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### **India: My Life as a Volunteer in an Ecovillage**

As I reflect back on my Lumos experience, from the beginning of my search to find a suitable international volunteer project to the writing of this final report, I feel a complex array of emotions. I feel a little sad. This is normal whenever life closes a chapter and begins a new one. I feel uncertainty too. Before going to India I was set on becoming an actuary once I arrived home. I'm now home and currently working as a caregiver. The path to a successful career was one I felt my parents and culture had foreordained, and it wasn't until my time in India that I found the courage to really question the life path I had been sleepwalking on for many years. This isn't to say I won't end up working a successful career in finance, marrying, owning a large house, and having several kids who will enter adulthood with the padding of a generous college fund—I just feel I have greater control of my destiny, more drive pursue work that is balanced and ethically conscious, and less fear about making life choices that deviate from the white, suburban, upper middle class norm!

Another one of the prominent emotions I feel is gratitude. I'm grateful to the wonderful people I encountered in India, the places I saw, and to myself for the work that I put into making my Lumos experience come together, as well as the money the Lumos Foundation provided me with that enabled me to travel to India in the first place.

I'll never forget the surprise I felt when I got the email from Dr. Monteverde that my scholarship proposal was approved and slotted for full funding. It had only been several months earlier that I found myself in the position where the Lumos Spring application deadline was fast approaching, and I had no earthly clue where I was to go or what I would do. In a serendipitous conversation with my family's gardener I found out about his recent trip to Amritapuri Ashram—how he'd been bewitched by the beauty of India's culture and spiritual traditions and how the ashram had a humanitarian branch where

he'd volunteered. Something clicked, and within days I'd established a digital correspondence with several coordinators at Amritapuri's ecovillage, where a food-producing and pollution-reducing model was being researched and developed so it could be taken to over villages the organization had decided to sponsor.

Roughly six months after my project was approved, I found myself on the winding road from the airport to the ashram—utterly spent after passing through five airports and taking two separate red eye flights over the previous thirty-eight hours. I'd read about India's struggles with public—India is one of the most polluted countries in the world, and four out of every ten people meet the clinical criteria for being malnourished. Yet seeing the skin-and-bones frames of so many Indians and the garbage heaps laying along so many streets gave me a much more visceral understanding of why the project I was about to embark on was so important.

When I arrived at the ashram I think I unconsciously expected to be greeted by a procession or a well-informed bellman or at least somebody who looked official and could point me in the right direction. Instead I wandered around the ashram's massive grounds for a while, somewhat bewildered, until I encountered an ashramite who, as I realized seconds later, had taken a vow of silence. It was only after a lot of awkward attempts at sign language and pointing that he was finally able to direct me to the new arrivals desk for international residents. It took me another few days to get connected with people in the ecovillage. Some of the people I had expected to be there, including the main person I had been in contact with regarding my project and who had offered to oversee my work while I lived out my 6 months at the ashram, were nowhere to be found because they'd recently left the ashram and moved on to other countries. In the beginning I was very frustrated by how disorganized the ecovillage appeared and how difficult it was to coordinate with the project managers and to fit the projects I was assigned into the framework I had laid out in my Lumos proposal. It was only after lots of mistakes,

creativity, communication, and acceptance that I began to understand the Indian work culture better and I started to find a “flow” to my work.

The Amritapuri ecovillage is composed of four branches, three of which I was involved in. I spent the majority of my time working on several of the mini farms, each of which were devoted to the cultivation of one or a few crops. I also spent a substantial amount of time working in the ecovillage’s composting and recycling facilities. The only branch I did not get to actively participate in was the biofuel generation system that was being developed while I was at the ashram.

I devoted much of my day to physical labor on the farms and at the composting and recycling facilities. I learned A LOT about gardening and farming from this, to the extent that I am now applying for professional horticulturalist positions, and at least from speaking with people in HR, it appears my six months of ecovillage gardening experience is enough to qualify me for work in the field. I also was able to work with some of the managers at the ecovillage to brainstorm several farming ideas and implement them for experimentation and possible incorporation into the “final draft” of the ecovillage model that will be taken to sponsored Indian villages. One of these projects was a “food forrest”—a garden that has three vertical layers of trees, shrubs, and annuals that work together synergistically to maximize ease of cultivation and food yield. Others included land-reclamation techniques inspired by the hugelkulture gardening paradigm and a variety of experimental techniques for herbal tea production.

Outside of my “day job” at the ecovillage I spent a lot of time soaking in the ashram’s spiritual culture—some of which I deeply appreciated and some of which I didn’t seem to “get”. I also did some travelling outside the ashram, eating amazing Indian dishes and savoring in the beautiful sights and people.

Now I’m back from my trip and living in California. As I mentioned before, I’m working as a caregiver and math tutor, but am considering various job avenues including actuarial science. No one knows what the future holds, least of all me, but I’m excited to find out.