

Interrogating Rajasthan: Poverty In the Developing World and the Liberal Arts

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Liberal Arts Essay Contest

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The hot sun shone as I walked down the dusty desert path in a village outside of Chittorgarh. I shuddered to think what this weather was going to be like when May hit. I awkwardly brushed aside my *dupatta* (scarf), but it was not for this cumbersome handling of the long piece of fabric that I was getting such intense stares from the other people in the village. Although I had done my best to dress appropriately, my blonde hair and my skin's unrelenting tendency to burn from both sun and embarrassment frequently gave me away as the *videshi larki* (foreigner girl) that I was. The Indian village scene was something that I had not yet gotten used to. Although I had been in India for two and a half months and had become used to steering the occasional cow out of my way, the rural areas presented a completely different set of adjustments. I had not yet grown accustomed to the dilapidated houses, the barefoot children nor the deep mutual confusion and bewilderment that I felt with the locals about my presence there. What was I doing here? Did I have any sort of purpose? Or was I offending my own liberal sentiments as an intruder in this strange land?

Seeming to read my thoughts, Ishrat, the NGO employee upon whom I had begun to fully depend, playfully took my arm and led me to the next house. She knocked on the doorpost and a harried woman opened the door and hospitably ushered us in. Ishrat explained the elements of the health survey, and in a manner that was strangely business like for such a foreign place, began to fire questions. "How old are you?" "How many children have you given birth to?" "How many of your children have died?" As the survey went on, I to understand as best I could with my limited Hindi. The woman continued, and gestured to a tiny toddler sitting upright in the corner. "*Bhukhar lag raha hai* (He has a fever)." This I understood. We had had lecturers come to our class and

Interrogating Rajasthan: Poverty In the Developing World and the Liberal Arts explain how the infant mortality in India was so high because of diseases that had been cured a century ago in the developed world. I shuddered, knowing that a fever here, was not the innocuous ailment that it had been for me while growing up in the states. Four of this woman's children had already died from similar illnesses. At this point, I began to fully comprehend this devastating reality. Although India had been the gleaming cover girl on American periodicals such as Time and Newsweek, I was slowly learning that this economic growth was not reaching everyone. I believe that my liberal arts education helped me further understand the poverty that I confronted during my study abroad experience in India. It was through this experience that I realized that a liberal arts education was not merely a set of esoteric facts to be memorized, but rather a set of tools with which to think about and interpret the world. Through my experiences in India, these tools that I had invariably picked up during my education at the University of Wisconsin Madison quickly became recognized lessons that I used to further understand the difficult concepts of poverty.

Lesson One: Ask Questions, Observe, Learn

Through my travels abroad this past spring, I realized the important skills that my history major had given me. I had spent three years in the library reading and writing papers for an eclectic array of courses. Although I had previously thought each one of these courses as a discrete set of papers and tests, my experience with an Indian public health organization gave me a much fuller understanding of how this coursework linked together. I realized that the study of history provided me with the ability to evaluate material critically. I had learned to distance myself in a respectful, yet analytical way. Being abroad was the ultimate test of this. On one hand, I had a unique advantage to the

Interrogating Rajasthan: Poverty In the Developing World and the Liberal Arts residents of the country. I hadn't been born in India, I wasn't raised with their cultural norms and I looked different. As frustrating as this was at first, I soon learned that there were very few expectations of me. For the first time, I wasn't assumed to "understand." Instead, I was encouraged to freely ask. On the other hand, the freedom that I felt as a foreigner came with responsibilities. As I critically absorbed both the objective and subjective information that was being thrown at me, I began to understand the value of interpreting the policies of my own Government towards the developing world from the perspective of a foreigner, or in many ways as a liberal arts student. I was able to separate myself from many of the supply-side narratives that I had grown up hearing, and truly comprehend how much of the wealth that had entered the country had not reached the rural fringes.

Lesson 2: Listen Carefully and Value Everyone's Story

If my academic life had taught me anything before going abroad, it was that people's stories matter. Stories are the way that people understand and interpret the world and thus have very observable consequences. Further, one of the most rewarding parts of a liberal arts education is the learning of a language. My study of Hindi thus allowed me to understand the nature of rural poverty that much more. By understanding that the scope of the issue lay beyond statistics and sound bytes, I was able to be open to stories like the ones of the woman whom we interviewed. The sophisticated listening skills that I had learned at the UW Madison allowed me to be responsive to what I was learning.

Lesson 3: Embrace the Many Ways That Humans Approach Their Condition

A commitment to social diversity is quite possibly one of the most important assets that I have gained as a student of the liberal arts. With the broad number of

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opportunities that have been available to learn the language, music and literature of cultures in which I wasn't raised, I have gained a better appreciation of the wide number of ways to approach the same questions with very different answers. This added to my general tendency to be open to new experiences while I was abroad, but it also added to my understanding of the rural poverty that I was confronting. For instance, I realized that for farming families, population control measures were not as effective because children were such an asset. Because of my value for others' individual struggles, when I foresaw solutions for many of the problems that confronted rural India, I recognized the importance, but also the trickiness of being culturally appropriate.

Lesson 4: Realize Important Experiences Never Leave You

Last week I was having a conversation with engineering major about the benefits of a liberal arts education. He mentioned that the education has made him a better problem solver. I explained how I believe that I have learned to solve a different and wider set of problems. As I was discussing this, I realized that my liberal arts education was an important asset during my time in India and in my experiences with rural health, but I didn't truly appreciate it until I came back home. My tendencies to read further and to communicate about my experiences through writing and through speech have been absolutely essential in my processing of these powerful experiences.