A gentle reminder of what I did

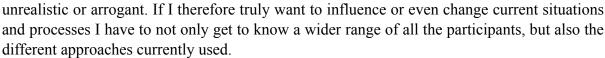My internship at Anveshi from January 9th to February 3rd 2018

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How did I get here?

The first time I left home for more than a few weeks was in 11th grade, when I participated in a year long exchange to the United States. Five years later I am confident in saying that this experience has left a lasting impact on me in many ways.

I did not leave all my personality traits behind, but this year had offered me another perspective and enabled me to "shed a glimpse beyond the edge of the plate" (a German saying which roughly translates to "thinking outside the box").

From very early on I have been interested in politics and especially foreign affairs.

While I had ruled out becoming a doctor early on, due to my inability to see blood, this was my idea of how I could "help" or rather contribute and participate.

Looking around politicians or policy makers are frequently accused of being out of touch, unrealistic or arrogant. If I therefore truly want to influence or even change current situations and processes I have to not only get to know a wider range of all the participants, but also the different approaches currently used.

Various studies in Germany show that the areas that are most xenophobic or anti Muslim actually are the ones with the smallest percentage of migrants and Muslims. People hate something they haven't really been exposed to, something they don't know.

Through staying in different countries (not necessarily traveling, but rather working, volunteering or studying in one place) I tried to alter my own exposure.

My stays have always showed me distinctive systems, even thoough they might be similar, and at the same time made me question the one I had grown up in.

We often take it for granted and try to change it from within, but there are plenty of suggestions for improvement also offered when looking at other countries.

Before beginning my studies in political science this fall I wanted to get to know several fields, with different objectives related to politics: A community center for refugees in Lesvos, a reasearch institute for women's studies in Hyderabad, a legal organisation defending people in danger of being deported in Texas and hopefully an embassy in Berlin.

I choose Hyderabad out of different reasons, some of them practical ones. A friend of mine is in her 3rd year of studies here and I was able to stay with her and her family for the month. When asking her about internship possibilties her professor suggested three places, Anveshi being one of them. In the end curiousity was probably one of the main decision making factors, when looking at the different websites and projects.

And a few months later there I was, 4.400 miles from home in Hyderabad!

Observations through a car window

Until now I had mostly taken public transportation or my dearly beloved bycicle to school or college since I do not have a driver's licence yet. Perhaps due to these circumstances I never fully understood the meaning of "bad traffic". I was glad not having to drive here and saw myself spending quite some time in uber cabs.

Many people questioned me if this lengthy comute didn't bother me, since the place I was staying at was about 45min away. However I have to say I felt the opposite: I enjoyed watching people on the streets, in shops or autos. Especially in the beginning there was something fascinating about it.

My hometown is not a mayor city, but close to Frankfurt and it's metropolitan area. Nevertheless did I never see so many people in such close proximity. Of course this observation is purely subjective. I have visited cities like Buenos Aires or New York but couldn't relate my experiences there to Hyderabad.

One thing Germans always bring up when referring to India is: "everything looks so colorful there".

They are right, not only in a literal sense, but in the variety of activities happening, which often made it hard for me to choose where to look first.

After a few rides I also started recognizing shops and signs along the way. What had seemed to be a labyrinth of crowded streets was now given a (albeit minimalistic) structure.

On many occasios did I wish I was able to communicate with some of the drivers in Hindi or Telegu, to be able to ask them at least some of the less controversial questions rushing to my mind while looking through the window.

What especially stayed with me was the close exchange and influence amongst the distinctive religions in Hyderabad when it comes to architecture, local cuisine, language or clothing for example.

A crash course in cultural soft skills

Many people first receive me as a rather shy and quiet person, who smiles but doesn't necessarily participate eagerly in a conversation. That may be to some extend true, however stepping into new cultural territory doesn't exactly aid such a characteristic. During my first week(s) here I not rarely saw myself not knowing how to act in certain situations. I felt insecure when it came to my behaviour and mostly observed my surroundings in order to feel confident in acting myself.

When growing up one aquires certain cultural soft skills. In most cases they enable me to acclimatize in new surroundings.

I know what an employer in Germany means when she says be there at 8°clock, what to wear in which setting, what people eat for lunch or how to find the next bus station.

I also feel knowledgable and as someone, who watches the evening news on a regular basis can participate in a casual political small talk in the office.

One does not have to study to fit in. Having lived in a culture for a significant amount of time is sufficient to "behave naturally", "to know what everybody is talking about".

In many travel reports or even news paper articles Germans refer to India as being "chaotic".

Even though I know where this statement is coming from since I felt the same way I do believe it to be superficial. Chaos is defined as "complete disorder and confusion" and that is what a lot of people think they see. Not knowing the process and system quietly resting behind the scenes one is simply not able to asses properly. Children playing catch and run could also look rather "confusing" to an outsider who does not know the game, but none of us who do think of it as an epitome of chaos.

So what do you do, when the you want to question the first impression that came to your mind, because you know it to be incomplete?

A different place automatically hands you an infinite number of "new" sounds, pictures and customs.

Of course there are universal similarities, but when I first arrived in early January I was more struck by the differences.

That is when I saw myself shifting to the position of an observer, because there are only so many things one can learn through asking questions.

At times people might not even be conciously aware of why they act a certain way. This process can be rather challenging and make you feel alone.

While I was in my head constantly comparing, taking in and trying to understand, I was at the same time unable to share it with people , around me. I could have of course, but a part of me always aims at being recognized as someone beyond my cultural identity.

If I am therefore continously talking about my home country, I will be more likely to remain "the girl from Germany". But then this is all I know, so what do I say?

You can see the self-inflicted dilemma I had put myself into. But somehow I am still of the opinion that this path is worth taking, because I already felt much more comfortable and myself during the last two weeks.

I now experience situations very differently from when I first arrived and it does feel like the premise "it takes time" has turned out to be true in this case.

By no means do I want to claim to have mastered emerging into another culture in four weeks. That is simply not possible.

Still my attitude changed a lot and I am not as insecure and overwhelmed by all I see and hear.

While it felt like someone was rapidly throwing books at me only a few weeks ago, I now developed a technique to catch more of them and seperate them into piles. I am still unable to read all or even a majority, but at least I don't feel like I am under fire anymore, which is to be taken as a significant sucess.

I look different

My past 20 years of education have repeatedly taught me to be a self thinking individual and not afraid to stand out. Still I found myself wanting to blend in with the others and be part of a group more than ever while I was here. I still am more comfortable walking with others and am thinking about if people are judging me when they are staring.
That does not have anything to do with feeling safe or threatend for me, just wanting to be able to walk along a street without being noticed by everyone around.

Because of my skin color people tend to asscociate me with wealth. I had a similair experience in Chile, although it there focused more on my hair. As someone who lives with a single mom, who earns little more than minimum wage in Germany and highly depends on my grandparents I often felt rather uncomfortable in that position.
Of course I acknowledge that it is to an extend true, because Germans do have a higher salary in general, but I never thought of my self as wealthy or part of an upper class.

When people first asked if they could take a picture with me it felt very inadequate to me. I am not famous, nor do I look like a model, which is why I personally did not see a point in the photograph. Over time I started to mind less and joke about it: It would be considered quite racist if someone in Germany wanted to take a picture with an Indian because of how he or she looks.
At the same time other "white people" would come to me and start a conversation, although I did not know them at all. The only thing that we had in common was our skin color and it felt strange to me to connect to someone solemnly because of that.
In the end all of this is not an important problem or a struggle for me, but for once lets me see and feel what others encounter on a day to day basis, often with much more negative implications and consequences for their lives.

Mfc, reading and more

During my time at Anveshi I mostly helped with editing the Mfc Bulletin for February. That meant adjusting the font style, font size, spacing and alignment of the different papers. I was also able to read many of the texts afterwards. I didn't come from a health care background and my only sources of information so far were my grandfather (who was a doctor) and a course about "Health insurance in the United States" in college. Needless to say I had to look up many terms and topics on the internet, but I nevertheless truly enjoyed reading them. It made me aware and more concious of various areas I had not spent much time thinking about before.
I felt similair when reading the books "Towards a world of Equals" and "A history of doing" whenever I had time. The collection of topics in the textbook especially left me very thoughtful.

When describing my time at Anveshi I should not leave out all the discussions over lunch or in the library. From languages, politics, movies or education to food, I believe we covered it all. I always knew I could ask any question I had, which made me feel truly welcome. And as I mentioined before I never minded simply listening to a conversation someone else was having (although it frequently made me wish I could understand Telegu or Hindi).

Half-time: The seminar

Another important part of my internship was the preparation for - and on the 19th and 20th the seminar "Development beyond the state" Anveshi hosted at Osmania University. The participating speakers had submitted papers before and were given the time to present and in the folowing discuss their idea/ findings with the others and the audience.
Admitedly I was not able to grasp every detail of all the conversations as they also tended to go into quite specific details, but having read at least most papers in advance I could follow the general idea.

Up until the seminar I had only been part of events like this or conferences as a participant. Not only did I come to apreciate the organisation even more, but it also thaught
me the different aspects one has to think about when planning an event like this. Sending reminders, welcoming guests, looking at the venue - and I was afterall only part of the last weeks of preparation and hadn't seen all the previous effort.
In my opinion the event went very well: The set times always worked out in the end and the argument, though also being critical were always positive and never intolerant.

The venue was very beautiful, the food outstanding (especially the plum cake of course) and my impression when I talked to some of the participants, was that they felt the same way.
I also enjoyed the dinner after the first day and being able to spend time with everyone outside of work.
Overall these two days made me really feel part of the group and will always be cheerished very much in my memory of this month in Hyderabad.

Development beyond a book

So what are the lessons I will take home from all of this? What will happen next?
When I was younger I always thought that I would go to college straight out of high school, that I should not "waste" time. Now I am very glad I didn't. Interning at Anveshi, volunteering in Greece or Chile has thought me many lessons that I believe to be at least of equal value as my formal school education. I also often am inspired to study and inform myself about issues I come across when I am in a different place. Issues that were never even mentioned in my school curiculum. Nobody is telling me to do so and there won't be any exam in the end - "non scholae sed vitae".

In the far far future I would like to work for the German state department, an international NGO or the parliament. Maybe these plans will also change over the course of my studies, because ten years ago I would have told you I wanted to become a teacher in Greece.
But for now I am very thankful for the opportunity of being able to come to Anveshi, meet so many inspiring people, have a lot of interesting discussions and know that I have a place in Hyderabad I can come back to in the future.
Thank you very much for everything!

A few FAQ in the end:

So, how was it?
This is in a way a sarcastic question, which I will most likely get asked more often than any other when I get home. What do I say? It was great or it was interesting? I learned a lot? As this report shows I am not able to sum up my time in three sentences or less. So different people will receive different answers, varying in length and detail, but somehow carry the overall theme of this text: I would do it again anytime!

What will you miss the most?
The constant sun, spicy food, people's hospitality and everybody at Anveshi of course.

What will you not miss at all?
Bathrooms without tissues or toilet paper, the traffic and looking for an ATM that is not out of order or cash.

The best food you have eaten?
I really enjoy Paneer Butter Masala with Naan and Madhavi's food ;)

What were you asked most often in Hyderabad?
Where are you from? Something about cars (I don't know much about cars).

Your favorite place you visited?
Birla Mandir and Chowmohalla Palace

What stereotypes do Germans have about India ?
Everybody does yoga, eats rice and curry and most people are poor. There are a lot of crimes against women and children orphanes. The air is very polluted and there is garbage lying around. Cities are noisy, chaotic, hot, dusty and overcrowded. Tourists gets dirrherea because the food and water is generally not safe. Indians are very good with math and science.

Was it as you expected?
No, and that could be because or despite of the fact that I have not seen many (if any) Bollywood movies in my life. I feel as it is rarely helpful to have to many expectations.

What is most different from Germany?
I also do not like answering this question since it generalizes and is extremly subjective, but some examples would be: Shaking your head never means yes, Germans all speak the same language and people wear socks a lot and rarely go barefoot (and never on the street),

What are you taking as a souvenir?
A kurti, Chai tea, different spices and a pair of earrings.

Would you like to go back?
Yes, yes and yes! Maybe as a semester abroad in college.