



REFLECTION

Having just come back from spending almost two years in India, an Indian colleague asked UNU-MERIT PhD researcher Lina Sonne to describe her experiences. While conscious about the impossibility of summing up life in this huge, mad, colourful, complex and rather fabulous part of the world - after all there is a reason why most books on India are rather thick! - she nevertheless decided to give it a try. The following are some abbreviated thoughts on some of her impressions, and what she has learned.

By Lina Sonne

With a background in early stage venture capital, I wanted to focus my PhD on how innovation and entrepreneurship is financed in developing countries. However, rather than looking at the high-tech and urban sectors, I chose to concentrate on the kind that the rural poor would benefit from in their daily lives.



I met with many women groups during my fieldwork

The sort of things I would be looking at would be anything from micro venture capital investments in entrepreneurial companies producing services or products benefiting the poor, incubators working with rural grassroots inventions, organizations creating whole business models around the needs and resources of the rural poor to small-scale infrastructure projects and scaled up micro finance supporting rural ventures in an integrated financial and non financial manner. India with its huge (rural) poor population and thriving, innovative NGO sector became an obvious choice.

So it was with this in mind that I first landed at the chaotic old airport of Hyderabad - a brand new one named after Rajiv Gandhi has since become operational - the summer before last to begin research at UNU-MERIT's India office. I was able to get hold of a flat within a week and I soon began traveling extensively around the country as part of my fieldwork, studying different organizations involved in financing of pro-poor innovation in different ways.

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During this research I have met what must surely be some of the most dedicated "poverty fighters" around. Turning their back on commercial careers with degrees from top Indian and international academic institutes, they have built up the Indian NGO sector which seems to abound with pioneering, entrepreneurial and clever approaches to increase income, improve health and education levels and widening as well as deepening access to

financial and legal services.

The success of the "third sector" in a country with enormous class, caste and religious divisions and with severe gender inequalities, corruption and politicians out to make money rather than improve welfare surely speaks for itself.

Travelling around you really get a sense of just how vast the country is. Even a 16 hour train journey really doesn't take you very far. There is also a huge variety in geography, language, culture, people and food which makes it all the more difficult to easily define India or Indian, especially for a rookie like me. The friendliness and helpfulness is amazing. People are willing to take their time to help you, tell their story, give advice or to send you on to another contact who may be more appropriate. Hospitality is everywhere and wherever you go you are offered snacks, chai (Indian tea), or water- especially in the poorest households. I have visited rural villages where the villagers have taken time off work,



At a health camp meeting where I was asked to sit at the VIP table (by the local politician). The woman next to me is the Village Sarpanth (head) and no prize for guessing who the head politician is...

often waiting for hours for the visitors to reach, and spending parts of their meager income on providing us with seasonal delicacies.

The most important lesson of the past two years has been what a complex reality India is. There are so many sides to every issue or argument (Amartya Sen has even written a book titled "The Argumentative Indian") and so many shades of grey in between Western notions of "right" and "wrong" that you easily get lost. Looking back I suppose a key reason why I and my foreign friends found it difficult to cope or understand how things worked (especially in the beginning) is that we stubbornly stuck to our regulated, strict and inflexible old ways of thinking. So if I were ever to give advice to a Westerner going to India for research or otherwise, I'd say: drop your idea of how things ought to be and you will not get stressed out when they are nothing like you thought (and instead watch how everything works out in the end anyway - which is invariably the case) .

Moving on, I'd like to finish with one of the most enjoyable aspects of living in India as an expat: having a good time! To an outsider there seemed to be a constant stream of holidays (religious or otherwise) for which to shop, make special food and enjoy oneself. Add to that the wedding season and "standard" events such as birthdays and there is no lack of excuse for having some fun. Best of all, good times come with good tunes in the form of Bollywood music! It is fast, it is happy, it has a great beat and includes some mandatory and hilarious dance moves. Fabulous.

With the songs come of course the movies (or rather, the other way round), and what movies they are! Who needs Hollywood, I say, when we have much better film mega stars in India (Amitabh Bachan, Shah Rukh Khan), hot men (Saif Ali Khan, Akshay Kumar), extraordinarily beautiful actresses (Ashwairya Rai, Preity Zinta) and hilarious plots with happy endings. The good guy always wins and he does it whilst uttering cheesy lines without flinching and dancing and miming his way through numerous songs in a (relatively) manly manner. What's not to like?

On that note it is time to wrap this up so I can go home and relax before another great movie.