

Sakal Times

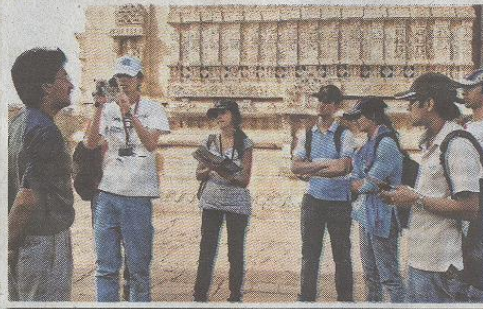
An incredible voyage

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The undergraduate students of FLAME undertook an extensive travel to the heartlands of India to explore the real face of the country as a part of the college's Discover India Program. They share their experiences of this endeavour with **Shruti Khairnar**



ADVENTURE GALORE: Snapshots of students and taken by them during the trip

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An incredible voyage

Travelling by second class in trains, staying with villagers, eating their simple fare, listening to their concerns, experiencing the magnanimity and warmth of people despite them living in immense poverty and illiteracy — these were the lessons that the second year undergraduate students of FLAME learned while exploring the real India as a part of their Discover India Program (DIP).

Sixtyeight students were divided into seven groups and each group chose to study one aspect of the culture and heritage of India. The choices reveal the deep insights of these twenty somethings. Turbans of Bikaner, rediscovering Punjab, relationship between monuments and landscape in Jaisalmer, Chit-torgarh fort, studying ethnic diversity in Cochin, weavers of Andhra Pradesh and Indian Railways were the unusual subjects of study. DIP has been started by FLAME to accomplish one goal — to establish a connection between its students and the country's rich heritage. The pro-

gramme comprises of hours of preliminary research, a week long field research and a final presentation.

Noopur Desai is still trying to articulate her experience of Punjab. "These were the best nine days I have ever had. We felt the warmth when we stepped in Punjab. Travelling by sleeper class in Jhelum Express, walking across 12 people to get to the loo in the train, the entire trip was an experience in itself," she gushes. Natalie Grover, who was a part of the same group, says, "We picked up five topics that were synonymous with Punjab — the green revolution, Sikhism, army, Partition and food. We studied about the damage the green revolution had done there. The people of Punjab have given so much to the country and suffered and yet they greet you with a happy face."

Meanwhile Rajasthan was a cultural treasure trove for the students. Poonam Chandersay, who went to Bikaner, shares, "We wanted to study an element through which we could study Rajasthani culture and hence we thought of the turbans. We documented 100 styles of turbans and also

met a person who could tie turbans in all these styles." Akrati Gupta was the leader of the group that studied Chit-torgarh fort. According to her, the Mewari pride of the people there was something that other tourist towns of Rajasthan lack. Describing the experience, she expresses, "This is the first time we had undertaken a research of this magnitude and we were anxious. We had just one month but we came through and learned a lot."

Moving away from culture, Yashovardhan Chordia's team, on the other hand, focussed on the more serious social issue of suicides of weavers in Andhra Pradesh. They were shocked to find out that to die has become a sort of a tradition there since political parties offer compensation to the families of the deceased. "We lived in the homes of villagers and ate there. We had no luxuries and a limited budget. We were prepared to have a turbulent stay but the villagers took care of us," Chordia said. Speaking about the real India that he came face-to-face with, he adds, "The villages have no water, sanitation, schools or hospitals. Also when you

see weavers toiling on the handloom making zari sarees you realise the value of that saree."

Reality bytes were in store for Jayati Doshi and group too who documented the social, cultural and geographical diversities along one of the longest train routes in India. "Initially we had apprehensions whether the common people travelling in the trains would speak to us but they were more than willing to talk," Doshi narrates. Her observation could be some great food for thought. "We talk about diversity but the reality is much simpler. We realised that people were so busy just surviving that diversity did not really matter," she says.

As this was a task carried out entirely by the students with just one faculty member assisting them, it was a tough call. "DIP seemed like a fancy idea but a travel of this nature was difficult for undergraduates. Nevertheless, every group has done a brilliant job," Desai says emphatically. A tremendous learning experience for this bunch of enterprising collegians and most of the credit goes to those who shared their lives with them.