

A New Passage to India fellowship,



IISER Pune, November 2013-January 2014

Application:

I applied for the ANPTI in the third year of my PhD to experience something completely different from my own project. So, I talked with Ms Schürer and she supplied me with an IISER brochure to find a potential collaborator. I then got an approval letter from my supervisor and wrote a motivation letter and a CV to be sent to IISER and the potential collaborator. These documents were sent to IISER Pune to the person I proposed to collaborate with. This person then contacted me, we talked on skype and agreed on a preliminary project plan. She was going to the field to collect data around the time I was hoping to visit, and she invited me to join the excursion. She sent me an invitation letter and after that I filled in the official ANPTI application forms for the fellowship. I was awarded a scholarship for 2 months and decided to stay about 2.5 months. From then on, I communicated regularly with my collaborator, who got everything organized in Pune (including the accommodation) and for the field work. The first half of the scholarship was in my account at least a month before the start of trip.

Travel & insurance:

The visa application was done about a month before traveling online. After that I visited the consulate services in Hamburg in person to drop off my passport and the application, and again a couple of weeks later to pick up the passport (it can also be done by post but going in person guaranteed faster processing). I had some issues with getting the student visa, possibly because I identified the visit as an internship or traineeship (probably better refer to it as studies). The consulate services online instructions are misleading and contradicting and my invitation letter was initially not sufficient. I was asked to provide documents from IISER that they could not provide, and in the end I was awarded not a student visa but an "x entry" visa, which complicated things in India unnecessarily. In fact, a tourist visa might be a better option for anyone doing their work in Pune, since it will significantly reduce the bureaucracy involved in both ends and decrease the costs somewhat as well.

I booked a flight with Air India (~520 e) from Frankfurt (train Gö-Fra airport ~28e) via Delhi to Pune. IISER sent an institute car to pick me up from the airport, and my collaborator met me at the airport. I got a student insurance from <https://www.travelsecure.de/en/> for the duration of the trip.

IISER Pune:

The institute is very young, the campus is being expanded and there's lots going on – conferences, external talks, social events etc. and a fairly interdisciplinary focus. The scientific atmosphere is vibrant since the academic staff is relatively young and enthusiastic. Getting things organized was quite easy since my collaborator, all the support staff and the guest house manager were extremely helpful and made the Indian system run smoothly for me. I stayed in the guest house on campus in a nice (luxurious for Indian standards) 2-room apartment (+ a little kitchen and bathroom) that I shared with a German girl for the first 2 weeks, then alone. The room, full board (3 meals a day in the mensa in the same building), internet, washing machines, cleaning of the room once a while etc. were all free for us, the costs covered by IISER. Therefore, it would have been quite possible to stay for well over 2 months with the scholarship.

Working group:

I worked with an independent post doctoral fellow, not an actual working group. I joined a field work project, and a large part of the logistics (permits, funding for the field work, travel) had been taken care of by collaborator before my arrival. My first 2 weeks in Pune I read papers on the topic and discussed the study design and the research questions with the collaborator. We did a big part of the planning together before going to the field, and my background and experience were taken into account. We then traveled to the field site, spent 6 weeks collecting data together, then traveled back and for the remaining 2 weeks in Pune I transcribed data from the field.

The project was a study of the mating system of blue sheep in the Himalayas. We made behavioral observations of male-male and male-female interactions during the rutting season of the species to assess the significance of behavioral characteristics vs. age class in determining male mating success. I did not have a separate project for myself, but I worked independently within the project, and (the large amount of) data that we collected will be combined for joint analyses, i.e. our collaboration can potentially continue.

Experiencing India:

Pune is quite an easygoing Indian city. It feels safe (I walked around the neighborhood alone in the daytime) and there's little tourism so the feel of the city is somehow business-oriented. There's also little bargaining and we seemed to be getting fair prices (as opposed to touristic areas where westerners are happily cheated). The food is great all over India, the people are more colorful than in Europe (yes, saris are in daily use by some women), it's loud and lively. Hinduism is strongly present in everyday life, vegetarianism, ayurveda and spiritualism have a solid stand in the culture, and going barefoot and eating with hands are common practice. It's also a very "prudish" culture: women should cover their knees and shoulders, arranged marriages are a norm, genders are separated in many contexts and public displays of affection (except between men) are bad manners. People seem to treat each other differently than in Europe: it's very polite and courteous on one hand, but on the other, the cast system seems to penetrate through in many ways. Servants are cheap and plentiful and rich people always find someone to do the "dirty work" for them. As downsides, the traffic all over India is pretty horrible, it's very dirty in places, there's smog which is especially awful when sitting in traffic in an "auto-rikshaw" (happily smog is not too bad on IISER campus since there's vegetation around) and the bureaucracy can be a pain.

The nature of the working project required us to spend 6 weeks in the Himalayas in the winter, around 4700 m elevation, living in a tiny village and spending days outside hiking the mountains. This was a very different kind of India since it was Buddhist, and people in Himachal are quite different from further south. It's also much less hectic and much cleaner up in the mountains. It was a very interesting opportunity for cultural comparisons between Pune and Himachal: the people's relationship to nature, livestock, family and other villagers are defined by the religious views, traditions and the environment. The location was really beautiful and the work was, mostly, great, but it was also very cold, also indoors... Aside from collecting data there was not much to do besides having villagers over for tea, shopping for woolen socks, tending to the fire, taking photos and entering data... But there, and while traveling, I learned lots about India and its people from chatting with my collaborator and the locals.

I had a great time in India, met some very interesting people and experienced the country in ways that a tourist would never have a chance to. I'll definitely go back to travel and explore more! Pune and its IISER, based on my one month's experience is a nice place for working. There's nothing very special about the city but it's real India, and a good base for exploring the country and its culture. The people at IISER are making a real effort to make things as effortless and rewarding as possible for its rare foreign visitors.