

International Service Trip: India Reflections 2009

Spring 2009

The International Service Program would like to thank all of its supporters and offer these reflections on our experience as a way to express appreciation for your incredible generosity towards our trip.

The International Service Program of Colorado College was established in 2006 by the Center for Service and Learning in order to provide students with a advanced level service experience in another country. The 2006 group worked with the Himalayan Light Foundation to install solar lighting in a Tibetan refugee community in northern India. In 2007, the group continued to work with solar lighting; however, through other established connections, they began working with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Pune, India. This organization, named MAITRI, coordinates many humanitarian efforts in the Indian state of Maharashtra. One of their main focuses is the region of Melghat which is located in central India. Native Korku tribes inhabit the region which is also a large tiger preserve. The people of Melghat are at least one decade behind in development compared to most of India and their children often suffer from high rates of child mortality and illness. Thus, MAITRI established an ongoing presence in the area, an initiative called Melghat Mitra (Friends of Melghat). Colorado College has partnered annually with Melghat Mitra since 2007, helping with solar lighting, water and

sanitation, and agricultural projects.

This January, nine Colorado College students and two staff advisers traveled on the International Service Trip to participate in an agriculturally based service project in the village of Chilati. The NGO and the villagers worked together to identify three needs of the village: bathing platforms, compost pits, and a community nursery garden. The bathing platforms create a more sanitary and comfortable bathing area, as well as a place to wash dishes. The water from the platforms runs off into kitchen gardens behind the houses, where each family was supplied with two banana trees to plant. Bathing platforms are important to improve sanitation, decrease stagnant water which can lead to malaria, and increase the amount of nutritious food in the kitchen gardens. The compost pits will hold manure along with other organic materials in order to create a natural fertilizer as opposed to the more commonly used chemical fertilizer. This will help the villagers by improving agricultural efficiency which will also increase family income and decrease the amount of water needed for the crops. The community nursery serves as a communal site for the families of Chilati



The International Service Trip group in front of the Bibi Ka (the "Mini Taj Majal") in Aurangabad, India.

to access produce rich in vitamins.

During the majority of their 10-day stay in Chilati, the students split up into two groups for the bathing platforms and compost pits. They went from house to house, checking on each family's progress of either project. In doing so, they were able to connect with villagers while they learned various techniques of construction that these families used and discussed aspects of each other's lives. The students also held regular interactive training sessions to talk about the importance and purpose of both projects in the village.

Despite the experiences gained each day through the daily routine, a number of the most significant learning experiences happened in the

least expected moments. A few times, women invited the students into their homes and enjoyed interacting with the students even without translators. Each night, the boys and girls from the village would gather to play and sing songs with the CC students. The students saw the children's great desire and capacity to learn and were inspired by this passion. These experiences illustrate the importance of cross-cultural exchange which made the trip a unique learning experience. Reflection before and after the trip was a crucial aspect of the program, designed to teach students to think intentionally and carefully about international service. Following are the student's personal reflections on the International Service Trip of 2009.

Janne Barklis: Sophomore

The thought of describing my experience in India in saturated words that would not possibly be able to illustrate the rich moments that comprised my trip is daunting to say the least. The traffic, the smells, the need to adjust my notions of personal space and hygiene all came as “culture shocks” that were somewhat expected based on my research before the trip. But no research could prepare me for the vibrant culture in Chilati and the beautiful dedication of Melghat Mitri volunteers to friendship and improving the lives of their friends. More than anything, I will recall certain random memories I associate with the trip

and consequently, though maybe inaccurately, India as a whole.

First, I will remember India as the place that gave a prominent voice to my already whispering maternal instinct and my serious reflection of service work directing my interest toward those organizations that benefit children. I will remember that the most vibrant colors in the village were the green of young

crops, the gold and silver pots cerebrally balanced three at a time, and the gorgeous array of saris that moved gracefully through the dirt streets as I stumbled behind, gaping, hygienically-challenged—dirt covered tangled hair—and graceless. Furthermore, I will always recall the phenomenon that occurred each time I communicated awkwardly with one of the village women. No matter their dress, hair,

face, stature, or age, as the conversation progressed, each woman became the most beautiful one I had seen that day or possibly ever. This happened with every woman, every time, without fail. Still I have no concrete explanation for this admiration. These are just a few of the many images I recall from the trip, some better than others.

India, like America, has its faults and its highlights. All I can say is that the Mitri volunteers, villagers, and most Indians met me with the greatest welcome. I cannot reflect on these memories without filling with gratitude for everyone in India and America who gifted me with such a valuable experience.

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Boys on the main road in Chilati, India.

The 2009 Service Trip is an experience that I will never forget. The trip far exceeded my expectations, based on other international trips I have taken, of what I would learn and encounter. In the months leading up to the trip, we participated in training sessions and conversations that broached a wide variety of issues we would confront in India including how to participate in a cultural exchange (being respectful, being sensitive, being aware), the benefits and consequences of International Service, and the logistical and technical aspects of our work. Although I knew a trip to such a foreign culture is something that you can not entirely prepare for, I strongly feel that the hard work leading up to the trip allowed us to fund expenses for the trip but also gain more from the experience by providing a foundation of

knowledge that we could build off of.

Working with MAITRI, an NGO based in Pune, I learned a tremendous amount about the benefits and consequences of international service, how volunteer-based non-profits are run, and the basic need problems that Indian tribals (as well as other rural communi-

ties around the world) face. On top of being a great learning experience, my trip to India made me appreciate many things that I had previously taken for granted in America: a political system in which citizens participate in and have the ability to influence, officials who are accountable for upholding their duties, and a strong in-

frastructure that provides basic needs (access to clean water, health care, etc.).

Our trip to India was unique from other traveling I have done in that everyone (including the villagers, the NGOs, and the Colorado College team) was actively involved in dialogue. The NGO volunteers constantly encouraged us to communicate (through the translators) with the villagers and this allowed us to learn a tremendous amount about their lifestyle and make personal connections with them. Our nightly reflections as a group allowed us to assess the work we had completed and make adjustments as necessary. This service trip provided an invaluable experience that enhanced my understanding of cultural interactions, human's relationships with their environment, and the functions of a volun-

Zoe Osterman: Sophomore

Tabitha Hrynich: Senior

I had already spent a significant amount of time in India during my five and a half month study abroad program in Pune city during the summer and fall of 2007. However, that stay could not have prepared me for the completely different India that I experienced as a volunteer for Melghat Mitra in January of 2009 with the Colorado College

International Service team. The group of nine students and two staff members made the long journey from Colorado to Melghat – we were excited yet unaware of what we were about to undertake. Our experience far exceeded our expectations – from the sustainable agriculture work we did alongside the villagers of Chilati, to the time we spent playing with the chil-

dren or sitting and chatting with the women in their homes.

The language barrier failed to stop us from making the personal connections we all sought to create, and we left with experiences that we will forever remember. One day, a fellow team mate and I were beckoned by about five women to follow them to the river with the bowls we had been using to carry gravel around in. We weren't sure if we should go at first since the rest of our team wouldn't know where we were, but we decided not to pass up the opportunity. We accompanied these five women, all around our age, to the river bank. They showed us what they wanted us to do – scoop sand into our bowls and

carry them back on our heads. Although we could not verbally communicate beyond exchanging our names, there was a mutual curiosity between us. They asked us questions in Hindi that we did not understand and we gave them answers in English that they did not understand. While our “conversation” with them didn't necessarily communicate anything about our lives in words, it showed us both that there could be valuable camaraderie, one way or another, between members of two completely different cultures. It was small moments like these that fed our enthusiasm and built up what was a very valuable experience for all of us.

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Lauren Jenkins: Junior

The International Service trip to India opened my eyes in ways no other travel or community service experience has. While at first I was struck by the amount of people, colors, smells and activity, I quickly learned to love the chaos. Both while traveling and in the village, I found myself constantly amazed by the similarities of people in India and in the United States instead of the apparent differences. I was so touched by the villagers who welcomed us into their community and homes and were genuinely enthusiastic about us being there. I learned to carry stones, water, and sand on my head to help build the bathing platforms on which we worked, and I realized how strong the women who do it daily are!

Everyone pitched in to build the bathing platforms and compost pits, and it was often through and because of this mutual labor that we were able to learn about their lives.

I felt deep connections with the children as we played, colored, sang, and danced. They were so eager to learn and have fun, and I constantly think about them and their futures. For this reason, our group has decided to start a letter writing and petition campaign to Indian government officials concerning the disturbing lack of quality education in rural areas of India. I am so grateful for my own education and the opportunities it has provided me, and believe it crucial to extend that opportunity to the children I grew to love.



Jacquie, Holly, Jennie, and Janne presenting a compost training session while Kalu and Sanjay translate.

Additionally, I became interested in pursuing a career in international nonprofits and/or public policy as a result of the things I learned while in India. Finally, I am endlessly thankful for the amazing

network of friends and family who donated time and resources and supported our efforts and allowed for this unforgettable experience.

Eleanor Mulshine: Sophomore

If there is one thing I learned about my experience in India, it's that no one could or should have told me how I would feel throughout my time there. Looking back at my sporadic journal entries, I see how naive I was about India beforehand. I made it a point in my preparations for the trip not to read *too* much about India, for fear of having my expectations crushed. This is not the best approach to traveling in all cases, but this time it worked. Of course I had ideas in my mind of how it would turn out, and people told me what to expect once I got there. It was important to me to learn certain cultural norms and why I shouldn't make judgments upon appearances or facial expressions, because they differ a lot from the U.S. to India.

Many of my memories of India consist of our travel experiences. We were lucky to take an array of modes of transportation, from planes to vans to trains to rickshaws to cars to feet. We saw living proof that India is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, having spent some time before and after the village in the

city of Pune, with a population of over 5,000,000 and 7,214 people per km². People are everywhere, which means that no one takes for granted the space that they have, and everyone knows that there are no rights for occupying a given amount of space, with the exception of owning land. This is opposed to most cities in the U.S. where people assume that we all own our 'personal space.'

In the village we stayed in, Chilati, I saw a recurring theme of conservation which I haven't seen as much in the U.S., yet I'm not so sure that it was necessarily because of an innate human quality that separates us. They had fewer resources than we do as Americans; therefore, they used fewer resources and do so more efficiently. If and when the resources we have deplete, it will take a lot of willpower for us to lower the amount of 'stuff' we use every day. After having spent three weeks in a small area of a big country, I hope to go back with the knowledge I gained and build upon the experience I had through the India Service trip.

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Sumrati at a training session.

Holly MacBride: Junior

The service trip to India was one of the greatest experiences I have ever had. Even the months of preparation for the trip were very interesting and helped prepare me for a place that was nothing like I had been to before. I would have to say that the best part of the service trip, other than helping the villagers, was learning about their culture. You can be taught all about any culture, but it's something really amazing when you learn it through first hand experiences.

For instance, seeing the amount of work the Indian women do on a daily basis was incredible. In the U.S. I take for granted the rights that women fought for and equal opportunity. Every single day we would see the women carrying basins with water on their heads or bowls of rocks. After carrying rock and sand about fifty feet my muscles would begin to get tight. Granted, those women aren't building bathroom platforms

or compost pits every day, but their daily routine consists of more manual labor than any of our team members were used to. The force that they had to put in to separating grains from the husk was crazy. Some of the women would teach us how they did that as well as grinding down the grain. I tried grinding the grain, which didn't look too hard, but after a minute my arm started getting sore. Those women are strong.

Experiences like these made me really think about how I take for granted the fact that I can go to the grocery store and buy the food that others have worked to produce. All I have to do is find something in the store and pay for it. To say the least, there's a lot that I learned during our service trip and not enough time to touch on all of it. The villagers have a different way of life and I couldn't be happier that they allowed us to be a part of it.



The International Service Trip, women and children attending a training session.

Jacque Tilden: Sophomore

Hello, my name is Jacquie Tilden. I am a sophomore Spanish major and Latin American Studies minor at Colorado College and was a participant of the International Service Program that traveled to India in January of 2009. I would like to thank you for your support of our program and share with you a little about my experience—or at least the part I have come to understand thus far. Please allow me to preface by saying words alone will never have the power to convey what I learned, saw and discovered and how it will influence my life for years to come. The following words could never do justice to what ‘India’ has come to mean to me.

If someone were to ask me what kind of projects we worked on, I would say we focused mostly on composting, kitchen gardens and providing alternative bathing

and washing methods, on projects that were manageable and self-sustainable, projects that eased the lives of the Chilati people while still preserving the Korku culture. If someone were to ask me about the NGO we worked with, I would say it is an organization founded purely upon passion and the desire to create change, and is devoted to making a connection with the people they are serving. If someone were to ask me about our team’s dynamics, I would say I truly feel each girl brought something distinct and exciting to our group, and that the friendships I formed were formed out of a universal love, investment, and hope in international service, a shared experience and an unspoken understanding of a part of one another. If someone were to ask me if I would recommend the trip to other stu-

dents, I would say I wish any person that expressed even the slightest bit of interest in the prospect of international service could experience something similar. If someone were to ask me what the hardest part of our trip was, I would say the car ride leaving the Chilati village. But if someone were to ask me what the biggest thing I learned in this experience was, I would say that’s an unfair question.

‘India’ will always mean more than the three weeks we spent there. ‘India’ means the children who ran through the village barefoot after our workday ended, stampeding up to the group and showing no resistance or hesitance, perfectly content with spending their time laughing and playing with nine American college girls. India means stares from eyes that gaze upon something so different than everything they ever knew. India means sitting on the floor of a woman’s house eating a meal she cooked for you, without ever having met her. India means bucket showers with water heated by burning sticks. India means the swing of a pickaxe into the ground, or a bowl full of rocks sitting on your head. India means bending down to walk inside a home. India means dry land, stagnant water and women washing their clothing on the riverbank around the corner. It means talking to Chilati villagers, learning about their lives, their land, their harvest and their daily



A woman in Chilati.

routines. India means the time spent with the members of the NGO that we all came to adore. India means language barriers, differences of skin color, differences of lifestyle, and frustration in understanding and expressing vastly distinct cultures. India means seeing that all people are the same. India means learning to love without reason, to appreciate the unique, to understand the essence of a person, to devote time to someone you’ve never met, happily. India means taking what you saw and experienced and applying it to a life in America; it means change. It means awareness, understanding, cultural exchange, love, hope, faith in humanity. Irrelevance of time. Difference, acceptance. Goals. Learning. ‘India’ means living.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my rambling words, for supporting the International Service Program, and for making India what it was to me.



Re-cementing a water pump in Chilati, India.

Jennie Vader: Junior

My return to India was more spectacular than last year. I traveled with the International Service Program in 2008 to work on a water and sanitation project, but found my experience not as fulfilling as it could have been. I was inspired then to become a leader for the 2009 trip in the hopes of helping to develop the program so that others could gain as much as possible from the experience.

“The questions raised and discussions held among our group were, to me, the greatest success of the trip because ... these lessons and skills will be carried on to other sectors of life and future service opportunities.”

After my first trip to India, I found that the hardest questions to answer were: “Did the trip fulfill your expectations? Do you feel like you got the most out of the experience?” I thought that I was getting the most out of my experience, but in struggling to answer these questions, I started to think, perhaps I didn’t even reflect enough on this experience to outline my expectations and whether they were fulfilled. Did we do our very best work in the village? Did we contribute anything productive to this community? In my frustration, I realized that more thought needed to be attributed to this program, so I set out to be the leader.

This year I was impressed by the work ethic and reflective abilities of our group. We began discussing the hardest questions of international service this fall, continued to discuss them in India, and will reflect upon them in the coming months. If this trip is not a life-changing experience, it should at least teach

the participants to critically think about service, especially service abroad. The questions raised and discussions held among our group were, to me, the greatest success of the trip because I feel that these lessons and skills will be carried on to other sectors of life and future service opportunities.

Another amazing aspect of the trip was the amount of personal interactions between the villagers of Chilati and our group. The NGO worked very hard to provide opportunities for one on one connections, and we tried our best to capitalize on every moment spent in the village. We worked with men and women alike, played with children, visited homes, and went to the market. We learned about their daily schedules and agricultural practices. Additionally, we learned a lot about the NGO’s function in the region of Melghat and how they have impacted the area, establishing trust among the Korku tribals.

I will not be returning to Melghat next year; I feel that I gained the experience I was looking for this year and did my best to facilitate a nuanced, intelligent, productive trip for the participants. I will never forget Melghat and might visit someday, but hope that the International Service Program can maintain its relationship with this NGO and will continue to bring knowledge to and learn from the rich Korku culture.



Girls in Chilati, India.



A family in their field in Chilati, India.

For more information on the International Service Trip through the Center for Service and Learning at Colorado College, please contact Tonita López at 719-227-8247 or tonita.lopez@coloradocollege.edu