

EXCHANGE REPORT

A SEMESTER ABROAD

AT TISS MUMBAI FROM JUNE TO OCTOBER 2019

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DECIDING ON A SEMESTER ABROAD

The decision to take a semester abroad was easy, not only regarding the benefits that a stay abroad would have for my subject of study – but also personally. Furthermore, we are also advised to go on a semester abroad to India, since the master is dealing with modern India. Topics discussed in our seminars, from colonial heritage to future perspectives and current political, socio-cultural and economic situations, must be experienced first-hand to fully understand the scope and its impact. The choice fell on the city of Mumbai, because of the uniqueness of this cosmopolitan mega city in the Indian context, and the freedom it offers in terms of dressing, culture and mindset.

My personal objective for this semester abroad was to find and meet people of (roughly) my age, and experience their everyday lives, their struggles and progresses. In my Indian family, I am by far the youngest of all my cousins and therefore couldn't fully enjoy the experience of being with same aged people. Professionally, I sought for inspirations from my environment, fellow students and professors to broaden my perspective on topics we usually read and discuss about in class.

Since I have an extended family in India, this was not my first visit – but the first time with an awakened consciousness to actively question and extend the known, manifested knowledge. In my opinion, families are supposed to be safe spaces and therefore (try to) filter influences and external impacts. For me, it was important to leave this comfort zone, to be (as much as possible) unbiasedly open to the experiences and learnings of others.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE SEMESTER ABROAD

My journey to Mumbai started with the application at the Göttingen International in November 2018. After handing in the necessary documents, I was allowed to apply for a semester abroad at the respective university in India.

My first choice was the Mumbai University because of its master programme in journalism at the Department of Communication and Journalism. I was looking forward to the courses of *Media Economics, Reporting and Editing*, as well as *Media Criticism, Ethics, Constitution and Media Laws* and my favourite: *Conflict Communication*.

Unfortunately, I had to reorient my semester abroad due to communication problems that couldn't be solved. Therefore, the choice fell on the Tata Institute of Social Sciences – that offered exactly what I was looking for.



All first semester students of Tata Institute of Social Sciences Mumbai 2019

TISS MUMBAI

ORIENTATION WEEK AND ACCOMODATION

Right after arriving at Tata Institute of Social Sciences in the beginning of June, we started with the orientation event for IRO students (International Relations Office). These include all foreign students, or Indians, who have studied abroad and returned for the master.

On June 6th the IRO informed all new IRO students about TISS, its schools and premises, important service providers, sim cards and bank accounts, and safety. Since I have the privilege of being an OCI card holder, the procedure of FRRO registration was spared. From then on, the official orientation week started with a cross-school event with all the new students from TISS. In sum, most of the information we have been given by IRO already, additionally the deans of the respective schools introduced themselves and shared some interesting information about their master programmes with us.

After the IRO orientation programme, the question of accommodation had to be handled. Since my application was forgotten in the first place, arriving at TISS was a little adventure with few information about accommodation and so on. In the end, I had the option to choose between the dorm (three-shared bedroom) or an IRO flat, that has two rooms with each two beds. The flats offered many extras, like a kitchen, washing machine, fridge, air condition, hot water and so on. I quickly decided on the IRO flat and shared from then on, my room with a south Indian girl and another master student from Ecuador in the other room. Together we enjoyed the fortunes of the monsoon times and the troubles of the IRO flat: from major power cut with the risk of fire, caused by inadequate wiring for an unsuitable infrastructure of the IRO flats with extra devices, to boiling hot water in the shower, to bed bugs and other incidents.



IRO flat cooking space & stove

In cases of insufficient time or cooking skills, the campus offered two dining halls and two canteens. The new campus, in my opinion, had the most beautiful view (see image). Food wise there was not much difference between the new and old campus dining hall. The premises of

new and old campus are similar to a micro cosmos. TISS is located in Deonar, that was once the outskirts of Mumbai, a rather rural area, now a proper urbanization has nearly soaked in the farm charm. The city's noise pollution is swallowed by the rich surrounding flora of the campus. Wild animals like cats and dogs are usually tamed and taken care of by the fellow students and professors, who pet, feed and water them. On the other hand, however the monkeys tamed the students and stressed the importance of closed windows and a strict no-food-rule in their presence.



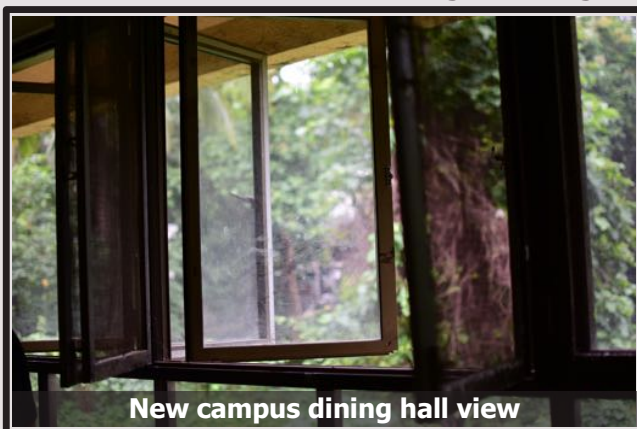
Typical dining hall food

THE SCHOOL OF MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES

The School of Media and Cultural Studies, or short SMCS, offers only one master programme. As exchange student I had the fortune to choose any and as many courses as it suited for my purposes. In my batch, we were roughly 20 to 25 people. Contrary to our seminar system at CeMIS, where students from different semesters attend classes together, SMCS offers courses only for the respective semesters. Besides the obligatory attendance, students had to prove attendance by biometric verification, and follow a strict schedule of modules.

IMAGE MAKING

This course was supervised by [REDACTED] who is also the Dean of the School of Media and Cultural Studies. Subject of this course was a critical engagement with visual images and media narratives, to understand how constructions and relationships of power and resistance work and interact. The overall goal is to enable the students to uncover the complex layers and codes that are involved in image making and representation, and enable a critical



New campus dining hall view

engagement with contemporary visual culture in the Indian context. This course involved a great deal of artwork, from paintings and ancient classic Indian art, to scooter and missiles commercials. Prominent scholars referenced in this course were Michelle Foucault, John Berger and Walter Benjamin, amongst

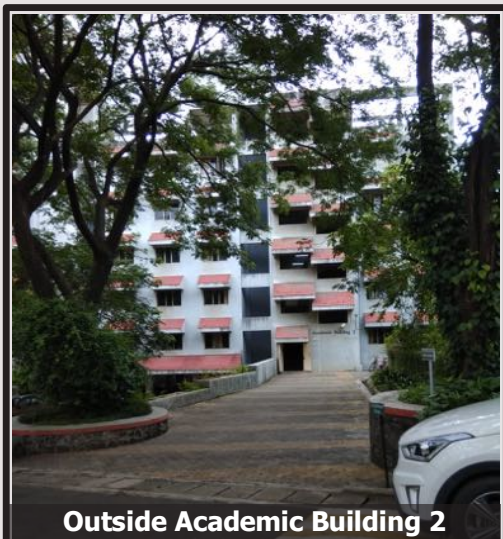
others. In the very first class, we experienced on the basis of simple exercises, how our individual backgrounds influence interpretation processes, the reading of signs and the consequences that follow these very natural – but constructed – processes.

The assignments comprised of two essays and one class test, however I only audited this course.

CULTURAL STUDIES

The course objective was to introduce students to basic concepts and theoretical developments in Cultural Studies to offer critical perspectives facilitating a critical engagement of their own cultural landscapes. It involved reflecting on the work of several scholars that have been relevant to the process of developing ideas in Cultural Studies. Topics dealt with in this class reached from *What is Culture?*, to *Orientalism* and *Decolonisation*, to *Nations and Ideas* as well as *Race, (Cultural) Capitalism, Cast and Gender*.

Assignments for this course comprised of a term paper and a class test. The term paper offered two options, either analysing a campaign or an event that occurred at least 20 years back. The focus of the event was to retell the historic happenings and narrative of mainstream opinion. I chose the campaign, and analysed the *#selfiewithdaughter* initiative, a campaign launched by a *sarpanch* of Haryana which was ultimately taken up by Prime Minister Modi, who linked it to his own campaign *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (save the daughter, educate the daughter). The objective of this task was to reflect on an (activist) campaign and examine its arguments, how it transforms debates and even changes the discourse around issues or ideas. The campaign *#selfiewithdaughter* was first launched in 2015 and received a great (worldwide) participation, fathers (and also mothers) posting a picture with their daughter(s) under the hashtag, to stress the importance and pride to have a girl child.



Outside Academic Building 2

Although, criticism by two prominent women, an actor and a political activist, was met with extreme and strategic misogyny by so called *bhaktis* (internet trolls, mostly affiliated with a specific ideology).

This was also the subject of the second part of my paper, that outlined how political instrumentalization of social media in contemporary India takes place, with focus on

the controversy around the status of the female and the idea of masculinity. [REDACTED] offered opportunities to explore the discourse around gender and how feminist movements and resistance evolve from cultural restrictions, oppression and misogyny. One interesting aspect about *#selfiewithdaughter* and *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* is the criticism around male protectionism and infantilising the female with these campaigns. This paper concluded with the question around the normality of violence and the acceptance of oppression. Furthermore, it is linked to the reproduction of abusive language in everyday situations and how a counter public is rising in the realm of social media, claiming space for change. This course has definitely raised the awareness of gender stigmas and constructed normalities among us students.

MEDIA STUDIES

This course comprised out of two main parts. First, we dealt with political economy and then moved on to audience studies. The final assignment of this course comprised of two term papers referring to each part of this course.

On the basis of the discussed theories and literature in our Media Studies classes, I chose the topic of social media and how its power structures condition politics. The title of my first paper was *Who gets to represent who? And why*. In this paper, I argued on the bases of course material that social media foster the manifestation of populism and power legitimization of emerging politicians. The prominent example of India's current Prime Minister served as an illustrative case, how the social media are used as strategic tool and platform for self-representation. Great focus was laid on the nature of populism and the difficulty of defining populists, and the lack of gatekeepers in social media. This paper concluded by stressing the importance of self-representation on social media and underscoring that populist ideologies are too simple for a complex reality and therefore have the potential of de-democratizing our nations. In this sense, democracy refers to the very core idea of a power-system that is based on the diversity of every individual. Elections, party-systems and policies are measures stemming from this core idea. Contrary to this, populism has become a widely accepted norm and is not anomalous anymore. It has become a mainstream not only in western democratic politics, but rather a populist Zeitgeist.

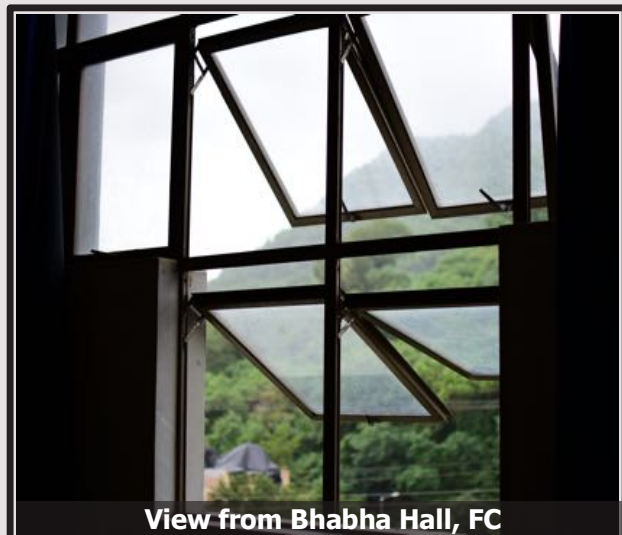
The second paper dealt with the question how social media behaviour is influencing the offline political discourse on the basis of four interviews conducted with Indian students. The title of the audience studies assignment was *How social media behaviour influences political discourses in the offline world*. The objective of this

paper was to analyse the consequences of contemporary politization of the private space: how students engage in social media and how this shapes the political behaviour and discourses in their own private space. To do so, this paper comprised of two main parts. The first one dealt with the overall frame of social media engagement and politics, followed by an analysis of the interviews conducted with four Indian students on social media engagement and its consequences. The key findings illustrated a broad range of individual opinions and expectations of social media: from initial hopes to remedy shortcomings and essentially overcome oppression and societal grievances, culminating in an apparent realisation of the possible.

The interviewees' answers illustrate a certain frustration or growing apathy towards social media, which is in constant struggle with powerlessness, and persistent hope to make a difference. Simultaneously, the politization of the ordinary is followed by a deep inner conflict between seeking harmony and taking a stand. Especially discussions within the family trouble the interviewees a lot, since these conflicting situations, of expressing politically controversial opinions and yet driven by the urge for harmony within family, are a delicate balancing act. This paper concluded with a certain mood of realism towards social media and its possibilities. A deep conflicting relationship with social media was shown by all four participants – who belong to different social contexts. The virtual and physical world are hard to separate these days, and virtual campaigns and trends have a direct impact on the offline world.

FOUNDATION COURSE

All first semester students are required to take the foundation course, that is split into two courses, FC 01 and FC 02. Each course comprised out of two written exams, that in turn comprised out of two essays each. The objective of this course is to ensure, that all students have basic knowledge in the most important topics and discourses in and around India.



View from Bhabha Hall, FC



Street food in South Bombay, pani puri and pav bhaji

FC 01 - *Ideas of India* offered the modules on *Idea of India, Constitution and Rule of Law and Rights, Caste, Understanding Gender and Sexuality, Religion, Social Movements and Tribal Movements*. In the final exam, I choose the topics of idea of India, that was based on Sunil Khilnani's book and the visions of Nehru, Gandhi and Ambedkar, and

why India is not a textbook example of democracy. In my essays for the second exam, I developed arguments around the topic of a feminist/contemporary women's movements and how it addresses the intersections of caste, class, race, gender and more. The second question required an analysis of what distinguishes old and new social movements based on examples.

FC 02 - *India's Development Challenges* offered the modules on *India's Economic Growth, Urbanization, Contemporary Issues in Rural India, Poverty, Education, Environment, Healthcare, Mental Health, Media and Migration*. In my first exam, I developed arguments around the statement whether cities are engines of growth, the different perspectives on urbanization and the difficulties that are involved in the measurement of poverty, and how income poverty and social exclusion are interlinked. The second exam dealt with the topics of environment movements that challenge dominant practices of development and how users negotiate the media and their spaces of resistance.

In general, the final exams summarized the situation at hand and the complexities involved in solution finding. Since the foundation courses were taught for two or three schools simultaneously, the groups of students were thrice as large as in the respective schools. Discussions gained momentum in these environments very fast and often ended in stereotyping and stigmatization. Whereas in my experience, the SMCS classes offered discussions that were quite open and rather constructive in terms of countering stereotypes or the like.



View over Sanjay Gandhi National Park from outlook of Kanheri Caves

GENERAL LEARNINGS

During my stay in Mumbai, I made use of my geographic locality. Besides visiting the spots in the city itself with my flatmates and other friends from the hostel, from Colaba to Juhu and the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, I have visited my extended family in Hyderabad and Pune, and met friends at their family's place in Goa.

With Uber transportation in Mumbai becomes too convenient. Especially as a group or travelling alone, it offers a lot of possibilities to optimize travelling and ensure safety. Sharing live location, sending trip updates to friends and panic buttons, for example, help to make travelling, especially as a woman and also during nights, safer. The metro also offers safe travels, at least from station to station in an extra ladies' compartment. However, it is still a weird contrast that Mumbai's modern life offers. Expensive malls and fancy bars are mushrooming in the city, offering a 24/7 consumption regardless of the poverty that is right at their doorstep.

Today, I have been back home now for about a month, and experiences and learnings have been settling in. I can conclude that I have succeeded in my venture and achieved my objective for the semester abroad. I made use of every opportunity to interact with my fellow students and professors, to learn from them and absorb new and known information. One important aspect for me was to interact with people from different political or socio-cultural motivations to keep perspectives and opinions as broad as possible. Every person has different experiences and therefore can offer new perspectives.



View over the sea from the Gateway of India, South Bombay

Besides the university grounds, I had the opportunity to build a great relationship with family friends of ours and the fortune to be part of these two different Indian families. Since both families have stayed in Germany and returned to India after several years, it was enriching and enlightening to share and discuss experiences with people who know both countries – a base of common understanding.

