

## My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

### In India

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Destination: Ruchi NGO, Himachal Pradesh, India

Diletta Cola discovers that 'accepting' is the only key to open wide her Indian adventure.

How long are three months? They say time is relative, so probably it depends on what you do, on where you are, on the people you are with.

It was September 2017 when I left for my internship abroad, and I was supposed to spend three months in Himachal Pradesh, India, as an intern in a local NGO, with Ca' Foscari per il Mondo project. My main purpose was improving the language I had been studying for two years: Hindi, but I was also keen in learning more about Indian culture and traditions, which are so different from European ones. I did not know that my experience would have become much more than that.

The initial impact with India was not easy. I was confused because of the several changes I had to face: spicy food, a completely new environment, unknown people, with whom I was supposed to socialize and cooperate, and an unspecified job in an Indian organization. I knew I had to spend three months there, and in those first days they seemed an insuperable obstacle to me.

Then Mrs. Pushplata, or better Pushplata-ji, one of the health-motivators working in the NGO, invited me to celebrate *Karwa Chauth* with her family, and that occasion proved to be a turning point for my experience. Considering that I did not know what this festival was, neither other remarkable details, such as accommodation, bus timetable to reach her village or what I would have done and said for two days at her home, I was skeptical. For a moment I really took into consideration refusing her proposal, because, it was clear, nothing was under my control. But then I realized that accepting was probably the key, the only key I had to open wide my Indian adventure. And so I chose to put it in the lock. 'I'll come' I replied, and five minutes later I was in my room, sticking some clothes, sleeping bag and mosquito repellent in my rucksack. Celebrating *Karwa Chauth* festival was one of the most powerful experiences I lived in India.

At the time it was still the beginning of my internship, and my Hindi was not that fluent. However the smiles that welcomed me at Pushplata's village turned out to be more meaningful than words. Some women

immediately offered me typical food, mainly spicy Indian sweets. When I realized I was the only one to eat, they explained me that during *Karwa Chauth* festival married women have to fast until the full moon rises in the sky, in order to ensure a long and prosperous life to the respective husband. Before nightfall though, they need to perform a special rite in front of the *murti*, the gods' images. The ladies invited me to join, thus I found myself offering some incense to *Durga Mata* and other deities, and singing extremely melodic devotional hymns with them. Maybe it was the incense perfume, or maybe their voices, but suddenly I realized that I was exactly where I wished to be. It was such a powerful feeling that made me thank life for the extraordinary opportunity I had.

Later Pushplata's daughter, Alka, made a henna tattoo on my left hand, and she painted the traditional red *tilak* on my forehead. I was ready to take part in *Karwa Chauth* ritual. The sky was dark and all the villagers were gathered close to a big ancient tree. There were children, different-aged couples, everyone talking with the closer neighbour. When the white, round moon appeared, each wife walked in front of her husband and all the couples performed *Karwa Chauth* ritual. The wife had to look towards the full moon and then to turn repeatedly around her husband, pouring some water on a small tree, previously placed in front of him. In the meantime, we took many pictures. The women were especially excited because a European girl had visited them, and I could not help but smile for the deep joy was sharing with those people... my neighbours.

In that moment I felt so grateful for the opportunity of being there, being a part of their community, not as a stranger, but as a friend. It was a great lesson. It had been difficult to trust those strangers, and now they were telling me I was not a stranger to their eyes. They had just accepted the differences among us, not as a boundary, but as a starting point for showing me their world. Something amazing about India is the attention and respect given to diversity. Everyone there seems aware of his own specific features, which are not hidden, but people show them, they are proud of it. For example, it is possible to recognize a Hindu believer, a Muslim or a member of a Sikh community because they wear different clothes, according to their religion. Indian people taught me that diversity is a richness, not a stigma, and that is exactly what they made me experience during *Karwa Chauth* festival by accepting and welcoming me as I was.