

Class of '55,

My name is Cindy Xiong and I majored in International Relations. During my senior year I received a Class of '55 Award to attend a study abroad course in India, POL 330-Women and Politics: Strategies for Empowerment. Thank you for your generosity that helped me to be able to afford this course fee and experience my first trip out of the United States. Without your contribution, I would not have all of these great and eye opening experiences from India. I know money can be extremely difficult for students to come by to receive the same opportunity I did to study abroad. The summer before the 2013-2014 academic year I worked a full time job, a part time job, and finished two Iowa College AmeriCorps Program terms to be able to, not only afford the costs to attend Cornell, but also to pay for this course. So, I cannot express how much I appreciate receiving the Class of '55 Award.

During the two and a half weeks we spent in India, we stayed in the state of Maharashtra, visiting the cities of Mumbai, Pune, and Jamkhed observing and learning about women's participation in politics. However, not only did our class focus on formal politics, we also discussed how women are affected by the implementation of politics in various ways, such as: health, work, empowerment, religion, education, caste, marriage, etc... With only a class of five students and one instructor, we touched base on many topics that the students were all interested in. Although of course there are still so much to learn about women and politics, especially in India due to its diverse population enriched with so many traditions and its historical significance.

We spent the majority of our time in Pune, where we utilized the resources the ACM Office had to offer, such as classroom space and the instructors through ACM. Our adventure started with a Marathi lesson to be able to get around much easier and communicate with the people we were meeting. Learning a new language is extremely difficult and all I had to do was memorize a few phrases, so I applaud anyone who is able to do that. I am glad that Professor Aparna Thomas was fluent in both Marathi and Hindi, because getting around would have been extremely difficult to do without her.

Besides doing our course work and listening to lectures from various ACM instructors and women's organization leaders, we did a bit of site seeing and participated in other activities. We visited a few temples (photo 1), which was very difficult to do because you have to practically climb a mountain. But, it was a very good work out though. Had henna done on our hands by a women who has been doing it for years and taught herself how to do it (photo 2). We also had a guide with us, Priyanka, when Aparna was unable to go site seeing. It was interesting to have her around, because she was about the same age as us, so we had many conversations about our life experiences and interests. She took us shopping and taught us how to bargain, which is still really difficult to do and intimidating. Priyanka is a professional dancer, so she taught us a few moves from a Bollywood routine (photo 3). Her grandfather attends a yoga class that goes on every Sunday, so during our first Sunday in India a few of us attended the class. There are 70 year old men who are much more flexible than any of us that attended the course. It was pretty funny because they made us stop a throughout the session because they were worried we were going to hurt ourselves.

As our time ended in Pune we drove to Jamkhed to observe women in rural India, staying with the Comprehensive Rural Health Program (CRHP), which has dedicated its efforts to improve the wellbeing of the people in the rural areas and empower women at the same time. Our journey to Jamkhed is an unforgettable memory, and I am so glad we did not crash, because driving in India is scary. Even crossing the street is difficult to do. We were almost hit multiple times during our stay in India. During our stay in Jamkhed we met so many inspiring women who have done such great work in their villages. These women were trained as Village Health Workers, which empowered them and challenged the traditional roles of society along with superstition of health and illness. We went on a routine checkup with the Mobile Health Team, which is a subsection of the organization, and observed a Village Health Worker making her rounds (Photo 4). These health workers do a variety of things, that you would normally pay about a hundred dollars to have done, so it was interesting to see it be done in person for so little of a cost, if there was one.

It was nice being at CRHP, because its development model was effective and you can see it being implemented. We went to various women's group meetings, along with meeting with the adolescent girls meeting and had a discussion about their lives and dowry. We met with the interns there who helped us get to know the place at a deeper level, along with meeting the director of CRHP. I am a part of an organization called Third Wave Resource Group at Cornell, and every year we do an event called Pads for Peace where we make reusable cloth pads. This year we donated them at CRHP, and the director thought it was such a great idea that he made it into a program for the women to do. It was so nice that what we do at Cornell can make a difference out in the world. CRHP also has a preschool program that just started not too long ago. We went around the village to make sure the parents knew the children had school one day and played with them during their break (photo 6).

After we left Jamked we went back to Mumbai for some sightseeing. We visited the Gateway of India (photo 7), a mosque (where when the tide rises you can't get to, so it looks like it is floating in the sea), art museums, on a tour around Mumbai, and we shopped. We did a lot of shopping. After shopping in Mumbai, I no longer ever want to shop...for a while that is.

My time in India is something I will never forget. We met with such amazing women during our short visit who are doing so much for their community. I am happy that I was able to emerge myself in that environment, getting the full experience of the culture and a better understanding of how policies are affecting these people, which you will never get with just reading a book. I wish that everyone who wants to, would be able to experience this as well and will encourage people take the opportunity to do so. Once again, thank you Class of '55 for helping me experience everything I was able to in India. Your help was much appreciated.

Below are some photos from the trip.

Thank you!

Cindy Xiong '14



Photo 1 – Pune, India: Here is a women working during one of our visits to a temple.



Photo 2 – Pune, India: A few of the students who went on the trip got henna done on their hands.



Photo 3 – Pune, India: Priyanka teaching us how to do the Bollywood routine. It was really hard to do, but really fun!



Photo 4 – Jamkhed, India: A Village Health Worker checking the blood pressure of a woman during one of her checkups.





Photo 5 – Jamkhed, India: Woman doing laundry.



Photo 6 – Jamkhed, India: At the preschool after play.



Photo 7 – Mumbai, India: Gateway of India.