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My Summer in India

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I spent this summer working with the Dalit Foundation in New Delhi, India. “Dalit” means broken or crushed and it refers to the group of people known as untouchables. The Foundation is committed to ending discrimination against Dalits. Before arriving in India, I did not have much knowledge about Dalit issues or Indian society in general. During the course of my ten-week internship, I learned so much about caste-based discrimination, tasted a sense of what it is like to be an international human rights lawyer, and traveled many fascinating places.

The Foundation primarily operates by providing grants and fellowships for individual activists or community organizations working to protect Dalit rights and bring social change to stop caste-based discrimination. The bulk of the Foundation’s work is dedicated to selecting and monitoring those individuals and organizations. My assignments were mainly research and writing on a variety of issues. I studied and wrote a report on the structure of Indian government and how to navigate the Indian judicial system. I compiled distinctive Dalit arts and culture. I also collected all the governmental programs and statutes related to Dalits.

The most interesting assignment I did was evaluating the impact of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. This statute was enacted to prevent and punish caste-based abuses. One of the most disturbing aspects of caste-based discrimination is the violence inflicted on Dalits. Dalits are subjected to incredibly inhumane and violent treatment. For example, under the statute, it is a crime to force a Dalit to drink or eat any inedible or obnoxious substance. This seems to be a strange crime at first glance. But it was in response to many reported incidences of a non-Dalit forcing a Dalit to eat human excreta. The intensity of violence is really difficult to comprehend. A Dalit woman was burned alive by non-Dalits in her village because her son eloped with a non-Dalit girl. Unspeakable violence like this happens frequently in India. Despite the seriousness of the situation, ending caste-based discrimination is extremely difficult because the caste system is so deeply ingrained in Indian society.

Besides working with the Foundation, I really enjoyed traveling in India. I admired the beauty and magnificence of the Taj Mahal in Agra, watched Hindus preparing for cremation along the

Ganges river in Varanasi, went on a camel safari in the sand dunes of Jaisalmer, did zip lining by the spectacular view of the 15th century fort in Jodhpur, took a yoga lesson in Rishikesh, and learned how to cook a simple Indian meal in Udaipur. Every city I visited had its own unique characters making each place memorable. Life in Delhi was equally interesting. Delhi really is a remarkable place. It is a huge metropolitan city. There are many historical sites, museums, monuments, and temples. Newly built fancy malls selling designer brands coexist with traditional markets filled with tiny shops in narrow alleys. Most of all, street food in Delhi is fantastic.

My internship in India was a truly fulfilling experience. Even though I had to endure 115-degree weather and frequent stomach troubles, learning about Dalits' struggle to end caste-based discrimination and traveling to wonderful places made everything worthwhile.