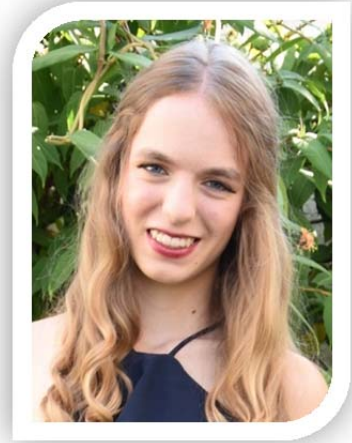


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Country: Germany

Volunteering period: August 2016 – July 2017



Final Impression, July 2017

Now that my year in India is coming to an end, many people ask me questions like “How was it?”, “What did you learn?” or “What do you think about India?” I normally explain that one year is very long and I made many very different experiences, so it’s almost impossible to answer any of these questions. However, I will give my best now to describe what I saw and felt during this year.

Of course I spent most of the time with my voluntary work so I would say that this is what affected my time in India most. I changed the centers twice but most of the time I worked in two projects: In the morning, I taught women in Maths and English and I gave general knowledge workshops about topics like health, women’s rights or environment. The center was located in a rather poor and conservative area of Jodhpur, and many of the women who came to the center had finished school very early or had never gone to school at all. The majority of the women I worked with were married and housewives, often mothers of many children. Their main purpose of coming to the center was to get a vocational training in sewing which would help them to earn their own money later and to become more independent. It would be a lie to say that all the women were motivated to learn English and Maths every single day but as soon as I got a deeper insight in their daily life that was all about serving their family, being silent and unremarkable and following the cultural and social norms, I understood that what they were really looking for in the center was a little bit of freedom, a space where they can be just themselves and develop their own skills. So I saw my challenge in trying to find a balance between giving them the necessary basic education and the freedom they wished for.

In the afternoon, I taught children from the age of 7 to 12. Many of them were the children of the women I taught in the morning. This was really interesting for me because like that I could get to know the families even better. The children I taught all went to school in the morning but when I looked at their school books, I was often surprised by how little they know and understand of what they were supposed to learn at school. Even more surprisingly, though, was that these children, despite the pressure that they had from school, were still extremely motivated to learn. They often begged for homework and tests, and they visibly enjoyed learning games and activities.

In general, I really enjoyed my work with the women and the children and the relationships I developed made me very happy. Also, I am convinced that I learned a lot more from it than I ever taught my students.

Still, I think it should be mentioned that you shouldn't underestimate the amount of work that includes preparing classes and workshops, writing reports and organizing other activities.

But besides all the work, I also had enough free time to explore Jodhpur and to experience the cultural life. On long weekends and during holidays, I traveled to different places in India. And of course we also had the chance to take part at important celebrations like Diwali or Holi.

My home for this year was a guesthouse in Jodhpur that is run by the founder of Sambhali Trust, Govind Singh Rathore. Of course, living in a guesthouse where other people spend their holidays has quite some advantages: You get served food and there are even people who clean your room. But the best, in my opinion, was the fact that I lived together with the other Sambhali volunteers who went through similar things and could therefore understand my situation better than for example friends at home. Sometimes we were almost 20 people but at other times of the year we were only five. Anyway, I always liked the familiar atmosphere and the possibility to talk to other people, to share experiences and food and to get help and good advices for teaching whenever you wanted to.

For me, the guesthouse was a bit like an island in Jodhpur, where we were not so much confronted by the Indian culture. Being on an island in the middle of a hectic ocean is relaxing, of course, but it can also give you the feeling of being apart from the rest. Sometimes I would have liked to be a little closer to the rest of India, the kind of India that I saw when I went outside on the street, when I talked to locals and when I was at work. Even though the family is living in the same house and we close relationships to them as well as to the staff of the guesthouse, you should not forget that it is not the same as living in a host family.

All in all, it is very hard to resume all these various experiences in just some words, but there is one thing I can say for sure: I don't regret any of them. I am more than thankful for having had this chance to make them, and for the knowledge and development they brought me.