

FROM MEMPHIS TO INDIA

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**The World Food Prize
Borlaug-Ruan International Internship**

**S.M. Sehgal Foundation, IRRAD Campus
Haryana, Gurgaon, India**



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Introduction

My name is Marcus Johnson and I am a 1st year student at The University of Tennessee. I major in political science but will eventually change it to journalism to better compensate my interest in analyzing issues and working to spread awareness instead of being directly hands on. I do like to be hands on, but am far more proficient with public speaking, writing, and other forms of communication. I believe strongly in Nobles Oblige, the wealthy supporting social welfare programs or directly giving back to communities. When someone has an overabundance of any type of wants, or needed commodity, they should have no issues parting ways with a portion of what they have. I believe that greed will be the reason that we won't be able to sustainably feed 9 billion people come 2050, but let us hope that no barrier stops that goal from being met.

Memphis, TN is the place of my birth and where I reside when I am not in school. Memphis, the home of blues and barbeque is a culturally diverse as the amount of sauces one can put on their wings, ribs, or bread. I say bread because I know of people who eat ketchup sandwiches, not because of odd taste buds, but because it's either that or drink a cup of water to sate the hunger. Memphis has its prosperous areas as well as its slums, ghettos, trailer parks, or any low-income title that can be attached to a given area.

I grew up surrounded by family, some more well off than others, but under no circumstance did that cause a rift in the family. Whenever there was a cookout or get together, people contributed what they could so that there was never any pressure to keep up with anyone else. Sharing food and resources has always been a part of my life.

Global Youth Institute

I attended the Global Youth Institute in 2013 after my economics teacher Ms. Kavass told me and the person I came with, Kaylan Callaghan, all about the foundation, the work done by the scientist, accomplishments of the world food prize laureate winners and other miscellaneous information we would need to know in coming to Iowa that October. My paper dealt with gender

equity and micro finance loans for the women of Chad, Africa. People always see in the media or other forms of information the disparity, crisis, or over exaggerated “awareness” the first two example were. Studying the situation in Africa on a marco level, and Chad on a micro level, made me realize that although a majority of Africa is not in terrible condition, there are countries like Chad where a majority of its borders is political, and economical in turmoil. This made me come into the Global Youth Institute with expanded interest in everything I could attend during my time there. I was able to ask questions, speak with scientist, business people, Cardinal Turkinson of Catholic Church, and gained a wealth of knowledge about food insecurities around the world as well as taking a more keen interest into the happenings of local area.

When I first heard about the Borlaug-Ruan internship from Ms. Kavass. I was apprehensive about applying for it. I had no idea the depth at which the GYI and WFP work in the cause to combat world hunger. Eight months overseas seemed daunting at the time. My entire summer would have been swallowed up within another land, culture, and environment. I would be exposed to poverty on a scale that I was not used to, but would be still highly comparable to what I have seen. I experience new smells, sights, food, people, and a wealth of other experiences that would morph my perception into a broader world-view. I thought about all of those different points over and over and inch-by-inch my inhibitions about applying went down. In honesty, it didn't take long for me to change my mind; a couple days if not less really. I was excited for the GYI and after it was over, the deal was sealed. I wanted to apply in hopes of being accepted and with much gratitude I was.

Memphis to India

My internship was based in Haryana, Gurgaon, India right next to New Delhi, India. Haryana is the state that Gurgaon is located within. India has states in the same fashion the U.S. does although the system is not exactly the same. The states are allowed to govern themselves with apparently little intervention of the central government. When I first arrived and was greeted by Arjin (one of the Sehgal Foundation drivers), it was around 10 or 11 o'clock at night. The temperature was over 100 degrees and almost every minute detail of human interaction, street tendencies, and general flow of life was different. I was thinking that I am really across the world right now but I could not tell if I was too tired to actually take it all in or if I just could not experience of a sense of 'awe'. I later learned that I don't experience culture shock because of my thought process. How can I be shocked or taken aback by the culture and life styles of people living over 7,000 miles away from where I live. It is near common sense that they act differently

than what I am used too, so I took where I was placed in stride and rolled with the metaphorical punches.

Over the course of my stay in India I was able to draw comparisons between life in the states and there. The one main comparison was the price of goods. The cheapest bottle of water I got was about 20 rupees. That is less than 50 cents and the bottle was about a liter in size. Going out to eat, grocery shopping, street food, and almost any other commodity.

Is less expensive than its American counterpart. Most of the 400-dollar stipend I received went to experiencing the exquisite cuisine. Almost every restaurant we went to had amazing food and I was able to try a plethora of different dishes because of India's concept of sharing. I was caught off guard when I was trying my curry and Nikita's hand reached over into my plate and took some of my food. It was sudden and abrupt and I did not know how to feel about it. She realized that I was confused and explained that was just the custom. I was probably too hungry to people watch at the time and didn't notice how the other patrons in the restaurant were all sharing food, grabbing from each other's plates and no one batted an eye at it. At that moment I became okay with it and didn't mind. I also had the best hamburger of my life in a small restaurant called The Joint in Gurgaon. The burger was ironically called The Holy Cow and was near as big as both my hands put together.



Overall, India's taste pallet is amazing. I never knew that almost any dish prepared would be crafted with such love. That's the only word I can use that accurately articulates how good the

meals were; love. Perhaps I had just fallen for how different the spices and ingredients were because we as people normally go for the abnormal. If an Indian had come to Memphis and tried barbeque for the first time, his/her heart would thump out of their chest at the flavors they had just ingested. That's how I felt when after a few weeks of a near strictly vegetarian diet I had my first mutton burger with a cheesy type of fries; love. My favorite dish while there was butter chicken and non. Whenever the foundation cook Ram made that dinner I was sure to be in the kitchen by 7 to eat. Another memorable meal was Chole Bathura. One rainy day in one of Delhi's biggest markets, Nikita took us to a restaurant that was "world famous" for that dish. The food its self was just fried bread with spices and seasonings mixed into it. Whether the establishment is world famous or not is up for debate, but for them to only serve one dish, they sure made sure it was near perfect every time.

Street food was another monster all its own. We ate a ton of street food. Well the other interns more so than me. If something didn't look or smell appealing to my senses do not try it. Fortunately most of the food didn't look bad. We had grown to trust Nikita in her choice of things for us to try no one got sick. Drinking coconut juice from a street vendor with 2 other people always builds friendships.



One noticeable difference that I and the other American intern Julie found unpleasant was the absence of the color green. There were trees of course, but in the middle of summer, we are accustomed to lush green near everywhere you go. There were parks and places to feel connected with nature but there were hour long metro rides into Delhi that we seldom wanted to make. When we did get out and visit parks and forts around Delhi we got to see the populace relaxing, playing and enjoying the evening. Normally we only got to see the hustle and bustle of the people. Working in an office from 8-5 could get very draining, so to think about the people working in the Sehgal foundation and other occupations throughout the city finally getting to stretch their legs made me appreciate the work that people do whether to feed the world or to feed their family.

I loved performing in plays in high school. I was able to attend an Indian version of a Shakespeare play featuring Shulpi (another Indian intern I worked with).



The Taj Mahal is probably one of the more beautiful landmarks in the world. At a distance under the Agra sun, the Taj Mahal glistens like it was carved from pure diamond. The architecture was simply amazing. It made me thirsty to go out and see other spectacular monuments. The wonders of the world that have no power other than making your jaw hang lower with each step you take gazing at whatever it is that is captivating your mind.



Our tour guide was telling us stories about why the outer walls and Taj Mahal itself was built. From the moment we arrived in Agra (which took about three hours) to the time we left he would dispense so much information about the history behind the Taj Mahal that I honestly remember very little of anything he said. About halfway through the tour, one of the Indian interns pointed out that another tour guide speaking in Hindi contradicted what ours was saying. Nikita chimed in saying that just about everything our tour guide was saying was fabricated and some even outright lies. The story that could not be false was the reasoning behind the building of The Taj Mahal. The emperor at the time commissioned the structure to be erected after the death of one his wives named Taj as a tomb. The structures adjacent to the left and right were tombs for other wives. It is speculated that the emperor was starting to have his tomb built; The Black Taj Mahal was to be built across the water facing the Taj Mahal but the emperor was overthrown and increased so his mausoleum was never completed. It had honestly barely even been started on from what actually in place.

Talks with other interns, mainly the Indian ones like Nikita lead us to the conclusion that laws in India were made to be broken. There was little enforcement of any regulation, rule, law, or code of conduct. We witnessed blatant disobedience of speed limits, street signs, oncoming traffic, public policy, and almost any other normal day-to-day regulation. We joked that one would have to do something extremely idiotic in order to get arrested. Seeing as how 3 of us interns were foreigners we took no chances with doing anything outside of even the smallest infringements like 'do not walk on grass' signs.

Traffic in India is its own special issue. If I were to get behind the wheel of any motorized vehicle during my stay in Gurgaon I would have surely had an accident within 30 seconds. There were many directions that would have thrown me off making me do something wrong and either get hit or hit someone. The amount of honking in traffic, both necessary and unnecessary is one of the main reasons no U.S. licensed driver should drive in a foreign country with such a jarringly different driving style. My first night in Delhi when being picked up from the airport, I thought I was going to witness an 18 wheeler-ish truck slam a motorcyclist into a wall. The amount of weaving in and out that the drivers do, bumper to bumper tailgating at speeds of at least 45 mph, bicyclist, rickshaw riders, and even people and animals all share the road at once making traffic in India simply insane. I never felt as though I was in danger when riding around though. I trusted whoever was behind the wheel because that was the driving system they were used to.



Although India is a beautiful country with as much culture as any other nation, it's still a part of the global south or a developing country. The best way I could describe New Delhi was to take the worst and best parts of Memphis, jumble them up and smash them together and let the areas fall as they may. In some places, we could be walking in an area that's highly urbanized, but then turn a corner that looks as rundown as the images we see on TV. Poverty, filth, structural decay, poor working conditions, and poor hygiene were all apparent in many parts of the city. Walking through markets and having to ignore beggars on the street as if they are not there was odd to me

since I normally acknowledge everyone. Especially small children subjected and even forced by their parents to beg. One time at a red light a couple small children were going vehicle to vehicle asking for money. Once they reached our auto, they begged for about two minutes before the auto driver shooed them away from us. Jam packing thousands of people into towering apartments, litter decorating every street, stray dogs eating paper towels with little scraps of food hidden within, and many other tellers of the condition that India is in all let me know that everything is not good with the country.



No matter the condition of the nation or its people everything I was able to and see while overseas was a blessing and I would not trade that time I spent in India for anything. I learned more in that short two months about how other people live than I ever would have watching History Channel shows about them or documentaries.

Interning At The S.M. Sehgal Foundation

The S.M. Sehgal Foundation has its main office on the IRRAD campus (Institute of Rural Research and Development) in Gurgaon, India. The Foundation was founded in the late 90's by Suri Sehgal and Edda G. Sehgal.

The current CEO of the foundation is Ms. Jane E. Schukoske and one of the trustees I got to personally meet and speak with is Rajat Jay Sehgal. The foundation has a number of different bases located in villages in Haryana and other states. The people on the research teams are highly educated and well qualified for their positions and I could feel a wealth of knowledge flowing from every individual when they got up to speak on their subject.

During the interview process I expressed interest in wanting to intern in Brazil. I was thinking more on the cultural side of the internship and did not take into consideration my strengths and weaknesses. The institution in Brazil worked with crop research of some level and one thing college has shown me quickly is that I am not a science person. If I had of been sent to Brazil

and worked in the labs and fields doing scientific research, I would have probably had an extremely difficult time keeping up with the load and type of information I would have to record and keep track of. In my interview I expressed that I liked working with people trying to solve social issues, raise funds, social work, speak with people, and anything dealing with human interactions. With that in mind, being sent to IRRAD was a perfect fit, especially for the work I was assigned.

I was placed under the supervision of Debika Goswami and Vikas Jha, the programming and group leaders of governance and public advocacy respectively. I was tasked with researching the newly passed Food Security Act and Public Distribution System. I was given an old interns paper to look over (their research was along the same line as mine) and a print out of the act its self to get an understanding of what I was to be doing. For about 2 weeks, the most work I had done was reading and sitting through meetings that either had little to do with my subject or nothing at all. One meeting though was slightly helpful. It shed light on fraud within the system that I had not come across in readings. It should have been an obvious assumption though since people find ways to cheat the system by any means. The people in the meeting expressed that individuals were getting duplicate ration cards and finding ways to get more food than they were allotted. The point of the meeting and presentations was to pitch different methods by which this fraud could be defeated. Ideas like genetic verification, an expansive computer system, and other expensive sounding ideas were thrown around. Other members in the meeting shared my internal thoughts (I did not put forth my opinion). The ideas, although, were expensive and the funds needed to support them simply did not exist.

The first few weeks were slightly frustrating because the office was so busy with events and other business that field visits were placed on the back burner. Sitting in an office from 8-5 reading up on whatever random information I could find on food security was one of the more boring things I have ever done in my life. I was unsure of where my research was even going. I asked to write a brief paper on my understanding of the act and other information I gathered. The information I had was not truly a lot either. My research was so narrowly tailored that I would not have enough to even write about in my final report to my supervisors and Jane and who ever else attended. The point Debika wanted me to emphasis was the direct application of The Food Security Act. I was to try and map out how effective the distribution of subsidized grains and if those who qualified for them were getting what they were promised in the bill. The breakdown of who received what is as follows: those who were above the poverty line but owned less than 5 acres of land or other valuable commodities was to receive 5 kilograms of wheat per unit (person listed on ration card), a person below the poverty line (first level) were to receive 5kg of wheat and other course grains per unit, and a person listed in the double Ay category (the second level of those below the poverty line) were to receive 35kg of wheat and other course grains overall. I always thought that the double ay group had the short end of the stick. Some families in the village are huge and giving people who are in the first bracket of poverty and other above the line altogether the option to secure 5kg of food for whoever was listed on their ration cards when

all double ay can do is get a fixed rate. One villager expressed that his family size was over 20 and that his double ay status made it extremely difficult to feed his family with a grain size designed for six people. Each kilogram of wheat and grain cost 2 rupees (about 5 cents). These subsidized rates make it possible for rural villagers to purchase a steady supply of food for their family.

Meeting with Debika to try and find exactly what end I was working to was fruitless as well. The fact we spoke the same language did not make the accent barrier any easier to hurdle. Whether the tweaked focus of the paper I was pitching (which I honestly cannot remember) was lost in the transition from my mouth to her ears or she just did not want me to deviate from the assigned plan. Another good thing about having other interns to connect with while working is being able to voice frustrations to one another. I felt as though my research was too small while another intern felt hers was way too broad. When the work of the day was done, we would sit in the common room and share information regarding the others research. Whether little bits of information we came across that would have been helpful to another person's project was immediately shared. We wanted each other to have the best possible paper and report. I continually felt as though my paper and report would fall short of my own personal standards. At that point I figured that my project was purposely easier and more streamlined since I had freshly graduated high school student. I decided to just do with what I could because the field visits could only shed more light on things I could write.

Field Work

When Julie and I got our first field visit, I was both excited; but at the same time curious. I was wondering how the village members would receive us. I was sure their curiosity would be as high as mine, but then I thought about the frequency of people coming through to speak with them and ask questions. When we arrived after about an hour-long ride, we met up with the Sarpange (village head) and he then came with us to a villager's home where I would be conducting my interview of a few villagers. My first panel was a license holder and about 3 other village members. The translator the foundation hired was exceptional at her job. Saumya was able to (from what I could tell) seamlessly stream from one language to another with little to no difficulty. The villagers would give her massive amounts of information to translate back to me. I was not sure how she was able to remember everything she had blasted to her, and from multiple mouths in unison at some points. We asked questions to the license holders (grain distributors) such as: are the beneficiaries satisfied with grain quality, is enough grain given monthly to feed the amount of people legally obligated to receive aid, can villagers afford the subsidized rates, and are the villagers satisfied with the current systems, are you getting the

amount of grain needed, is the quality good, any recommendations for improvement, any frustrations, etc. Between the 5 villages visited, the responses varied slightly from village to village. Most villages were in increments of 5-10 miles, so the divide in conditions from village to village was puzzling.



One concept I did not actually understand until about my 3rd field visits was the divide between The Food Security Act and its beneficiaries and The Public Distribution System

And whom it caters to. I thought that these two systems worked in direct tandem, but what I discovered was that although these two systems do in fact work together; they are separate entities. The Food Security Act tweaked some details to an already functioning system; The Public Distribution System. With that being said, overall, The Food Security Act is well received among people who received grain under the old system, which is The Public Distribution System. Sadly, those who became beneficiaries of the Food Security Act are not as happy. Villagers under the PDS are those below the poverty line and AAY, while villagers above the poverty line are under the FSA. The same story was told in near each village, PDS villagers were happy while FSA were split down the middle. This was no fault onto them. For whatever reason food grains did not always come in full for FSA beneficiaries. Only once did a PDS beneficiary or license holder express that enough grain was not delivered. FSA Grains normally came in increments of half of what is needed and rarely ever in full. Grain quality was an expressed issue only once, and that was because the grains had become damp from the rain and unfit for even the dogs. Overall, when it came to the quality and quantity of grain, the villagers were more or less

satisfied. There were few tales of their not being enough food to go around but for the better part, things were okay.



The difference between villages came in many different forms. Two Villages did not have functioning public distribution shops, so the license holders would have to sell out of their own home. Awareness of rights entitled under the FSA was different from village to village and level of government involvement was different as well. In the 2nd village visited, rights awareness was dismal. At one point the interviews stopped because the women in the interview were highly upset with their license holder. They yelled back and forth for about ten minutes, and when I asked Saumya what had happened, she explained that the women felt the license holder was saying that he was only being a distributor as charity. That the village he was in was not his home and he could easily pack up shop and move. The women felt he was a bad license holder and he felt that the women were beggars and lazy and did not want to figure things out on their own. He said that they see other villagers coming away with more food than what they receive, or food that they're not receiving at all; and then demand that they get some too without understanding why. The reverse of this is true for the 3rd village. Here the license holder was beloved. He plastered everyone's rights of entitlement outside his PDS workshop, and for those who could not read; he explained it to them. If a villager was unable to pay for their grains in

Full, he loaned it to them in debt; and instead of only distributing once a month, he was open all month long. He went above and beyond for the people in his village and they voiced their gratitude for him to Saumya and I. The only downside to this happy tale is the fact that this license holder has been working as a distributor for over a decade, but has not gotten paid in over eight years. Many of the license holders expressed that they were not getting paid for their work, but they still continue to do the job for the people of their village.



Government Participation within the villages is its own issue. For the most part, it is next to none. Neither the villagers nor the license holders feel the government does enough in order to ensure the FSA is being implemented correctly. The way people sign up for their ration cards is by way of government census. Every five years the government will come (in plain clothes to stay low key) and conduct a census to check population size, and the income levels of the villagers. The issue is that the villagers feel every five years is too long a wait. Family size can grow by 2-3 children in between that time. Villagers also say that the government officials do not thoroughly evaluate every person; people are skipped over and are not given the opportunity to update their cards. For the people who are given the chance, the process by which paperwork is filled out is slightly complicated simply because of misinformation, low communication, and illiteracy. Any villager who said that food ran short in their family were villagers who had not had their cards updated in a number of years. Aside from the five-year census, officials are supposed to come every two or so years to allow people to update their cards; this was not the case. Although only one direct account of corruption was given, it was spoken as if it was a definite rampant fact. In the 5th and final village visited, one of the men said that there was a man

receiving below poverty line benefits when he was well over the line with land and many farming tools to his name. The fact this man was receiving basically free food when he was one of the richest men around is an obvious sign of corruption, political favoritism, or whatever other title that can be attributed to the unfairness.

All in all, what I found from my field research was that the FSA had its ups and downs. Even though only half of the people benefiting from the system were consistently happy with it, it is still a slight success. My survey size was relatively small though and the stark contrast from village to village with who was happy with what and why not over a variety of different factors make the assumption that things may get better a little hard to fully grasp. What I felt was that the government needs to step up its involvement in the workings of the village since its apparent the people are not fully aware of their entitlements and are being skimmed over when conducting important work. The villagers also have to take responsibility into their own hands as well and not rely on information to be fed to them.

My 7 weeks in India was something I never thought would be offered to me. I went to India with an open mind and left with an even wider world view. I absorbed as much as I could when exploring Delhi. I was not necessarily changed by my experiences but I left with an appreciation for other cultures and being in college keeps me surrounded by different lifestyles and viewpoints. As far as food security goes, the fight to end poverty runs deeper than is talked about. People stealing from each other, corruption from the government, and a food supply gap between the social classes make the battle to end poverty a daunting one. I'm sure that we'll be able to feed the 9 billion mouths that reside on earth by 2015 though.

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