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First study-abroad course in India

Summary: Twenty-one students, accompanied by Professor of Economics Pareena Lawrence, a native of India, paid \$4,000 each to travel to India on the first study abroad course offering to India sponsored by CERP at UMM.

(February 15, 2006)-Years ago, when I paid \$500 to go on a Caribbean cruise, I anticipated six sun-filled days and seven party nights aboard a fabulous resort ship.

I got my money's worth.

Later, when I paid \$45 for a ticket to game seven of the 1991 World Series, I expected to see a Minnesota Twins World Series championship.

I wasn't disappointed. In neither of these opportunities, for which I paid richly at the time, did I wonder if I gave back as much as I received.

Recently, over the semester's winter break, 21 University of Minnesota, Morris students, accompanied by Professor of Economics Pareena Lawrence, a native of India, paid \$4,000 each to travel to India on the first study abroad course offering to India sponsored by UMM's Office of Continuing Education and Regional Programs.

Two of the students, Russell Haywood, a senior philosophy and political science major from Woodbury, and sophomore Ashley Anderson, Rochester, who is working toward a double major in management and economics and a minor in Chinese language and literature, didn't know quite what to expect before they traveled to India. What they found, however, was more than they expected. Almost in unison, they wonder now whether they gave back as much to the people whose country they visited as they received.

Haywood wondered, "What are we giving back to them?"

The UMM program, Globalization: Examining India's Social and Economic Development, is designed to "observe the problems of mass poverty in India and its various ramifications and to examine sustainable grass roots efforts to combat this problem without the involvement of large sums of aid from the World Bank or other foreign governments or private sources."

Anderson, who, along with other female students on the trip, wore a head covering called a "dupatta," was more conscious about how she dressed while in India. Realizing how much freedom U.S. women have, she thought it was "kind of sad that the women of India don't have that freedom." She experienced a "cultural shock. We learn in class about poor people, but [we] live in a relatively rich area," she said. "People there who didn't have a lot seemed a lot happier than some people here."

Alternatively, Haywood said he felt the men on the trip felt freer than the UMM female students. "I felt a reinforced

privilege as a guy," he said. Although, he added, he was surprised by the contrasts.

Lawrence stated that she while the course was about "globalization," she wanted to show UMM students that 50 percent of India's people, for example, have not been touched by globalization or have been perhaps negatively affected by it.

"In the interior villages, there are no paved roads, no running water they use hand pumps, and work with NGOs (non-government organizations) to install 'conveniences' such as water pumps," said Lawrence. "Water is more precious than gold, and agriculture and handicrafts are the primary source of employment. The infrastructure in the small- and medium- sized cities isn't good due to overpopulation and lack of maintenance." UMM students spent time with NGOs in the villages who work with women's groups surrounding the problems of AIDS, self-sufficiency, women's rights and child labor. "Women," said Lawrence "are mostly impoverished, and still 'behind the veil' in rural areas of the north. As far as giving back to the people they visited in rural areas of India, the students were surprised when women in both the north and south said that "simply our being there without a veil and visiting a foreign country for an educational purpose empowered them."

In contrast, as a visible demonstration of globalization, students recognized nearly 130 names and logos of international companies in a short period of four hours while traveling through large metropolitan cities in India. They saw the Indian headquarters of companies such as Oracle and IBM in downtown Bangalore.

Students found that they were viewed by their hosts as celebrities. Residents of the smaller villages took photos of the group. They were the first delegation of foreign students ever to visit Rohtak, a city of one million people. While in Rohtak, students met with elected female and male village heads and government officials who work with empowering women in political participation at the local village level. They also visited the universities in Delhi, Rohtak and Jaipur.

"The students are intense," noted Haywood. "They study all the time they don't play video games."

Anderson liked the food, especially "samosas," a triangular egg roll with a spicy potato-like filling. "Buttered naan," the local bread, was also a favorite of most students.

Haywood sensed that during one particular visit to a self-help group where residents had made chalk drawings and provided entertainment, "we instilled a sort of confidence in these people. To have foreigners come by...and take their hands and hold their kids and smile at them. We showed them that someone cared."

In preparation for the trip, students read from two 100-page publications, one on southeast Asia and one on India. They also watched two videos. During the trip, they wrote five "response papers," where Lawrence asked specific questions and students had 15 minutes to respond, for example, about their first impression of the country. They also wrote about the role of NGOs in the state-run economy and a short reflection paper, written while they waited at the airport, on how the trip affected or changed them. Their next assignment involved selecting 10 specific points from the economic, political and social aspects of India from their readings on which to comment about how their experience in India reflects on those particular topics if they found these issues factual and to expound on them.

Both Haywood and Anderson felt that the trip was a fantastic learning experience.

"I wanted to learn about another culture," said Anderson. "There's more to the world than just the U.S. economy."

"As long as you can see the world," said Haywood, "you will be better able to adapt. A liberal arts education helps one to adapt to new information. It's obvious that India will be a fundamental player in the economic understanding of the world."

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