycles. We then proceeded for a calming boat ride on the river to view the sunset. The view of Udaipur from the boat was intensely beautiful - we truly understood why Udaipur is often termed the Venice of the east.

Upon returning to the hotel, the hospitable Hotel staff prepared a period Hindu movie for us depicting the life of Jalal Mohammed Akbar the Great, a Muslim Mughal king and his marriage to Princess Jodhaa, a Hindu who was worlds apart in terms of religion and culture

and how they overcame these differences. The period movie depicting the extravagant lives of Indian royalty in the past was an apt end to a day where we discovered much more about india's rich heritage.

Appreciating the fine architecture of the City Palace, including tiles imported from China and Holland with our Indian friends from the Indian Institute of Management

A model of the complete Indian Institute Management Udaipur, modeled to resemble the beautiful ancient city of Udaipur

Day 11 (15 December): Interaction with MBA students from IIM; learning about the Rural Community Economy through a 13 km mountain hike

By: Rubini, Lim Wei Jie, Ng Hui Min

On 15th December, we headed out for a trek in the rural area of Udaipur. It was a pleasant walk together with our friends from the Indian Institute of Management, and we had a sumptuous dinner prepared by our host, Piers in his cottage above the hills.

Walking through the rural roads

River crossing!!

Playing cricket with the local kids

Stopping by a village for a break

We continue to climb through the mountains

Scenic view of the mountains and ridges

Back in the cottage, we have a feast prepared for us!

Dinnertime!

With good food, anytime is a good time ☺

Group photo by the warm fireplace.

Day 12 (14 December): Session with a technopreneur

By: Pearl Goh, Marcus Tan

On Day 12 of STEER India, we visited the home office of Mr Jeetesh Prakash Sisodia, director of GKM IT Private Limited. He generously shared with us his professional journey as owner of his own start-up company. Through the informative and interesting sharing session, we learnt about his challenges such as disapproval from parents and initial failures, his motivations and most importantly, life skills such as sheer determination and passion towards one's work.

It was inspiring how Mr Jeetesh strongly believes in learning and personal development; this is evident in his company's structure and corporate culture. He organizes his company in a horizontal approach such that the office is made up of a large round table instead of the usual cubicles format, thus promoting effective discussions. This horizontal structure makes workers feel a sense of ownership over their work, that they have a direct impact on the company. There are no official office hours; workers can choose their office timing flexibly so as to maximize productivity.

A question posed was whether it was advisable for fresh graduates to gain some experience as employees first before starting up their companies, or to become an entrepreneur immediately. Mr Jeetash's advice was to always keep one's options open, to weigh the opportunity costs and make a prudent judgement – to consider the business environment at the specific point in time carefully before making a choice.

Also, he shared that he gave himself 5 years to grow his start-up, and if it does not go well, he would return to the corporate world. This shows the significance of having a degree which ensures security.

What struck us particularly was that Mr Jeetash would employ two employees to the same project at the same time. This avoids project standstill when one person is down; it also disincentives his workers from engaging in non-productive practices such as surfing Facebook and social media on the job, as one worker would respect the time of the other.

We got a sense that entrepreneurs are mostly driven not by money but the excitement of growing one's business, the challenges of winning and delivering projects, and having more personal freedom over one's time and working habits.

Interactive session with Mr. Jeetesh

STEER Team with Mr. Jeetesh

Day 13: Seva Mandir

Clara, Keng Yong and Alicia | STEER India

Seva Mandir Heritage Walk

Seva Mandir, meaning “Temple of Service”, is a grassroots NGO based in Udaipur. Its motto is “Transforming Lives Through Democratic and Participatory Development”. Seva Mandir works on rural and tribal development issues in Rajasthan. We watched a video depicting Seva Mandir’s programs, then proceeded to go on a tour of the local village. We saw Hindu temples, mosques and entered a Jain temple where we learnt about this minority religious group.

Seva Mandir also implemented a waste collection scheme where dry and wet garbage are collected separately where the wet garbage will be recycled into fertilizers.

We learnt that villagers’ occupations are defined by their castes- merchants, potters, road cleaners, etc. Some occupations are dying off, such as traditional pottery. There are strict social hierarchies that separate the different castes, but Seva Mandir’s work has led to greater acceptance of the lower castes, which were previously thought of as “untouchable”.

Sadhna

After returning from the heritage walk, we took a look at Sadhna. Sadhna is a shop operated by Seva Mandir selling elegant handcrafted textiles. It was established in 1988 to provide alternative incomes for women in Udaipur’s rural, tribal and urban slum belts, thus creating opportunities for these economically disadvantaged people. Sadhna is run based on the principles of Fair Trade, such as paying workers fair wages.

We saw Sadhna’s employees hard at work at their sewing machines, creating textile products ranging from sarees, bags, pillow covers to handmade notebooks. Additionally, these products hold the authentic CraftMark certification to certify their quality

School

Last but not least, we visited the *Dr. Mohan Sinha Mehta Rural Training Centre Kaya*, run by Seva Mandir. This school teaches not only young children, but also caters to school drop-outs and those who have not received formal education.

We met a group of UK students volunteering at the training centre to teach English to the children. They were helping out in a 2 month camp for the students. Such camps were held around 3 times a year. The Indian school teacher who led us on the tour around the school was an engineer who gave up her well-paying job to embark upon this mission of educating the poor. It is really heartening to hear such stories, where people would be willing to give up more practical jobs to fulfill a greater purpose in life and make a difference in society. We looked through some of the materials that the school provides for the children and found an adequate amount of study materials, such as textbooks and exercise books. There were board games and toys provided as well.. We also learnt that there were two NUS business students who came to school before to do internships. Some of us consider embarking on projects or internships to help out in the future.

Last night in Ahmedabad: Dining in Vishalla Restaurant

By Janice Goh, Vong Shi Ting and Farhan Dino

Vishalla restaurant has a museum of ancient Indian artefacts, which includes a wide variety of pots, jugs, locks, and so on. It was an eye opener to find out that many modern day tools that we use today existed hundreds of years ago. For example, they had thermo flask kettles, which were engineered in a different way from what we use today. We were also impressed with their intricate locks with complex internal mechanisms. For instance, one lock even required three keys to fully unlock it. They even had giant locks, which were used to lock palaces and temples back then.

The rest of the restaurant was modelled after a traditional Indian village, which included different kinds of live exhibitions such as traditional Indian performances and music where people can dance along to it. There were also campfires for people to warm themselves during the cold weather. We were also allowed to tour around their kitchen to see how the chefs cooked their food.

The restaurant served a wide variety of vegetarian food, which was free-flow. The servings were very generous with multiple garnishes to choose from. We sat on the floor and ate from a 'plate' made of lotus leaves weaved together with twigs.

Colourful side dishes served with food

Biodegradable lotus leaf plate and bowl

We felt that it was a very nice village setting, reminding us of the kampong community feeling back in Singapore. The look of the village felt like an amalgamation of traditional Malay and Indian cultures.

The meal ended on a nice note with a scoop of pistachio and saffron ice

cream. Overall, it was an interesting experience as we got to experience the traditional Indian village culture.

Woman making bread over charcoal stoves

Earthenware at the exhibition

Campfire by the performance area

Man frying bread in kitchen

Traditional Indian puppet show (Consists of a drummer and puppet master hidden behind cloth. Puppet makes noise via whistles from the puppet master)

Throughts from participants

(Photo taken at the salt mine.)

Lim Wei Jie, Year 1, NUS: STEER India is a great experience which I would recommend for students to participate! You get to have an in-depth perspective of India which you may not get through the eyes of a regular tourist. Keep an open mind and you will learn a lot of things! ☺

(Vive, extreme right. Crossing a river during the 13 km trek.)

Vivekanand Ramesh, IIMU participant: It's always an exciting experience of a lifetime when people from two different cultures interact. The range of topics discussed while being close to reality of Indian soil, helped me broaden my vision and purpose for life.

Before Lake Pichola, Udaipur

Photo credit: Lim Wei Jie

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