

Hannah DeLap

Foundation for Sustainable Development/Basecamp Foundation- Jodhpur,  
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The following is an account of the experiences, bad and great, of Belmont graduate, Hannah DeLap. From October, 2011, to June, 2012, she worked in a village of rural India, with the village women, managing an empowerment project and helping with business development.

When I signed up for this internship, all I knew was that I would be on an adventure of a lifetime. I originally thought, from what I understood from my skype interviews, that I would be working a village with a Norwegian based non-profit and being able to implement self-help groups and microfinance. Well, things don't always work out how one might think they will...

I arrived in India late due to the Indian consulate not getting my visa to me in time. This was a bit of a damper because I missed the orientation and was unable to get to know the other interns that would be my colleagues for the next few months. Well, after three flights and long layover in London, spanning over 35 hours, I finally made it to Jodhpur, India. This would be my home base for the next 8 months, although I would be living in a village 45 kilometers from the city. Since arriving in Delhi, I had not gone outside, so when I arrived at the Jodhpur International Airport, which in size was comparable to the commons area in the Massey Building of Belmont, the heat hit me full force with a bit of sand and sun to only beat in the knowledge that I had landed in India.

Now, my time here started out extremely rocky. Not only was my support team, exceptionally bad at helping, but also, I had quite some shocks in the first week that put me in a place of despair. First off, I had a scary encounter at my guesthouse the first night I was in India, where people were trying to get into my room while I was sleeping. Needless to say, I moved guesthouses the very next morning. Next, I did not have any orientation to the city or the country; mainly because I missed it missed it by two weeks. Instead, I ended up running errands with the intern coordinator instead of learning how to navigate the city or Indian life. After only 2 days in Jodhpur, they decided it was time for me to go to the village. This was fine with me, because I felt bored and like it was wasting time for me to be doing nothing of importance in the city.



Once in the village I met the girl I would be replacing as manager, and soon to become one of my great friends in India, Radhika Rathore. She is Rajasthani and a Rajput, which is the warrior caste of India, and the main caste of my home, the village of Chandelao. I would soon be left alone as the manager of the Sunder Rang arts and crafts center. This project was started in 2008 by the Norwegian non-profit, Basecamp Foundation, and had henceforth been managed by Indian women for the women of Chandelao who need help supporting their families. There are an average of 18 women who work at the center and they make a wide range of products that are a mixture of Indian and Western looks. When I arrived, I had no idea that I would soon be managing this project with no art experience or desire to be crafty.



I won't lie, about three days into the village life, with a maximum of 8 hours of electricity out of 24 and no other development workers in the village, I was starting to break down. I had found out I was not going to be working WITH a non-profit; I WAS the non-profit. I was going to be managing a women's craft center where not a single woman had any grasp on English and I had not been given any Hindi or Marwari lessons. It was going to be a long 8 months... Or so I thought. I did have a breakdown though, which was good that it happened early and I could "man-up" and get over it fast rather than putting it off till later. It was quite hard finding your entire idea has been shattered in a state of lies while you are 12 hours ahead and a world away from everyone you know. However, this probably made it easier to get over quickly.

It didn't take long before Radhika left Sunder Rang and I took over, reluctantly. But I was to find that they really needed someone to market the goods and increase the profit in order to support the program. I ended up working there 6 if not 7 days a week for 8 months, and couldn't believe how fast it disappeared. I would say the hardest part of being the active manager there was trying to find the necessary raw materials in the back markets of Jodhpur, where I was constantly being taken advantage of because I am white and an obvious foreigner, or *gori*. This became a theme of living in India. If you can't bargain, don't ever try to live in India, or any developing country for that matter. This is because you won't get things at the price of the locals, unless you can bargain. But even though I lack knowledge of crafts and arts, I was able to implement a few new designs and oversee production for the mostly Western clientele that came through the village.

I focused my time on marketing for both domestic and international buyers. However, I soon found that the markets were completely saturated with "fair-trade, global goods" that would be able to help those in need. I knew from then on I had to start changing the marketing ploy that would attract buyers. I worked on getting in contact with other non-profits who would train and work with artisans in India and would support sales and training. I talked with many groups, all with the same outcome- they had too many artisans already and were not able to acquire more. This made me have to change directions again. I started contacting boutique owners who would want to help women artisans in the developing world. I had a bit of success here and was able to attain a few new accounts in Spain, England, and the US. At least there were now a few accounts to support the project. I left before large scale accounts, like Whole Foods, were able to give a definitive answer about buying the products and have yet to hear otherwise.

Another part of being an intern in Chandelao village, was that I had to complete past interns projects. I was able to use money that another intern had been granted in order to train the women in garment making with the help of a tailor from Jodhpur. I also had to start working on a greenhouse project that a past intern had received a grant for and supplied a limited plan. This lasted for a good four months of my time before I realized that it was probably not going to happen because I would be leaving and my host father, who was the village leader, had no time or desire to be attached to the program. In development, the most important part of working in communities is that there is a desire from the people of the community to have the help and continue on the work that development workers set forth. Sweat equity is necessary in the idea that people cannot be given something and that they should have to help work for it or help build the project. This is the problem that development is facing as people in developing countries tend to expect something for free instead of working towards a goal with a slight push or loan from others.

Anyways, the greenhouse project has had plenty of work and background research to show how to build it and I had made contact with a farmer who was happy to help teach the village employees of the greenhouse once the project got going. But I was

short term at that point and was unable to see the project through. I hope it succeeds in my absence and others are able to following the directions left.

Living in a small village of India was such a great experience though; I cannot explain how amazing the women of a small Indian village are and how accommodating the community was for a foreigner. Almost every day I was invited to someone's house for chai, and although I took a "rain-check" quite a few times, being able to enter the villager's homes and being treated so well as a foreigner is amazing. I would enter a family's home and be offered a chair, which I would refuse, and sit on the rug or bare ground with the other women and be given fresh made chai while looking at the prized possession of the villagers: pictures. Indians absolutely love pictures. I can't tell you how many pictures I printed out for people that I took pictures of because they appreciated them more than anything else. Many times I would go to the homes of the young girls that worked at the arts center and they would do mehendi on my arms (henna). I was even brought to the women's homes at nights occasionally for dinner, which is amazing that they would invite me to have dinner at their homes and give me gifts like bracelets and, well, food.



I was also treated as family while attending the weddings that I was invited to in the village and became very close with a few of the young girls in the village. The culture gaps between us were very evident, but at the same time, young women and men are the same all over the world and just like to have friends and family to rely on. You could look outside at any time of the day and see children playing in the streets or young girls and boys hanging out with their friends.





Not only was the village life absolutely amazing, but after I was able to become comfortable and friends with the other interns, all young women, I made true friends for life, who shared the same passion for helping people and traveling that embody my being as well. On the occasional weekend a month, or the two two-week trips, I was able to travel around India and see things in a part of the world that only show up on pictures from the occasional online stumble for most people. India is my second home and all I can hope for is that I am able to go back and visit, or maybe even live there in the future. The experience I had in India will never be matched anywhere I end up in the world because I will always see the bright colored saris and turbans of Rajasthan, not to mention the heat and dust winds covering my body every time I close my eyes to imagine India and my time in this wonderful country.



While I have written about the hard times and some of the great times that I encountered in working, living, and traveling throughout one of the oldest civilizations in world, the great times will by far outweigh the bad. I have considered looking for jobs in India, because I love this country so much. However, when I remember how hard it is to be a white woman in such a male dominating society, I think I am going to look elsewhere in Asia for now, with hopes of returning in the future. I love India, and although I cried when leaving Chandelao, my new family and friends in the village, I know I will find my way back sooner or later to see how things have changed in their lives... And mine.