



Around the Field: Allegheny Students Study Indian History and Politics in Media and Performing Arts

Following on previous years' successful study abroad programs in India, Allegheny College (Meadville, Pa.) in May and June of this year offered "Restaging History as Media Event"—described as an "investigation into how historical sites and narratives provide the 'theatrical' backdrop to contemporary media events."

Taught by media professor Ishita Sinha Roy and theatre professor Beth Watkins, the 4-credit course, according to its course description, "explore[d] the rise of Hindutva (Hindu neo-nationalism), Islamophobia, and backlash against women, as symptoms of neoliberal postcolonial anxiety." Students were able to witness, said the description, "how heritage arts and crafts are being threatened as well as revived by global markets, and how tribal villages are organizing their own forms of cultural survival." Fifteen Allegheny students, including two May graduates, participated—from a wide cross-section of majors and years (including only three media students and one theatre student). Allegheny librarian Linda Ernst also participated.

Watkins and Roy set discipline-specific goals of students learning "how representations of the past in popular culture are dramatic re-enactments of old antagonisms on the national/global stage." They focused on various case studies: the "Nirbhaya rape" (and its theatrical reenactment), Padmaavat film controversy, 'love-jihad' court ruling, and the branding of Hindutva (Hindu-based nationalism)." The Nirbhaya rape was the 2012 incident in which a 23-year-old woman was gang raped and beaten in South Delhi, then died, prompting new laws and courts in India, street protests, worldwide outrage, and a steep drop in tourism to India, especially among women.

The tour also included meeting with Indian high school students in an international baccalaureate school, and women who are acid attack survivors and running their own cafeteria. Watkins said students learned that the women are not "victims" but persons who are "recovering on their own terms."

Sinha Roy, Watkins and their students had a packed visit to India, and not just course content. Not only did they view various cultural performances and schedule numerous academic sessions during the trip, but the group devoted many hours just getting from place to place to soak up the most about India in only three weeks. Destinations included

the cities of Delhi; Chandigarh, capital of both Punjab and Haryana; Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, both in Uttar Pradesh; and Ranthambore, Udaipur, Devigarh, Kumbhalgarh, Ranakpur, Jodhpur, and Jaipur, all in Rajasthan. Sites visited, among others, included Delhi's Red Fort, Capitol Complex, India Gate, and Swaminarayan Akshardham temple



Other Allegheny College students on an earlier study abroad in India

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Top 10

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ECUADOR: Quito

ENGLAND: London

FRANCE: Paris

GERMANY: Heidelberg

GREECE: Paros Island

complex; Agra’s Taj Mahal and Fort; Jaipur’s City Palace, Observatory, and Amber Fort; Udaipur’s City Palace; Jodhpur’s Mehrangarh Fort; and the Ranthambore National Park, known for tigers and other large animals.

Between the class sessions before they left, and experiences in India, the course fully explored the word, “media,” in its title. In addition to watching “Bollywood” films connected to the course’s historical and cultural themes, students also engaged with Indian television, movies, theatre, dances, puppet and marionette shows, and other media and performances. The only medium not included in the course was radio, since the vast majority of Indian broadcasts are not in English.

The trip was not without challenges, both before and during the program. For example, the temperature in Rajasthan hit 114F degrees. The group was prepared for heat, but not for a heat wave, said Sinha Roy. (Still, she said, students committed to every step of the itinerary.) Students also were game for adjusting to cultural differences; when an Indian man surprised a male Allegheny student by taking his hand, the student simply “went with it,” Sinha Roy recounted. Lucinda Morgan, Allegheny’s director of international education, said students were not used to how crowded India is. Sinha Roy and Watkins also were wary of what the Indian public’s reactions might be to this year’s Indian general elections, which were held in seven phases ending May 19, so they planned the tour to not be in a major city on that date.

But the biggest challenge was student and parent reactions to a three-week trip to India, because of the difficulty of persuading students to go anywhere abroad other than Europe. (Informational sessions were designed to both “excite” and “reassure” potential participants, including showing students photos taken by Allegheny students who already had gone to India, they said.) This Europe preference is related to what the professors said was their primary mission:

“Can we teach students to not fear the world?”

They hoped and planned that their students would learn from their “productive discomfort” resulting from immersing themselves in India. Still, some parents simply said “no” to their kids going to India, and one student decided not to go because of food allergies.

Students obtained a great deal of academic and other preparation before they went. They were required to attend numerous film screenings and discussions during spring semester, sessions that included sampling Indian dishes; seven such sessions were four hours each. Students were also provided with book lists and website links; Watkins and Sinha Roy wanted their India program to be an “informed experience,” while knowing that they could not give the students a “comprehensive foundation”—including no crash course in Hindi or another Indian language.

Sinha Roy and Watkins constructed their own website for the course, which gave students, faculty, parents and others insight into the broad view of the course. Main subjects touched upon included food (and food markets), the environment, culture (music, dances, and more), international relations, hospitality, history, elephants and tigers/tigresses, arts and crafts, old and new religions. An overarching theme to the entire course was globalization from a non-Western perspective including, as Watkins put it, how local entrepreneurship in a country such as India is connected to the global economy.

Sinha Roy pointed out that the course interrogated language used about countries such as India—“emerging economy” versus “developing economy” versus “Third World,” adding that the word, “development,” is a “loaded term.”

Sinha Roy had taken as many as 30 students to India in past years, and they attributed the drop to 15 this year to issues connected with Allegheny College starting an official summer semester, not to events in India. This trip’s minimum enrollment was about 10 and its maximum was about 20, Morgan said. She added that she thinks the ideal size is about 15, and it allowed students to “connect and bond” who otherwise perhaps would not have.

Students were graded during spring semester on pre-departure quizzes and homework; attendance and participation in the predeparture academic sessions, fundraisers, and screenings; a research paper; and individual meetings to discuss the student’s portfolio goals and assignments. During the three weeks in India, students were evaluated on their travel journal; participation, “cultural ambassadorship” and teamwork; and academic sessions. After their return, for a successful re-entry that Sinha Roy called “so important,” students completed both photo/video blog entries and a slide presentation (and its accompanying script) by July 15. The last piece is making a public presentation this fall during International Week.

Sinha Roy and Watkins cautioned that students’ travel journals need to be “diaries” and not just travel notes. Students are “heavily censoring” their journals, and yet they still contain “surprises,” they said.

IRELAND: Dublin
ITALY: Florence (Ldm)
ITALY: Florence (SRISA)
ITALY: Rome
ITALY: Sorrento
ITALY: Tour of Italy
ITALY: Tuscania
JAPAN: Kyoto
JAPAN: Tokyo
PERU: Cusco
SCOTLAND: Aberdeen
SPAIN: Barcelona
SPAIN: Madrid
SPAIN: Seville
THAILAND: Koh Samui Island
TIPS
Uncategorized
BY MONTH
BY MONTH
Select Month

Watkins said that she is convinced that short courses, such as their three weeks in India, can be designed to allow students to immerse in a culture. In fact, Sinha Roy added, there does not have to be any difference between three weeks or a semester depending on faculty guidance. Morgan added that students also are more willing to be “adventurous” on a three-week study tour, going somewhere such as India, as contrasted with where they might spend a semester, such as London. (She also said that participation in faculty-led study abroad is increasing, to about 120 in 2018-19 from 90-100 the previous year.)

Morgan said that because Allegheny students have myriad financial aid packages, including scholarships, the study tour’s cost for students varied significantly. Two students who participated won the U.S. State Department’s Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship.



Tomb of I'timād-ud-Daulah, Agra, India. Photo by Ibrahim Rifath

Sinha Roy holds a B.A. and M.A. from the University of Bombay, in addition to M.A. and Ph.D. from the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California. Her book, published this year by Peter Lang Publishing, is *Manufacturing Indianness*. Sinha Roy for several years taught the mandatory intercultural communication course completed by all Allegheny College students who are going to study abroad. In addition to previous education abroad programs in India, Sinha Roy has led Allegheny study tours to South Africa, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and Japan.

Watkins previously had co-led six Allegheny study tours to England, an alumni trip to Canada’s Stratford and Shaw festivals, and participated in a faculty study tour to Morocco. Her teaching specialties as a theatre professor are acting, directing, devising and dramaturgy, focusing on the “development of the creative process and how methodology and research can inform and enhance creativity”; “devising” refers to an “ensemble-led performance which begins without a central text.” Watkin has directed more than 60 plays and operas.

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