

# Life in India...where to begin?

Internship report by Kelsey Paske



Kelsey Paske during her 3 months in Delhi

**India is a country of contradictions; severe poverty intermingled with incredible wealth; Hollywood fashion and Bollywood films; vibrant traditional clothing and grey smoggy skies. While my time in India was certainly challenging personally and professionally, the three months I spent living in Delhi will be something I cherish.**

The Lawyers Collective was a truly interesting place to have worked. Established by Anand Grover and his wife Indira Jaising, the Collective is dedicated to delivering legal services to those most vulnerable and marginalized. It was certainly motivating to walk into an office each day where lawyers were litigating access to medicines and drug policy, the rights of LGBTI persons, women's rights – including domestic and sexual violence and sexual harassment in the workplace – and of course conducting research for the United Nations Special Rapporteur (UNSR) on the right to health. Mr. Grover has held the post of UNSR for the past six years. The nature of the work and the dedication of staff made this workplace unlike any I'd experienced before.

Mr. Grover is often described as a controversial man but controversy in this field is necessary. Anand is very human rights centric. His outgoing and strong willed personality may ruffle feathers in Geneva, but there is no disputing he places human dignity at the forefront of his agenda in advocating for the right to health. Anand's research assistants are incredibly knowledgeable. They are dedicated to applying a 'rights based' approach to all of their work, and they passed this approach on to me.

December 11th marked a devastatingly emotional day for LGBTI individuals and the staff at Lawyers Collective. Previously, the Delhi High Court had handed down a decision in the Naz Foundation case which found that consensual homosexual sex was not a crime, thereby legalizing homosexuality in India. Unfortunately, in an archaic decision, the Supreme Court overturned the decision of the Delhi High Court due to constitutional infirmity. While this

marked a tremendous step back for India and progressive equality, Mr. Grover and the staff at Lawyers Collective as well as thousands of LGBTI activists across India continue to ensure their sexuality is recognised with respect and dignity.

The treatment of LGBTI people became a clear focus point for the Lawyers Collective and the UNSR. I was involved in researching the atrocities against LGBTI people in Nigeria and Uganda and the significant right to health implications of the national laws. Upon receiving images and first-hand accounts of violence, I was utterly distraught at the devastating affects the laws had on individuals, and the increasing 'jungle justice' involving acts of torture and degrading treatment, ultimately diminishing the security, dignity and respect of LGBTI people in both states. Unfortunately, the rights of LGBTI people still need to be prioritised globally as 82 countries continue to outlaw homosexuality.

While much of the work was to be kept confidential, the primary focus on my internship was the thematic report to be presented to the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council. The focus of this report was the proliferation of unhealthy foods, diet related non-communicable Diseases and the right to health. Anand is incredibly passionate about tackling the accessibility and availability of unhealthy junk foods in the global market. This accessibility is contributing to the obesity epidemic; a known pre-cursor to diet-related non-communicable diseases (including respiratory problems, cancers and diabetes). The marketing of such foods to children and low-income groups is particularly rife; often resulting in a food desert and food swamp in low-income areas. The research exposed the serious gaps in international human rights law with regard to an accountability mechanism for transnational corporations, whose influence abroad contributes to economic advancement, but also to numerous human rights violations.

As a young female in Delhi, harassment was a daily occurrence. I realised the insecurity that women face in a country where gender equality is laced through the Constitution but not practiced. The gender bias I experienced and the discrimination and harassment I endured prompted me to consider what Indian women's experience – ultimately shaping my current Honours research on the political economy of gender-based violence in India. I am grateful that this internship has sparked a particular academic interest and shaped my future work.

The word I use to describe my experience in India is intense. The city of Delhi is aggressive and chaotic but also fascinating. The work at Lawyers Collective often concerned quite confronting and interesting subject matters, but provided a great sense of purpose. As challenging and confronting as Delhi was to live in, I do find myself missing the chaos, my colleagues, friends and the culture of community. There is something about India, which is often difficult to articulate but it's that very 'something' that should encourage people to visit.

I want to thank the staff at the Castan Centre and Lawyers Collective for affording me the opportunity to live in India, work alongside incredibly dedicated and inspiring staff and see first-hand human rights law in action both domestically and internationally. The experience was certainly rejuvenating and has provided me with more energy to continue to seeking to secure human rights for all.

\*Please note this my own opinion and experience and does not reflect the UNSR on the Right to Health, Lawyers Collective or Castan Centre.