

STEER India

4 – 15th December 2014

Part I: Ahmedabad, Gujarat, Part II: Udaipur, Rajasthan, and Part III: Kutch, Bhuj

Organized by the College of Alice & Peter Tan, NUS

Part I: Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Day 1:

- Arrive in Ahmedabad
- Check in to Holiday Inn Express Ahmedabad

Part II: Udaipur, Rajasthan

Day 2:

- Depart for Udaipur (by bus)
- Evening session with Aajeevika Bureau at STEP Academy
- Check in to Lake Pichola Hotel

Day 3:

- Village visit with Aajeevika Bureau (Gogunda Village)

Day 4:

- Tour of historical sites and temples (Fort Kumbhalgarh and Ranakpur Jain Temple)
- Sharing with Mr Jeetesh Sisodia, Director of GKM IT Pvt Ltd

Part III: Kutch, Bhuj

Day 5:

- Depart for Bhuj (by bus)
- Check in to Shilpgram Kutch
- Traditional meal and story-telling with bonfire

Day 6:

- Watch warp making process at Shilpgram
- Orientation at Khamir Organisation Facility: Introduction to Kachchh region, and Q&A
- Split into various groups to engage in various crafts (Natural dyeing, waste plastic weaving, pottery making, Kachchh weaving, leather making)

- Nearby artisan's village visit (Bhujodi village)
- Dinner and traditional folksong

Day 7:

- Visit printing village
- Visit Shrujan
- Orientation with Abhiyan: Discussion on slum village and salt pan workers
- Check in to Shaam-E-Sarhad
- Visit the Great Rann of Kutch (Salt desert)

Day 8:

- Visit Hodka Village artisans, and water-harvesting system
- Visit SOS Children's Village, Bhuj
- Visit Hunnarshala Foundation

(Return to Ahmedabad)

Day 9:

- Depart for Ahmedabad (by bus)
- Check in to Holiday Inn Express Hotel Ahmedabad

Day 10:

- Visit SEWA Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) Market
- Orientation at SEWA Organisation: Overview of activities in the Nandasan village and Ganeshpura village
- Visit to Nandasan village and Ganeshpura village
- Watershow at Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple

Day 11:

- Visit Gandhi Ashram
- Shopping, and depart for Singapore

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 Dr Tan Lai Yong, and admin staff Ms Nuraini, the College of Alice & Peter Tan organized its third STEER Trip to India from 4th – 15th Dec 2014. The trip was led by A/P Greg Dean Petersen, and Ms Wong Soon Fen, fellows of the residential college.



The STEER India 2014 team at Lake Pichola Hotel, after a dialogue session with Mr Jeetesh Sisodia, founder of start-up firm GKM IT Pvt Ltd.

Day 2 – 5th December 2014, Friday

Udaipur, Rajasthan, India:

Evening session with Aajeevika Bureau at STEP Academy

By Elaine, Hadziqah, and Lee Keng

Overview



About Udaipur, Rajasthan

Rajasthan is translated as ‘Land of Kings’. Prior to British involvement in 1918, Rajasthan was made of several princely states. One of the most prominent cities was Udaipur. In that city, the main people group was the Mewar, which prized itself in having a rich indigenous culture. The Mewar culture and arts are largely preserved because the region was inaccessible during the British Colonisation. The Mewar culture was thus protected from the Western influences and kept as it was centuries ago. Today, the culture, traditional dance and songs attracts tourists from all over the world. The students of STEER India 2014, had the privilege to immerse, understand and appreciate the arts over the course of the trip.

Aajeevika Bureau

Students of STEER India 2014 were warmly welcomed by the staff of STEP Academy (STEP), one of the seven wings of Aajeevika Bureau. Aajeevika Bureau looks into the welfare of migrant workers, specifically internal migrants. It is made up of several departments.

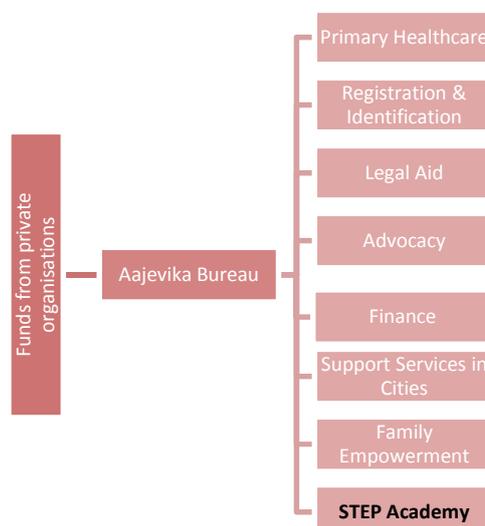


Fig.1. Different units under Aajeevika Bureau

A presenter from STEP, Yageshwari, informed the students about the patterns of migration and plight of migrants in India. Migration flows from developing areas to developed ones. For example, Rajasthan is a source state whereas Gujarat is a destination state. Migration is actually a coping strategy for rural poverty given the lack of employment opportunities in rural areas. Yageshwari identified migrants as ‘invisible city makers’ who are not accounted



Fig.2. At the meeting room before presentations

for in their destination states, thus losing their voting rights in both their home and destination states. Furthermore, they have poor access to housing, water and education. Back home, their families have to adapt with losing a family member.

One way that Aajeevika Bureau assists migrant workers is through the **Registration and Identification** department. Because migrant workers leave their home state to a new state, many are not accounted for in their home state. At the same time, the new state does not recognize them as residents as they have no form of identification. While in their homeland, these internal migrants are seen as invisible. The founders of Aajeevika Bureau saw this gap and started the project of Registration and Identification. With the sharing of Mr Rajiv, in Singapore, we understood that a large organization begins by bridging gaps, one by one and step by step. The different areas of needs of migrant workers were gradually identified, and addressed. As can be seen from figure 1, these are the needs that Aajeevika has identified.

STEP Academy

STEP Academy (STEP) is a training school that aims to equip migrants with skills, allowing them to be ready for skilled and better-income jobs, improving their socio-economic situations; bridging another gap for the migrants. The acronyms, STEP, reflect the mission and visions of STEP. It is meant to develop **S**kills, **T**rain workers, enhance their **E**mployability, and eventually **P**lace them into the higher-skilled labour force. STEP is one of the many departments under Aajeevika that aims to elevate the status of migrants in India.

STEP aims to not only to improve the lives of migrants but also to reach out to the school dropouts and people from the lower castes. By providing skills training, it increases the monthly income of the beneficiaries. STEP charges a small fee for the training. Upon graduation, a tool kit is given to the graduate. For instance, a person trained to be a plumber will be given a set of tools needed for plumbing. The nominal training fee will go into the cost of the kit.



Fig.3. Trainees at STEP Academy

Upon reflection, doing-good need not always revolve around giving. An element of ownership and empowerment is the key to providing sustainable solutions. Thus, the fee for training gives migrants a sense of commitment and upon receiving the toolkit, a sense of achievement and affirmation of skill is instilled.

The students of STEER India 2014 had the privilege of interacting with a group of trainees. Most of the trainees are young men, aged 14 to 30. The dialogue took place with the aid of a translator. Students and trainees took turns to ask each other question. Some trainees shared that with skills upgrade, it was not only an increase in income but they also found new friendships in STEP and became more respectable than in the past. Others sought greater aspirations as they were exposed to new possibilities through STEP. Trainees were also

interested to know if a similar academy was available in Singapore. The trainees' curiosity and willingness to share made the students feel very welcomed.

Students were interested to know how the trainees found out about STEP and how the training has improved their situation. Some had skills upgrade (meaning upgrade of skills in the same industry) and others had a new skills training. Most trainees learnt of the programmes through the outreach satellite centres. Students shared that unlike STEP, skills training in Singapore tend to be targeted at the older folks. Skills upgrades are usually for the seniors and young people usually go to school. Students can choose different paths, depending on what they're more comfortable with. For example, post-secondary education has 3 paths – students can enter Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs), Polytechnics or Junior Colleges. Each path has a different focus. After school though, people can continue education, especially if they find a mismatch between their desired careers and current skill set. These courses are provided by the government in collaboration with other organisations and are highly subsidised. This is quite similar with what STEP offers. However, unlike STEP, these schemes were introduced to facilitate a shift towards a more productivity-driven economy, instead of mainly to improve the lives of those in need.

Challenges

After the presentation and discussion with the staff of STEP, we realised that one of the main challenges they face is migrants' lack of understanding of rights. The staff shared that some migrants would go on for months without wages and think that it is perfectly alright. Migrants lack the understanding that legal action can be taken against the employer. The 'Legal aid' umbrella of Aajeevika serves to address these gaps in the areas of rights. It was interesting to note that in spite of the geographical and demographical difference between Singapore and India, this is a similar problem faced amongst the migrant workers in Singapore. Migrant workers were initially unaware of rights, and in the recent years, the Singapore government had been deliberate to the inform citizens, who are employers, about foreign workers' rights, vice versa.



Fig. 4. Q&A session with the trainees

Another area of challenge is the lack of aspiration of the migrants. Unwilling or ignorant to the vast opportunities and increase in income by improving skills, migrants do not seek to have training. In the hectic life in Singapore, we often overlook that our dreams and aspirations come from the knowledge of possibilities and from familial support and encouragement. One could aspire to be a doctor or a lawyer, because he or she knows the existence of such an occupation, and requirements it entails like an excellence in the area of chemistry and so forth. Also, resources to be able to train in these industries are crucial as well. As such, migrants who do not see possibilities of having alternates would be unlikely to aspire. Having the resources for training is a yet another issue. Therefore, one of the challenges of Aajeevika is to help migrants explore other options of income and empower them to be able to reach for their goals.

Conclusion

The model of Aajeevika Bureau reminds students that great work starts with a small step. Identifying issues come with interaction and observation. Also, issues often come as a 'package' with different areas of needs which are interlinked. In addition, the saying "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" holds extremely true in social enterprises. Just like STEP Academy, it does not give money to migrants to elevate social situation but it equips migrants and school dropouts skills needed to help themselves. Lastly, challenges faced could be universal across borders. Lack of aspirations is common factor in groups of low income earners. This could be attributed to the lack of exposure and lack of resources to achieve these aspirations. STEP Academy aims to elevate situations of migrant workers through skills upgrade and exposure.

Food for thought:

How are skills of migrant workers in Singapore being upgraded?

Day 3 – 6th December 2014, Saturday

Udaipur, Rajasthan, India:

Village Visit with Aajeevika Bureau, at Gogunda Village

By Benjamin Liao, and Teo Eng Han

Aajeevika Bureau (Continued)

It is an agency geared towards ensuring stable and dignified lives of communities in India that are reliant on migration and labour. It achieves these outcomes by solving economic and social problems that migrant workers face. They embark on several programmes that aim to impart technical skills to unskilled migrant workers, as well as providing services that aim to improve the quality of life for migrant workers such as facilitating registration and photo ID and providing legal aid for them.

Aajeevika Bureau is especially important in the context of India as it faces enormous gaps in policy for migrant workers both at the state and national level. The bureau acts effectively as a bridge between the government and the marginalised migrant workers by setting out new directions, priorities and programmes that can be utilised by the Indian government to improve the lives of a vast number of migrant workers. As an agency with much experience in internal migration, Aajeevika Bureau also helps other field organisations to expand their reach to migrant workers.

Gogunda Village

Our group set out for Gogunda village, and met up with Aajeevika workers in the village square. We met one of the staffs from the bureau who gave us a brief introduction to the village that we were visiting, as well as some of the crucial problems that Gogunda Village faces. After that, we split into five groups and went into different parts of the village (split into sub-units called *hamlets* and *panchayats*) to collect data about migrant labour from the villagers living there. Some basic data we collected included their names, ages, places of work, job sectors, occupations, and dependents in the household.

The image shows a survey form titled "Form for Family Livelihood Survey". The form is a grid with multiple columns and rows. The columns are labeled with various demographic and economic indicators, including "Household ID", "Name of Head of Household", "Age", "Sex", "Education", "Occupation", "Income", "Assets", "Debt", "Migration", "Health", "Nutrition", "Social Capital", and "Other". The rows are numbered 1 through 10, and the form is mostly blank, with some handwritten entries in the first few rows.

Fig. 5. A sample of the Form for Family Livelihood Survey

Due to generally low literacy rates as well as a lack of cultivatable land, many villagers opt to migrate to well-connected larger cities such as Ahmedabad and Surat to seek better job opportunities. The push and pull factors of this migration results in many of the young men leaving the village at ages as young as 12 years old. These migrant workers receive a daily wage of approximately 400 to 500 rupees. As we interviewed and surveyed various households in Gogunda village, we came across a migrant worker who came back to visit the



Fig. 6. Ben with some of the villagers

village as he took leave from his work. He is currently working as a cook in the hotel sector in Surat and he specialises in cooking Gujarati food. He takes 12 hours to travel from Gogunda to his workplace. Another man, Ramral, has a 14-year old son who left the village when he was 12 to work in Rajcourt as a kitchen helper. As a result of leaving to work and not being able to continue an education in school at such a young age, the boy is illiterate. Such occurrences are apparently not unusual, and parents like Ramral are not especially

concerned about their children even though they usually leave the village to find work and settle down in a new city alone all by themselves and come back only about once a year.

As a result, most of the people left in the village are women, young children and the elderly. As we went further on to explore the village, we observed that most of the young children who were seen in the village were girls. Subsequently, we found out that boys were not seen wandering around in the village as they were having classes in the village school. We learnt that girls in the village are not given a chance to receive any form of education, as it is believed that only boys have the natural right to become educated so that they can become productive units in India's rural economy in the future. Only girls who belong to richer communities have the opportunity to receive basic education. This is not to say that females were seen as inferior. While noticing that



Fig. 7. Some village children in a private school

many women and even young girls don silver and golden ornaments in the form of rings and other accessories, we enquired and found out that it was part of the custom; that these female villagers are seen to bring prosperity to the household.

How does Aajeevika help?

The Aajeevika Bureau helps migrant workers in Gogunda village to improve their job prospects and secure their wages by encouraging them to be part of a collective union. The migrant workers union is a powerful lobby group that has the ability to ensure that contractors pay these migrant workers consistently. Give the huge amount of members in the migrant workers union, they are also strong enough to engage in active dialogue sessions with the Indian government that are aimed to secure the interests of the migrant workers.

It is also important to note there is a return migration among older men once they have passed a certain age and are no longer as competitive in finding a job in the big cities. They come back to the village and take on odd jobs such as construction, and another main reason that was cited when they were interviewed was that they came back to take care of their dependents, i.e. their parents, parents-in-law, wife and/or children. In some cases, the burden on their shoulders is unfortunately harsh. Kelaram, a man in his mid-30s, lost his wife to

illness 3 months ago and has to support his family of 5 children. He goes to Gujarat for work in construction and when he does, his mother takes care of his children. However, such construction jobs are on a contract basis, and are thus not a regular source of income. Aajeevika hopes to help such migrants by broadening their skill base thus giving them more flexibility and ability to find stable income.

As we went around to different households, we also noticed several men wearing turbans. We later found out that these were a symbol of tradition and also identified the caste they belonged to. Locals also explained that dominating castes lived in the city area while non-dominating castes lived in “exile” in hilly areas. Aajeevika also shows awareness of this caste system and though the bureau itself does not condone the system, they do adapt their strategies around it so that they will be more effective in reaching out to the migrants. All the villagers we interviewed in the region were of the Gameti caste, so Aajeevika finds jobs suitable for that particular caste.

Financial Literacy Programme



Fig. 8.A financial literacy programme planned for villagers

Besides offering assistance to migrant workers, the Aajeevika Bureau also provided basic financial literacy for the villagers in Gogunda village. Since resources are limited in the village, it is important that villagers cultivate the habit of saving their money so that they can accumulate their wealth effectively. Volunteers from the Aajeevika Bureau organise workshops for the villagers at night to educate them about the importance of using the

national pension/savings account that is set up by the Indian national government to accumulate their financial savings.

The national pension/savings account is similar to the Central Provident Fund system in Singapore, which ensures that a certain percentage of the monthly income of Singaporeans are reserved in a central pool of fund so that every Singaporean has some form of savings for future usage. The various volunteers help the villagers to understand the rationale behind using the national pension/savings account by making use of flash charts and money trees diagrams to illustrate the importance of having financial savings and a credible insurance system to secure their finances. This can help to ensure that the villagers are provided with some form of social security to prepare for rainy days.

Conclusion

Through our interaction with the villagers and seeing their living conditions, we came to understand their plight and empathise with their situation. Many of them are sole breadwinners who have to support three generations of their family, and do not have much time to concern themselves with aspirations besides that of putting food on the table. This was sobering as we reflect on the disparity in choice and lifestyles between them and us. While we worry about what modules to take and what to major in, as well as what jobs or internships that would interest us to pursue in the future, these villagers take whatever job opportunity provided to them, to earn a living and survive.

Yet, we also saw that many of them are content with the environment and people they are living with, necessarily exuding a strong sense of unity among the villagers that is not found in a big city like Singapore. This made us question the reasoning behind such an occurrence; in a village where everyone has very little materially and has to rely on one another, each person takes care of his or her neighbour like family, while in a developed city, where people are generally more well-to-do, each person is caught up in achieving their own goals and dreams that we often forget to show care and concern for others and genuinely form a caring community.

While issues of rural to urban migration may not be relevant within the Singapore context, we face a different issue of emigration of Singaporeans to “greener pastures” and these Singaporeans never return, compared to the villagers who eventually go back to their village.

We can learn from this small community, and realise that it is this community spirit that holds people together and keeps them from permanently leaving. Perhaps, that is what Singapore needs.

Day 4 – 7th December 2014, Sunday

Udaipur, Rajasthan, India:

Visit to the Kumbhalgarh Fort and Ranakpur Jain Temple

By Choi Yan Ru, and Tng Xin Yun

Rationale

In order to provide an immersive educational and cultural experience, this STEER India trip not only focuses on bringing students to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that demonstrate the idea of community engagement, but also aims to increase the students knowledge about the history of India. It is with this mindset that we set off for the day's activities, visiting the Kumbhalgarh Fort, a famous historical site, and the Ranakpur Jain temple, an architectural marvel that is one of the more prominent Jain pilgrimage sites.

Kumbhalgarh Fort

Even from a distance when we were nearing the fort, we could see the citadel walls spanning the mountain peaks of the Aravelli Range. The first structure that we encountered was the Ram Pol, the massive and magnificent gate of the Kumbhalgarh Fort. Upon entering the fort, we were amazed by the expanse of land that the fort covered, dotted with various temples, palaces and gardens. We then set off to explore the extensive area of the fort.

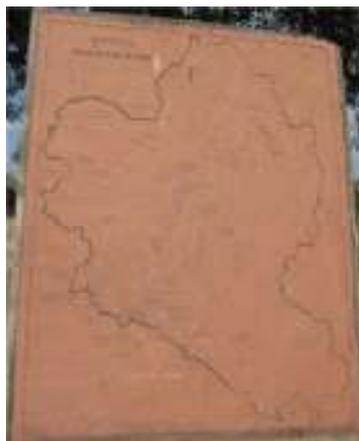


Fig.9. Map of the Kumbhalgarh Fort

As we ventured around the fort, one detail that stood out would be that many of the walls of the forts and palaces are in poor condition, in various stages of collapse or decay. However, this is not due to purposeful neglect but to preserve, as far as possible, the authentic and original architecture and design of the buildings. The layout of the fort also reflected the

social environment at that time. For example, there are both Hindu and Jain temples present in the fort, reflecting the different religions present at that time. On our journey to the highest point in the fort, we passed temples, some of which still have priests residing in them. Some of the students on the trip were even blessed by these priests.

While we took in the magnificent sights of the fort, it is also apt to reflect on how difficult it must have been for the labourers then to build the fort. The terrain is rugged and uneven, making it difficult for transportation of all the materials required for building the fort. Furthermore, many citadels have intricate designs and are towering structures which would have required massive amounts of manpower and a considerable length of time to build. Indeed, it took 15 years before the fort could be completed.



Fig.10. Some pictures taken along the way

As we climbed higher up in the fort, we managed to capture spectacular views of the buildings and mountains below. The location of the fort is an important point to consider and appreciate when exploring the fort. Historically, the Kumbhalgarh fort demarcated the boundary of Mewar and Marwar, and was an important defence outpost for the Mewar Kingdom. Planned and designed by the ruler of the Mewar kingdom, Rana Khumba, the fort is strategically located in the unassailable and inaccessible Aravelli mountain range. Coupled with the strong foundation and solid perimeter walls spanning 36km, it remained impregnable to direct attack. Furthermore, the fort



Fig.11. Canons found in the fort compound

also contained canons that acted as deterrence to invaders which further strengthened its position as a defence outpost.

In a nutshell, this visit provided a valuable lesson in the history of Rajasthan through exploring an important and elaborate fort and to allow us to marvel at the beauty of the natural landscape in the mountaineous region of Rajasthan. It also served as a great contrast to the previous places we have been visiting, where we were involved in more interaction with the locals in villages, understanding their way of life today, as opposed to learning about the history of Rajasthan.

Jain Temple

After our visit to the Kumbhalgarh Fort, we then proceeded to the Jain Temple in Ranakpur where this religion was unknown to many of us previously. Similar to that of Singapore, Jainism is a minority religion and it focuses on the beliefs of non-violence towards all living beings, and a relationship of interdependence and equality between all forms of life. According to the chief priest who gave us a tour of the temple, each of the pillars within is intricately carved by hand and there are no two pillars with the same design. This temple, like many other religious sites, has been commercialized as a tourist site and when we were there, we saw many other local tourists as well.

The visit to the Jain temple had been an interesting and controversial one. This is because of our experiences there, where some of us were approached by the priests in the temple who offered to give us a tour of the temple, together with explanations of the history of the temple. However, when the quick tour had ended, he insisted that we offered a sum of money as a donation to the temple, which we knew was going to be a tip for his service and explanation. Some of us were also shocked to learn that he rejected smaller sums of money and requested a minimum of fifty rupees to be donated. In addition, some of us were approached by a different priest to be “blessed” in return for a donation as a small token of appreciation. Such acts have challenged our religious experiences and beliefs as religion in Singapore is neither commoditized nor are religious sites commercialized for tourism. Donations in Singapore temples are given on a voluntary basis, and donation boxes are placed at different areas so that those who are willing to donate can then place their donations in these boxes at their own will without feeling pressured to do so. Hence, we were a little taken aback after experiencing the pushiness of the religious culture in the Jain temple as this was something that was not

common back in Singapore, although such practices can also be found in some other commercialized temples in other tourist major attractions around the world. Even though such practices exist, the Jain temple is still an important place in Rajasthan, Udaipur as tourist site for the spread of awareness of Jainism. By commercialising such an area, more tourists and locals can get the chance to learn about the existence of such a religion in order for its awareness to be spread further across the globe.

Sharing with Mr Jeetesh Sisodia

After visiting Jain temple, we returned to the hotel to have a dialogue session with the founder of the start-up, GKM IT Pvt Ltd. He shared with us his life story and how he came to venture into entrepreneurship. His motivation for venturing into entrepreneurship stems from his interest in identifying a problem in society, then utilise his knowledge in IT to tackle the problem. Expanding this concept to the realm of community engagement, this is also applicable as organisations would look out for segments of society that are neglected and source for members who can utilise their relevant knowledge to aid these communities.

Another inspiring take away from the dialogue would be the indefatigable enthusiasm and fervour Mr Jeetesh has to try out new ideas. In his bid to ameliorate the identified problem, Mr Jeetesh brainstorms for many solutions and puts them into action. In fact, he is not afraid of failure. If one of his ideas fail, he just shrugs it off and re-directs his attention to another idea.

His wife, Kriti, also shared her experience of switching career paths. From obtaining a Bachelor in Engineering, she realised that her true passion lies not in Engineering and therefore she decided to pursue her Masters degree in Psychology. From her sharing, it is evident that it is important for us to reflect on our strengths and weaknesses, and understand where it would be best applied. However, more importantly we must enjoy what we are doing and not let our career paths be dictated by pressures by other parties. On that note, should we choose to try something different, we must be able to prove that we have made the right decision. For Kriti, she worked hard to prove to her parents that this shift from Engineering to Psychology was what she truly wanted to do.

Their stories were beneficial in allowing us to get a glimpse of the life that happens after university, especially since they have taken the path less travelled. Jeteesh's experiences allowed us to understand the actual work that is being involved in a start-up entrepreneurial

experience so that we could better understand the thinking process behind his ideas and the specific steps that he had taken to his route of success today, whereas Kriti's experiences showed that it is important for us to pursue a suitable career that matches our interests and personality, providing great advice for us to ponder upon with regards to our personal growth and development in the future.

Day 5– 8th December 2014, Monday

From Udaipur, Rajasthan, India to Kutch, Bhuj:

Check-in to Shilpgram Kutch, and traditional meal and story-telling

By Teoh Ming Kwang, and Veronica Tan

About Kutch, Bhuj

Kutch is well known for its craft products because the locals have managed to adapt to the changing dynamics of the economy. Before the 1950s, the locals engaged in barter trade, in which they traded textiles for other goods and services, such as cattle and agricultural products. In the 1970s, the Indian government saw the potential in the Kutch region and its cultural traditions, and started supporting cultural villages economically. Gradually, the market for textile expanded, and today, people such as Japanese fashion designers, seek inspiration from the Kutch textile industry. The weavers were even invited to showcase their crafts in overseas exhibitions. The weaving industry continues to be a very lucrative sector of the economy because there is both a national and international demand for such craft. Locals with a B.A. Engineering degree would still want to join the weaving sector when they finish schooling. Yet, the people involved in the weaving industry have been shrinking in numbers; with 5500 families in the past to 800 families today. In spite of, the weaving industry in Kutch is still sustainable because locals see the need to preserve this cultural practice, which is a vital part of their identity and tradition. This practice remains very appealing to Indians who are looking for a work-life balance as it allows the entire family to be involved in the production process. Also, the weaving industry is likely to be less stressful than conventional professions such as Law and Medicine.

Shilpgram Kutch

After a ten-hour bus ride, the STEER India team arrived at Shilpgram, Kutch, a family-owned guesthouse. While some of us stayed in regular hostel/dormitory-type rooms, a lucky few had the chance to sleep in a mud hut, also known as a Bhunga. After being served a wonderful dinner, we were ushered into the open area for a campfire. There, the team enjoyed a sharing session about Kutch and its craft industry by Shamji, the head weaver of the family.

Shamji also shared his views on marriage with us. He believes that an arranged marriage is

the most natural way for Indians to get married because the community places great respect for the parents' decisions. The idea that parents make the best decisions is the norm and an arranged marriage is therefore still very acceptable and widely practiced in this community even till today. This is strikingly different for Singaporeans, who crave for the freedom to decide their life partner on their own. It was interesting to see how different societies have vastly different norms but are yet still successful in their own ways.

Conclusion

From our visit to Shilpgram, we can see that our hosts are very contented being able to make a living while doing something that they love. This is strikingly different from Singapore as the government and the society value pragmatic degrees, such as Law and Medicine, more than other degrees, such as the Arts and Social Sciences. Further, their ability to break off from the conventional corporate route and take-on the responsibility of continuing their culture and tradition prompted deep reflections with regards to our own values and aspirations. In Singapore, our identities are largely defined by coveted university degrees, prestigious jobs and material possessions. Since young, we are exposed to "examination hell" as we studied intensively for PSLE, GCE O level, and GCE A Level. We often pursue academic excellence at the expense of our family and social life. On the other hand, family life in Kutch, the preservation of culture, and work-life balance are key components to their lives. There is a stark difference in lifestyle and consequences of such habits between Bhuj and Singapore. To put it into layman's terms, perhaps we should ask ourselves this question: Are we happier than or at least as happy as the locals here in Kutch?

Day 6– 9th December 2014, Tuesday

Kutch, Bhuj:

Watch warp making process, visit Khamir Organisation Facility,
and try out various crafts

By Teoh Ming Kwang, and Veronica Tan

Warp making process

In the morning, the host family showed us the basic weaving process. It was very interesting to see how the weaving process started from scratch and how the entire family can be involved in the process. It includes:

a) Separating thread into different sub-bundles



Fig.12. Artisans preparing the thread for washing

b) Washing them in water (mixed with wheat flour); starch present in wheat allows for the strengthening of the threads



Fig.13. Artisan washing thread bundles in water (mixed with wheat flour)

c) Brushing to eventually separate threads and prepare for drying



Fig.14. Artisan brushing thread

d) Drying



Fig.15a. Thread being laid out to dry under the sun



Fig.15b. Thread being laid out to dry under the sun

Khamir Organisation Facility

We then headed to Khamir (<http://www.khamir.org>), where Shailesh, an agricultural scientist, gave us a talk about Kutch. Khamir is a platform for the crafts, heritage and cultural ecology of the Kutch region of Gujarat. Shailesh's focus was on strengthening traditional risk mitigation systems for food security with the onset of climate change in Kutch.

The Kachchh district lies on the Tropic of Cancer. As such, it is a semi-arid region that experiences an annual rainfall of 330 mm spread over 13 rain days from June to October. There is a high annual temperature variation, ranging from zero degrees Celsius to 47 degrees Celsius, and a diurnal temperature range of 25 degrees Celsius. This makes agriculture especially difficult in this region. Out of the total 7.4 lakh (1 lakh = 100 000) hectare of land sown, 85% is under rain-fed condition and it is the primary source of livelihood for a majority of the 1.64 lakh families.

One of the main concerns and difficulties for the Kachchh district is the uncertainty of rainfall as this will affect the economy and the livelihood of people who rely on agriculture. The region also has an earthquake recurrence interval of 50 years and earthquakes have resulted in serious damages in the past. In order to adapt to the environmental characteristics of the region, the people became more invested in the crafts sector of the economy, where they can be less reliant on the weather and climate conditions of the place. Furthermore, the locals tried to diversify their crops and their cattle so that they could be more flexible and adapt better to the climatic conditions of the area. This showed great resilience and adaptability in the people of Kutch.

According to Shailesh, one of the reasons why Kutch is able to hold onto its deep cultural roots is because historically, the British Crown rule indirectly controlled Kutch, and it is the only princely state that manages its own currency. Additionally, it gave Kutch relatively more freedom to manage its own army too. Due to the rather benign British rule, the locals were able to preserve their cultural roots without conforming to the British imperialism. This explains why Kutch is still very traditional today. Upon reflection, Singapore is similar to Kutch because the British enforced a relatively benign imperialism. Hence, we are able to build a national community with a uniquely Singaporean spirit without being obstructed by the fragmentalism caused by the colonialization.

Hands-on craft session

We then got the opportunity to try our hands at several crafts, namely, pottery, plastic weaving, dyeing, weaving and leather making. These hands-on activities allowed us to better understand the Kutch cultural practices.

Eng Han, Ming Kwang, and Veronica tried their hands at pottery. They learnt how to make simple clay pots with guidance from pottery master artisan, Niraj. We found out that they used bubble wrap to prevent their pottery products from breaking when they are being transported. Whereas, in the past, they made extra products just in case any of it breaks during the delivery.

Benjamin, Faustine, Jynn, and Yan Ru got to experience weaving – both hand-stitching and machine-stitching. They learnt that hand weaving the geographical indication (GI) onto their product is more effective in preventing other competitors from creating imitation products. The GI is a community copyright issued to producers of a certain region.

Samantha and Shaun learnt about plastic weaving which is similar to the regular weaving process but with a twist – weaving strips of plastic bags. Upon reflection, they believed that waste and unwanted plastics could be collected and bundled together to be used in the packaging of pottery product to protect them better. These waste plastics could also be used to weave small intricate designs into plastic woven bags.

Elaine, Cherie, Sharanya, Sheiffa, and Lee Keng learnt about the dyeing process and the business model of the dyeing entrepreneur at Khamir. As a master artisan, the entrepreneur was fully knowledgeable about the processes that come in play during the dyeing process. Using natural resources such as turmeric and iron, he taught them to produce natural colours such as red and black through the concoction of various minerals and chemicals. They were then taught to use these colours to dye, and tie dye the fabrics. The master artisan explained that over the few decades that he has been in the field, he has learned to limit the influence of natural conditions on the quality of dyes. The harsh climatic conditions of Kutch only affected the time taken to complete the process as more time was needed to dry the fabrics. He also had a treatment system to produce pure water that was widely used during the dyeing process.

The factory-like standardization of his colours are very difficult because dyeing was an intricate and process unique to different fabrics. The group was indeed amazed at the master artisan's abilities and expertise to combine various natural resources and chemicals to

produce various colours; a technique that is seemingly very scientifically-advanced. However, the master artisan noted that these processes and natural resources were used decades ago, where artisans such as himself would source for these resources in forests. Today, these natural resources are easily found in the market. Thus, the group celebrated the ability of complex traditional processes that continue to exist and be widely used today.

Belle, Haaken, Hadziqah, Xin Yun, and Zachary were involved in the leather workshop as they learnt how to make handmade footwear. They learnt how to incorporate weaving into the leather products by pasting weaves onto leather strips that make up the straps of a slipper. They even got to make their own leather products, such as cardholders and anklets, and through which they realized that such craft takes years of experience and practice in order to master.

These cultural experiences allowed us to understand more about the economic strategy of Kutch. Today, the locals deliberately specialized in different craft productions. From an economic perspective, specialization of one industry will allow more resources to be devoted in producing top quality products in that sector. At the same time, monetary benefits will incentivize locals to preserve their own cultural markers.

Visit to Bhujodi

After our handicraft crash course at Khamir, we visited Bhujodi, a nearby craft village in which they sold handicrafts, such as leather shoes and woven carpets for a living. We visited Shamji at his shop and he presented us with classic woven pieces for our viewing pleasure. His collection of classic pieces was more than a hundred years old. These pieces were not to be sold, but rather, preserved and to be donated to museums in the future. We learnt that the classic textile pieces, those that inspired future textile designs, are generally not well preserved today. Hence, it is indeed very heartening to see Shamji putting in so much effort in “reinventing” the classics. He can take at least six months to “reinvent” a single classical scarf. Through Shamji’s sharing, we learnt the importance of the preservation of arts because it is very much of our social identity. Unfortunately, the pursuit of monetary gains can be at the expense of preserving the classics today. This also happens in the Singapore arts scene as Singaporeans desire for more popular Broadway musicals rather than local theatrical productions.

After yet another amazing dinner from the Shilpgram crew, we were entertained by a local musician and his sitar. All in all, the team really enjoyed the stay at Shilpgram, Kutch. We were all more than amazed by their kindness and hospitality – they invited us into the homes and treated us like kings and queens. We also enjoyed the hands-on experience at Khamir and were very inspired by their passion to do what they love.

Day 7– 10th December 2014, Wednesday

Kutch, Bhuj:

Check out of Shilpgram Kutch, visit printing village,
meet Abhiyan, explore the Great Rann of Kutch (salt desert)

By Samantha Tan, and Sheiffa Safi

Block-printing Village

Following our artisan exposure and experiences with Khamir, the morning of 10 December was spent visiting a block printing community. We were taught the processes that are involved to produce block prints for shirts. This involved using various natural resources to produce the necessary colours, and the carving and selection of blocks. This experience was striking because the processes are extremely careful and scientific; involving the concoction of chemicals and the ability to weave cross-cultural historical and cultural elements into their unique block prints. Furthermore, we were introduced to the organized processes that come together to transform a plain fabric into one with detailed and extricate block prints. We witnessed that each individual had a pertinent role to play in every step of the process. It was eye-opening to see how a small, family-based community strengthened economically and socially through their traditional art work. Notably, the family we visited had been invited for international conferences and universities to introduce the art of block printing.

Through this experience, we learned of the important role that large organisations, such as Khamir, have in preserving these traditional arts. As a unique and intricate form of art, block printing continues to compete with larger and technologically advanced companies that mass-produce such pieces of work. However, these artisans are given a good opportunity to preserve their work. Through our conversation with the master artisan, we also noted that by tying up with non-governmental organisations such as Khamir, they are given the support and security of necessary resources and market strength. One question that was posed was the differences in their production of these traditional arts over the years. We noted that one key difference was their access to important resources such as acids that are used to produce colours. By tying up with Khamir who has a network of suppliers and a market, these traditional artisans are given a secure access to the market, their resources and continue to be thoroughly supported.

However, during our visit, we found that the master artisans were extremely used to their traditional methods of production. During our interaction with the artisans, we were told that,

aside from having greater access to markets, globalization has had little impact on their production processes. However, in our opinion, we believe that these communities should be challenged to deviate slightly away from their traditional methods to appreciate newer production methods that could collectively enhance the quality and quantity of their products while still retaining the unique cultural values and aspects. During the trip, while we thoroughly admired the efforts of the organizations that have assisted and empowered these communities, we believe that more organizations should tie and network together in order to influence traditional crafts into being more applicable and sustainable in the increasingly globalized world.



Fig.16. Block printing in fabrics



Fig.17. One of the blocks used in block printing

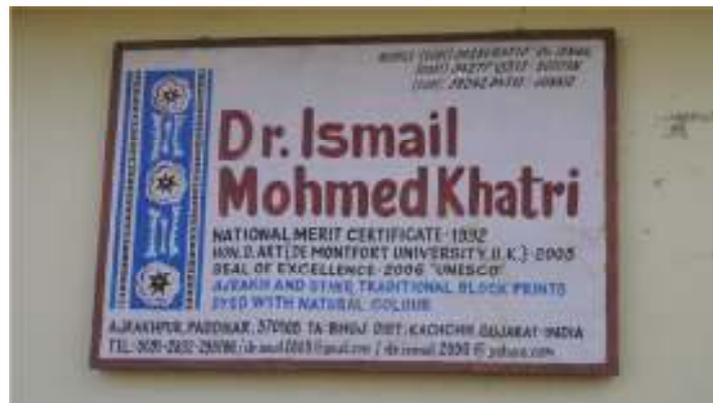


Fig.18. Achievements of Master Artisan

Shrujan

Shrujan is an extended initiative by the reputable Shroff family to empower females in the Kutch region, particularly in the art of embroidery. We were given a tour of Shrujan's production and office facility that include reserved areas for the exhibition of their final embroidered products, designing studios and training classrooms. We learned that embroidery is an important cultural art form especially in Kutch region that is passed on from mothers to daughters for generations. While speaking to the founder, Chandaben Shroff, and watching news documentaries studying Shrujan during our visit, it was admirable to find that the focus of Shrujan was to amplify the notion that culture should not hinder development. Instead, the founder and organizational efforts of Shrujan today focus on capitalizing the assets of women in this field.

We felt that Shrujan values and appreciates the traditional culture by using the skills and abilities of women in the embroidery sector. They have provided skills improvement classes and the necessary resources. In the designing studio, for example, we witnessed several women using their fine needling skills to create intricate stencils based on detailed sketches by designers. We were told that one piece of fine needling could take a whole day. However, Shrujan's structure allows these women to focus and specialize in their strengths and niches of the traditional craft to produce quality products.

Furthermore, the approximately 3000 women working under Shrujan are given a fixed income regardless of market storms. These efforts empower women, mostly who did not receive formal education, by protecting and allowing them to continue relying on their skills for this traditional art that has been slowly passed on for generations. Through our visit to

Shrujan, we felt that Shrujan's model of empowering marginalized communities and crafts can be adopted by Singapore. Facing an ageing population, we believe that the older workers of our country have important cultural skills that should be passed on to younger generations and capitalized on for further economic development. Parallel to the context of Shrujan, the art of pottery is dying in Singapore. Younger generations do not emulate the skills of the elder in adopting this traditional artwork as they do not appreciate the value of such traditional crafts. However, just as in the case of Shrujan, these older workers should be empowered to spread their knowledge and expertise on this dying art – expertise that can give pottery-making a unique Singaporean mark, amplify the importance of such cultural crafts and values and further empower these communities' livelihoods.

Great Rann of Kutch

Our final visit for the day was to the Great Rann of Kutch. As the largest district in India, Kutch is noted for its seasonal salt marsh. We learnt that 90% of the Great Rann belongs to India, while 10% belongs to Pakistan. The Great Rann therefore lies on the international border between India and Pakistan. Based on talks with locals and speakers from various organizations such as Khamir, we learnt that 51% of Kutch's land is occupied by the vast salt desert rendering this land completely uninhabitable. As agriculture is largely limited due to these infrastructural restrictions in Kutch, locals cannot only rely on agriculture as their sole source of income as compared to other districts in India. Efforts are therefore invested into the Great Rann to promote tourism, create alternative sources of revenue and collectively increase locals' incomes.



Fig.19a. Sights during visit to the Great Rann



Fig.19b. Sights during visit to the Great Rann

While making our way to the Great Rann, we saw many tents being set up for the reputable “Full Moon Festival” that was to take place on the week of 15th December. Furthermore, there were large buses of locals also making their visit to the Great Rann. It was also interesting to note that security was extremely tight – not even bottled water was allowed into the area of the desert. Furthermore, horse and camel riding services were available in the desert itself, and there was also a live traditional band playing local folk music. The well maintenance of the desert serves as a stark contrast to other touristic areas that we visited during the trip. Despite horse and camel riding being made available, it was not prevalent in every area of the desert, and was not actively promoted as the main attraction of the desert. Rather, the focus of the Great Rann was to encourage tourists to bask in the natural beauty of

the remarkably beautiful salt desert. With strict regulations and the inculcation of the right values in tourists, long-term sustainability in the tourism sector is ensured. This model of tourism should be highly sought after by other countries when promoting eco-tourism, in order to ensure that such natural environments, such as the Great Rann, remain untouched for many generations to come.

Our stay for the night on 10 December was at the Shaam-e-Sarhad Resort. Shaam-e-Sarhad Resort is a key example of rural tourism that is increasingly expanding in India today. The indigenous people of Hodka Village own the resort. For the meals that followed from the night we arrived, the young male members of the village treated us to traditional Gujarati meals. Staying in tents and bungalows, the resort mimicked life in a traditional Gujarati village. Throughout our stay, we found that tourism should not dominate the community; the community should take control of the influence of tourism on them. We were told by organizations such as Hunnarshala that such communities initially rejected the idea of opening themselves and their culture up to tourists; for fear that their culture will not be respected. However, as witnessed by the example of Shaam-e-Sarhad that opens seasonally and earns \$4-5 million rupees a year, the idea of rural tourism has changed the economic status of the locals without eroding their culture and values.

The infrastructure of Shaam-e-Sarhad was especially interesting. We learnt that it was built and supported by the designers of Hunnarshala. This shows the importance of relationships between various organizations and rural communities that should in fact empower and complement each other's efforts for the betterment of their economic and social status. During our stay, we were exposed to interesting and memorable experiences such as low temperatures during the night, the lack of hot water, and even a basic need for many Singaporeans today – the Internet. However, while interacting with the villagers who were working in the resort, we found ourselves assimilating to their way of life. We were introduced, for example, to their simple mechanisms of heating water and even their dance and music culture. Collectively, we found that the experiences in Shaam-e-Sarhad was extremely eye-opening and memorable as we experienced being tourists in a completely unique and different context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our visit to the block printing village, Shrujan, the Great Rann of Kutch and Shaam-e-Sarhad broadened our perspectives with regards to the relationships between traditions, culture and locals in this region of India. More importantly, from tourism to artisans, we witnessed how culture is widely used to empower the people in a way that they are comfortable with and can contribute significantly to. A salient message in all these visits was that these rural communities, especially, should have a stake and say in their own growth and development. This is a unique overarching value we learnt and will continue to carry with us even after the trip.

Day 8 & 9– 11th & 12th December 2014, Thursday & Friday

Kutch, Bhuj:

Hodka, Abhiyan, International SOS Childrens' Village, Hunnarshala;

Kutch, Bhuj to Ahmedabad, Gujarat

By Jynn Chee Chooi, Raquel Yoong, Zachary Chua

Overview

On the eighth day of our grand adventure, the team began the day with a visit to a village in Hodka, a cluster of 17 community villages that ran itself through the support of a collective committee of representatives from each village. Following which, we travelled to the city of Bhuj where we met with the associates of Abhiyan, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that organizes and manages a network of 33 other NGOs within a cooperative platform that offers mutual support. Thereafter, the team made its third stop for the day at the International SOS Children's Village which serves as a safe and homely environment for 134 orphaned children of Bhuj, employing a unique system of family-based care in order to create a loving and conducive community for the children's growth. Finally, we made our next stop at Hunnarshala in its beautiful campus, where the NGO that works to provide homes for the destitute and disaster-displaced shared its extensive body of work that spans regionally in India all the way to Banda Aceh, Indonesia; and understood its work in application on a guided visit to a Bhuj urban slum undergoing redevelopment. The following are accounts of the respective experiences and encounters.

Hodka, Village

Upon stepping off the bus, we were warmly ushered by the locals into the village that was like Shaam-e-Sarhad, characterized by traditional bhungas. With Shaam-e-Sarhad as a platform for tourists to immerse into the Hodka culture, the many neighbouring Hodka villages also opened up to the tourists as part of the daily cultural tours provided. For us, seeing the way of life of the villages deepened our understanding of the Hodka culture as we got to see how the community lived together and the insides of a family's bunga. The villagers had also prepared handicrafts, such as embroidery and leather products, which showcased Kutchi culture. Virtually every member from the village was involved in selling the handicrafts to us, from the young ones to the older women; it was a joint effort. Many of

us students bought many items back as gifts for friends and family. By opening up their village through the local cooperative model, it has provided a new shopping place for tourists who go to the villages directly.

Abhiyan, Bhuj

Next, we went to the Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan, a collective of 33 local NGOs in the Kutch region. Shrasta and Ashram, staff from Abhiyan, introduced us to what the NGO is about and how it has impacted the community through its well-established network. We learnt about how Abhiyan was set up in response to the 1998 cyclone in Kutch to rebuild and develop the area with community initiatives. One of the initiatives Shrasta shared with us is Urban SETU. SETU means 'bridge' in Gujarati, and helps to 'bridge' the gap between the government and citizens. SETU empowers the locals living in slums by facilitating their adoption of government schemes available and thus strengthening urban governance. In essence, SETU encourages a bottom-up approach where locals are given a voice and a stake in the community they are in. Another initiative they have started is Homes in the City-Bhuj Citizens Voice which was set up in 2001 after the earthquake severely damaged the city.

This program aims at promoting active citizenship by engaging the locals and empowering them to play a part in rebuilding their homes. Citizen blogs, social media and information kiosks are some of the avenues that provide access to information and a platform to voice their concerns. Many of us could draw the similarities to Singapore where the government has actively put in place platforms such as dialogue sessions to discuss social issues. At the end of the session, many of us proposed several suggestions to engage the community, one of which was a talk show to be broadcasted on TV, where the government officials can answer questions from the public on a public platform. The resilience of the people of Bhuj has inspired many of us and it has also taught us the importance of taking ownership in the community we live in.

International SOS Children's Village, Bhuj

Beginning with a discussion and sharing by the centre's director, Pradeep, the team was first introduced to how the International SOS Children's village functions, before being invited to have tea and a tour of the homes (some even played games or sports like Frisbee to interact). Running on a model based on family-based care that is centred on a substitute 'mother' who

cares for as many as 10 orphans in a house, the children and their 'mother' form a new family as one of fourteen families that reside in the village. With the belief that such a model would create the ideal and conducive environment for children to learn and grow up in, this Bhuj facility offers an alternative solution to adoption or boys'/girls' homes, and has seen a substantial rate of orphans finding good careers and happy childhoods. In an effort to create an all-rounded education and preparation for the children, boys are sent to Youth homes when they turn 14 to learn new skills while girls are expected to pick up household chore skills from their 'mothers'. Most pertinently, the strongest takeaway was the degree of sensitivity taken into consideration when understanding the emotional and social predicament of the children. Based on an assessment of needs (for instance, these children need as much maternal care and concern just like any other child) the village administration has been able to cater to individual children, despite the fact that children of different religions live in close proximity to one another. The most important lesson from the visit is the importance of empathy and understanding the needs of a target community when doing Community Engagement or Social Innovation when one seeks to address the issues of a marginalised community. Without understanding so, it would be ineffective to try to construct an efficient solution to any issue.



Fig.20. A group photo taken at SOS Children's Village

Hunnarshala, Bhuj

We were left in awe by the modern techniques adopted by the people in Bhuj to reconstruct their homes after sitting through a presentation by the Hunnarshala Foundation. The affected communities and villagers were provided with guidance by professionals and were able to respond appropriately towards disasters, through owner-oriented construction approaches.

One of the remarkable schemes was the demarcating of plot boundaries in the slum areas of Bhuj. With more orderly land planning, excess land is freed up. These excess lands serve many important functions such as future housing, transit/rental housing for migrants, old age homes for the destitute, livelihood creation as well as to provide for basic community homes. As up to 33% of the city population are living in slums, a significant move like this gives the people a better standard of living with a more centralized plan that reduces land wastage and dedicates these lands to more economical and socially beneficial uses. Facilities that were built by the people at Hunnarshala Foundation include the Shaam-e-Sarhad village – where we stayed for two nights. The impressive architecture at Khamir was also a work of the organization. Its aim of creating “Homes in the City” – homes which are environmentally sustainable, promote local management and control, empowerment of the local community – helps to ensure dignified living for citizens by providing basic housing and services for the economically weaker community of society.

We were deeply inspired by how the Hunnarshala Foundation engages the local community with a heart and has already conceptualized an end goal for the betterment of society. This was something that we found valuable and worth learning as part of our experiential learning on community engagement. What we found heart-warming, also, was that whenever the women get their pay from jobs such as being artisans, vegetable vendors and construction workers, they would pool their funds towards a central fund specially set aside for the development of their community. This spirit of togetherness and selflessness even in difficult times and poor living conditions was an inspiring and noble act.

Day 10– 13th December 2014, Saturday

Ahmedabad, Gujarat:

SEWA Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) Market,

Orientation at SEWA Organisation,

Visit to Nandasan village and Ganeshpura village,

Watershow at Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple

By Cherie Heng, Shaun Ramdas, Sharanya Vedula

Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

SEWA was born in the Ahmedabad slums and continues to strive for the rights of rural and urban women. They have been training women in various sectors since 1972. They have been striving to provide and obtain work, income, food and social security to urban and rural women through the implementation of various schemes that focus on health care, child care and shelter. It was founded by Ms Ela Bhatt, who was confronted with the harsh reality that almost 90% of the Indian population was employed in the informal working sector wherein they were often victims of exploitation at the hands of their employers.

With two thirds of the workforce employed in the rural areas, women often took on a plethora of jobs to feed their families, some of which included rag picking and lowly paid domestic jobs. Consequently, SEWA sought to promote a more equitable labour culture through the dual action of their workers union and co-operative initiatives. Their activities are also influenced by the principles of liberalisation, a result of which they endeavour to move beyond gender stereotypes by releasing women from the shackles of being a homemaker. SEWA follows a co-operative model that places emphasis on the economic empowerment of women by transforming their position in society from low to no income earners to active contributors of the household. Most of the schemes implemented by SEWA are influenced by the Gandhian principles of social empowerment, which attempts to provide equality of opportunities to women belonging to different sections of the society.

SEWA provides supportive services including savings and credit, healthcare, childcare, insurance, legal aid, capacity building and communication services, which are the essential needs of urban and rural women, at nominal and affordable rates. The structure of the organisation also places tremendous importance on the role of community leaders, who tend to reach out to majority of the diverse sections of society, as opposed to academics, who

might be viewed as outsiders, thereby preventing any significant change in the existing social structure.

Agriculture Produce Market Committee Market

We visited the SEWA women's shop in the local market of Ahmedabad that was established in 2000. This particular shop, which is open throughout the day, sells agriculture produce that has been harvested by women. While women work at the shop during the morning shift which runs from 6am to 4pm, the night shift is generally run by the men, due to security issues. Women take up several roles in the Agriculture Produce Market Committee which includes producing, delivery of vegetables, selling and accounting. On an average, the daily revenue generated at this stall is Rupees 50 000. Surprisingly, this shop is the only rented shop in the entire market, while all other shops are privately owned. The women levy a service tax of 7% on the vendors, as opposed to other shops in the market that charge 10%, which is a main factor for attracting the external vendors. Furthermore, the revenue generated through this tax is used to pay their utility and rental bills. The main objective of setting up this shop was to encourage women to step out of their houses and make them more comfortable with other kinds of jobs.

We toured the marketplace and got to interact with various vegetable vendors. We were greeted by overwhelming sights and smells that included the sharp smell of onions, the bubbling sewage pipe, the cows and the constant honking of cars, which were very different from the Singaporean markets.



Fig.21. A group photo at SEWA agriculture produce shop



Fig.22. Walking around the marketplace

After a short bus ride, we were brought to the regional headquarters of the organization where we were presented with several videos that demonstrated the gradual progression in the outreach activities of SEWA. We were given an in-depth explanation of the services offered by SEWA by Ms Pratibha, SEWA senior administrator at the headquarters in the city of Ahmedabad.



Fig.23. Ms Pratibha presenting the initiatives of SEWA

In keeping with their Gandhian principles of spirituality and simplicity, the women conducted their daily morning ritual where they sang the national song of India, spoke of their organization's aims and prayed in several religions to ask for blessings upon their members. This adherence to tradition, religion, and the state underlined SEWA's commitment to be an

organisation that does not replace the function of the state or religious institute, but rather, acts to supplement these organisations, albeit with a strong emphasis on the welfare and development of women in India and beyond. SEWA supports and supplement the state initiatives by promoting simplicity and self-reliance, two very Gandhian principles. Their integrated approach to co-operatives and women-run social enterprises is built upon the consensus of the community and this encourages the stake of every member in their community. With a relatively low annual membership of Rupees 5, women are encouraged to step up and join the workforce. These fees are used to fund the co-operatives and increase SEWA's outreach of their programmes to more women.

To involve the younger generation, new technology is continually being used to increase income and improve the efficiency of existing programs. Community radio stations have been started in three districts to link the youth to newer opportunities in different cities. The SEWA schools impart skills through their modules, which are recognised by the government.

Ganeshpura Village

After the presentation, we visited Ganeshpura Village, which was an hour away by bus from the SEWA headquarters. We were welcomed by the women to the village with a native greeting song, after which they applied 'bindi's' on our foreheads, which is a traditional Hindu practice of welcoming guests. After this warm welcome, we were seated in an orchard, where the manager of the co-operation greeted us and informed us that the co-operation of local women was set up with the assistance of SEWA in 1985, in order to increase the productivity of a barren stretch of land in the village. She placed tremendous emphasis on the fact that the mindsets of the illiterate villagers were changing due to the relentless efforts of SEWA that sought to promote equality among both genders.

The women of the co-operation shared with us that one of the major problems that they faced in the past was the lack of productivity in the village caused by the presence of vast stretches of barren and infertile land that eventually led to a rampant shortage of fodder and fuel for daily practices. SEWA assisted them in renting ten acres of land with the permission of village panchayat, a rural arm of the government. In the years that followed, they gradually built a greenhouse and rainwater harvesting plants on the agricultural land. In addition, they also planted Indian gooseberry trees, lemon trees and other organic and herbal plantations on the same land. We were also informed that the twenty local women who work on the land every day, have been provided with food processing, vermin-composting and basic

accounting training by SEWA; as a consequence of which they feel more empowered and have an equal say in the functioning of the household.



Fig.24. The women in Ganeshpura welcoming us; and Shaun with a flower



*Fig.25. Taking photos with one of the 'horoscope trees' in the area;
Faustine, Eng Han, and Samantha posing with their horoscope (Cancer) tree- The Sacred Fig*

RUDI Processing

We went to see one of the cooperatives set up by SEWA, RUDI (Rural Urban Development Initiative) processing. At the site, we saw women packing food. These women were empowered to take part in economic activity rather than their domestic duties. We saw first-hand how such empowerment impacted their lives. These women are very happy packing and SEWA is able to identify the gap in the market. This gap, filled by women, helps them to generate profits instead of the usual male-dominated industry to fill the needs.

Sat-Chit Anand Water Show, Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple

We enjoyed our second last night in India by immersing ourselves in the popular 'Sat-Chit Anand Water Show' at the Akshardham Temple in Gandhinagar. The show was very well attended by schoolchildren, and it was more appealing to the locals due to its emphasis on the values of Hinduism and its way of life. The water and light show narrated the story of Nachiketa, a nine year old devout Hindu, who persuaded his father to offer him up to Yamraj, the Hindu god of death. As a consequence of his display of unfaltering courage on being confronted by the scary God of Death, Nachiketa was offered one wish by Yamraj. He wished to inquire about the phenomenon of afterlife, which reflects the public's apprehensions surrounding the concepts of rebirth and karma. Despite being offered the gifts of limitless wealth, immortality and all-encompassing beauty, he remained adamant and compelled Yamraj to explain the hidden truth of Hinduism. The God of Death revealed that true happiness can only be found if we stopped obsessing with our mortal bodies and focused on our immortal soul. He also emphasised the importance of a guru, or teacher in the Hindu culture; who bridges the gap between the human soul and God.

We were amazed at the quality of the show and were also surprised that we were the only foreigners in a sea of several thousand people, which resulted in us being treated as celebrities. As the show began and through our interactions with the people around us, our group was struck at how different we as Singaporeans reacted to the show as compared to the locals. Village children sitting beside us cooed and often vocalized their amazement and wonder throughout the program while we remained unimpressed, perhaps exposed to other more elaborate shows. Sadly, we could not enjoy the show fully because of the obvious language barrier. Another takeaway that struck our group was how the Hindu culture was able to evolve and adapt modern technology to become more relevant with the younger generation, something that many cultural products in Singapore still struggle to do. As such in many ways, India still has much to teach Singapore about the preservation of culture and its practices.

Conclusion

This STEER India trip also reflects a flaw of Singaporean culture. We were exposed to an interesting cultural aspect of India. During the show, Singaporeans were stoic to the performance. As we already are a developed nation, we are jaded to many things. In

comparison, the Indian locals were enthralled by the performance with occasional whoops and cheers to root on the main character.

As a final reflection of the day's activities, our group felt that the strongest takeaway we have gotten was that India as a nation and culture is not a static one as often perpetuated by the "Timeless Asia" myth perpetuated by the western held view of Orientalism; rather, India was and is a fast-paced, ever-changing and evolving society where its people seem to have a growing self-consciousness and awareness of their rights and needs. As a whole, we are certainly impressed at the self-initiatives started by these Indians to meet their own needs and the needs of others, like the SEWA women, in the communities they belong to. Perhaps as we return to our own community in Singapore, some of these lessons of self-reliance and determination can be applied to our own situations to change and engage the community around us for a better tomorrow.

Day 11– 14th December 2014, Sunday

Ahmedabad, Gujarat:

Gandhi Ashram, Shopping at Alpha One Mall

By Belle Lim, Faustine Yap

Gandhi Ashram

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, commonly referred to as Mahatma Gandhi, is definitely a well-known figure to many both in and out of India. While the trip was mainly focused on social enterprises and interacting with the locals, it would not have been complete without learning more about this inspiration figure that changed the course of history in India. Fortunately, on the last day of the trip, the team went to the Gandhi Ashram, which is also known as Sabarmati Ashram. It is located in the Sabarmati suburb of Ahmedabad, adjoining the Ashram Road on the banks of the River Sabarmati, four miles from the town hall.



Fig.26. Some sights in Gandhi Ashram; Mahatma Gandhi's room

For the first half of the day, we explored the ashram which was one of Gandhi's residences. He resided in this house with his wife, Kasturba Gandhi, for twelve years. During which, it comprised of a school for training in manual labour, and later on became the base for the historical Dandi Salt March in 1930. Accompanied by the warm sunrays and the comfort of the cooling breeze, it was a pleasant walk throughout the entire ashram. Today, the ashram is more than just a residential property. A museum, the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalay, has been added. It is an informative site where 700 000 visitors come annually to gain a deeper understanding of Gandhian thought and beliefs, as well as his life and journey of leading nationwide campaigns such as uplifting the untouchables, increasing women's rights, easing poverty and achieving self-rule for India. The highlights of the museum include the "My life

is my message" gallery which consists of eight life-size paintings and more than 250 photo-enlargements of some of the most vivid and historic events of Gandhi's life; the Gandhi in Ahmedabad Gallery, which tracks Gandhi's life in Ahmedabad from 1915–1930; as well as a massive library which houses nearly 35 000 books about Gandhi's life, work, teachings, Indian freedom movement and allied subjects. Also on site is a non-profit making book store that sells literature and memorabilia related to Gandhi and his life's work, which in turn supports local artisans.

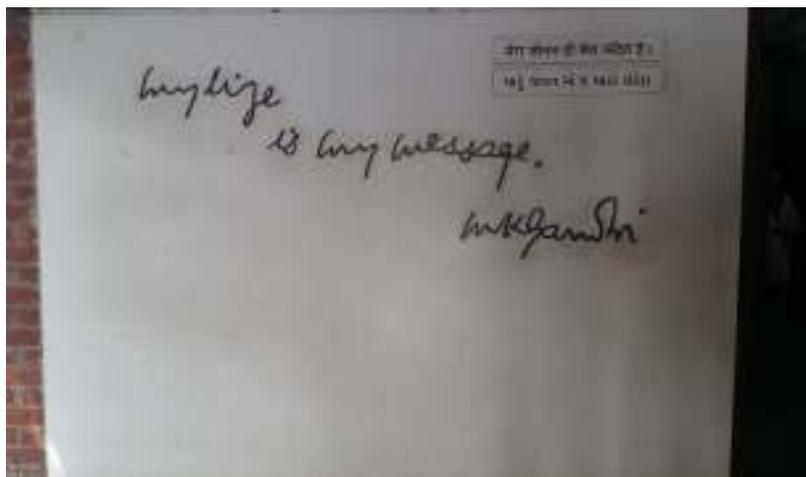


Fig. 27. Entrance of "My life is my message" gallery

It was definitely enriching, having a clearer picture of what Gandhi went through; committing to multiple fasts and marches, even serving jail time. More importantly, his willingness to go the extra mile for the people of India was beyond heroic. We admire Gandhi's courage and steadfastness which allows him to stand firm to his beliefs even though they oppose the society's deeply-rooted class systems and social norms vis-à-vis the caste system and "untouchability". Even when his own family members cannot see eye to eye with him on the issues that he champion, Gandhi does not waver or permit an exception; he sees his family on the same level as any other human being and closed his doors on them when they refused to accept his ideology. What we find especially respectable about Gandhi is that he remained an extremely humble individual even after gaining reputation and support from so many people. In addition to his self-sacrificial spirit, Gandhi was a very genuine person and selfless leader whom numerous people in India and around the world look up to.

Overall reflection for the trip

These 11 days in India was spent with meaning and steeped in joy, laughter and countless takeaways. A virgin experience for most of us, this trip has been a true eye-opener and was instrumental in sculpting our impression of India. Meeting the social entrepreneurs and Non-Governmental Organisations as well as the people behind them, we have learned so much about what is being done for the people – the poor, the women, the children and the marginalized communities. All the work done was beyond what any of us expected, and we hope for them to gather more support so that they can continue effecting real change in the lives of the people who truly need it – in saying this, we think of the Aajeevika Bureau, their workers and volunteers who painstakingly visit many villages and knock on doors to find out more in order to better assist them; the people at Abhiyan who function like the government (or even better), working with the aim of improving the people's standard of living; lastly, the women at SEWA who work tirelessly and courageously in such a traditional and patriarchal society to fight for a solid standing ground for themselves and the generations of daughters to come. In spite of the adjustment needed to the package of extremely dry climate which literally left our throats and skin dry, diet of pure vegetable, poor internet connection, lack of water, and terribly bumpy and manure-rampant roads, every one of us enjoyed this experience tremendously (refer to Annex A for some of our favourite photos showcasing people met along the way, exemplifying their friendly nature, and contentment in the little they have). These life lessons will be timely reminders of how lucky we are given our current state of living. More than that, this trip allowed for a team of 24 vastly different individuals to come together, braving through the struggles of adapting to a foreign land, and juggling with forming new friendships amongst the fresh faces (from various neighbourhoods in the college). While the trip will definitely be an adventure to remember in time to come, the memories and friendships forged will most certainly be one that is indispensable.

Annex A: Photos of local people and scenery to be missed dearly







