

# Introduction

At the start of July this year, I flew to Chennai, India to begin my Leadership in Action project. I had collaborated with development economics professors from Harvard Business School and Australia National university to conduct archival work, focused on gathering primary data on the historical role of women's rights organisations in women empowerment in India. My contribution would facilitate their research and analysis on the specific pathways through which feminist movements influence economic outcomes, specifically the role of kinship networks in shaping the success and reach of women's NGOs and Self-Help Groups in effectively promoting female economic and political mobilisation. As a result, I spent most of my time conducting straightforward data gathering - liaising with NGOs, academics and women's rights activists in Chennai to make the process smoother and to learn more about the social fabric of the city.

I had initially gained an interest in such subjects due to my academic background. For most of my sixth-form and university life, I'd been fascinated by the causes of development and the mechanisms through which countries could have sustainable and equitable growth. I'd studied numerous success stories which achieved astonishing progress in specific dimensions; for instance, the economic success of countries such as Singapore and South Korea under state guidance and free markets, the ecological success of Costa Rica, and the social success of Tanzania. I was reminded of Tanzania's success after reading a paper by Edward Miguel on nation building and public goods in Kenya & Tanzania, as he demonstrated how Tanzania had overcome their ethnic fractionalisation by prioritising civic identity, a common language and changing government institutions to discourage ethnic favouritism and promote national unity. This had led me to write a report in my first year of Laidlaw on the costs and benefits of monetary unification in the East African Community (though the results were disheartening, as they suggested Tanzania was in a league of their own in terms of economic, political and social stability relative to the region).

Nevertheless, I continued to read papers on the importance of identity and social institutions in shaping people's wellbeing and happiness, and found a paper comparing the importance of family versus friends in financial ties and trust in various communities in East Africa. I ended up reaching out to the author of this paper, and expressing my deep interest in the topic and asked if they might be conducting any research in this field at the moment. Through them, I ended up working in Chennai, researching the role of the All India Women's Conference and Women's Indian Association among other NGOs. However, part of this work also required that I go to Delhi - where I was once again faced with a culture shock almost as great as that of travelling from the UK to Chennai.

While the work was straightforward - as I mentioned above - navigating the country was not. In this report, I intend to discuss the distinct and surprising elements of life in India which I experienced, contrasting the cities of Chennai and Delhi.

# Everyday Life

Landing in Chennai, you find that it is a bustling city with an immense amount of tradition but also a forward-looking attitude. You'd have some relief from the searing heat which almost reached 40 degrees Celsius as the coastal climate meant that the city was often windy and rainy, but there were many times where the sun was beaming down as I would trudge along a main road in the hopes of finding an air conditioned restaurant or cafe to take refuge in. Streets are lined largely with established family-run businesses or roadside vendors, with modern coffee shops and vegetarian restaurants scattered between traditional, artisanal jewellers, silk clothes tailors and sculptors.

Though the chaos of the city made it feel as if you'd get swept up by the currents of traffic or the streams of people in the city quarters, communication was fortunately not a barrier which I had to worry about. The burgeoning tech and services sectors of Chennai have led to a population where a conversational level of English is a bare minimum requirement in much of the city; from the rickshaw drivers to policemen to tea vendors, the vast majority of people spoke English alongside their native Tamil. If English didn't work, odds are that they still spoke some functional Hindi. People were often more than willing to help out, and I must have been quite visibly a tourist because I was frequently and kindly offered recommendations on what sites I should see nearby.



On the other hand, Delhi was a metropolis with an energy unmatched by any city I had seen before. The quarters of this city were far more defined, with Old Delhi still being marked by medieval architecture and bazaars while much of South Delhi had a sense of modern opulence and classiness to it, and a large chunk of the political and administrative centre of Delhi is defined by a syncretic form of architecture combining Indian and British architectural traditions (named Lutyens' Delhi, after the architect responsible for most of the planning)

While life in Chennai appeared rooted in strong cultural values and had a strong sense of locality despite the city being one of the core urban centres of southern India, life in Delhi was marked by a restlessness and a need to adapt to the environment there - you will get swept up in Delhi's rhythm and you have no choice but to match the tempo.

# Regional Culture

Chennai - and Tamil Nadu more broadly - has a political environment that is entirely distinct from that of the northern, Hindi-speaking states that I've travelled to in the past. Alongside statues of Gandhi, you'll see the legacy of figures ranging from poets such as Valluvar to political leaders such as Kamaraj and Periyar everywhere. Valluvar's classic, universal and secular texts on the importance of kindness and moral duty shaped Tamil Nadu's cultural values from the medieval era onwards, while Periyar's assertion of social equality and defiance of caste hierarchy set the framework for a Dravidian identity defined by linguistic and regional heritage - with an aversion to social hierarchies and religious divisions, and Kamaraj's intense emphasis on the importance of education has made the pursuit of knowledge a pillar of state policy. This is not to say that there is any aversion to religion in either Chennai or Delhi; while Hinduism and Islam remain the dominant religions, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are all religions native to India which have significant followings (although Buddhism less so).



*In clockwise order: a temple entrance tower in Chennai, an ancient Buddhist statue in Tamil Nadu, the Lotus Baha'i Temple in Delhi, and a relic of St. Thomas from Santhome Cathedral Basilica in Chennai*

Civic engagement is high, but the political space is fragmented and chaotic - with regionalist parties and caste-based parties, famous actors often transitioning into political leadership and streets often lined with flags of a certain party or newly built infrastructure or buildings covered with large banners of a state minister. These are intended to remind citizens of which politicians were responsible for a certain project, attaching a face to the progress, as elections are often hard fought and ruthless.

In Delhi, the city is the stage for national politics - and student movements, protests and rallies are all frequent. As such, the regional identity - while strong - is not nearly as important relative to ideology and policy stances as it might have been in Chennai. Delhi's unique multicultural environment is partially a consequence of its proximity to various states with strong regional identities (such as Punjab, Haryana, UP and Rajasthan to name a few), partially due to its extraordinary religious diversity and partially due to its complex political history. Stories of Delhi as being built upon the legendary city of Indraprastha mentioned in the Mahabharata, and its later conquest by successive kingdoms & empires including the Ajmer Rajputs, the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals and the British, have left a sort of patchwork imprint on the city - like layers of sediment each with fossils and historical legacies of different eras.



Athpala Bridge in Lodi Gardens, an Akbar-era bridge built in a city park surrounded by Lodi Dynasty tombs and monuments, dating back 500 years



The 400-year-old Mughal-era Jama Masjid in Old Delhi (left)

# Conclusion

A native to Chennai described the country as a shock for all of the senses, and I have to say I agree. My time in Chennai and Delhi left a deep impression on me, with each city showing a different face of the country. Chennai was grounded and traditional with deep cultural pride, and this was reflected in the people I met there, while Delhi is historically layered and politically energetic - with the people being equally proud and confident in their identity.

The level of diversity which defines the cities is difficult to capture in a small blog post such as this, so must be experienced rather than explained as I don't believe I can do it justice.

The different faces of humanity that you can see in each city, with deep social connections and neighbours treating you as family. For instance, when I was ill in Chennai my neighbour - who I had only met upon arriving there - cooked food for me every day for 2 weeks.

The deep pride that people have in their unique heritage and background, with as many combinations of backgrounds visible there as there might be blades of grass in a field, which shapes their ethos and love for life.

As such, I can confidently say that the LIA project changed me for the better, through the experiences I had, and the way that it has moulded my thought process and strong sense of responsibility since. I don't speak as much of my interactions and experiences while in India, because my memories are all quite fuzzy to be honest.

Despite this, I vividly remember how I felt during those interactions - and it was a profound recognition of my own self-entitlement and privilege, as well as a deep affection for - and sense of togetherness with - humanity. I remember that my time there served as a reminder to me that complexity does not need to be contradictory.

Our multifaceted nature is what makes us human, and isn't necessarily a puzzle to be solved. There were people who had an almost saint-like kindness while others I interacted with were utterly miserable, yet I had these good and bad experiences across cities and communities - without any pattern in personality. India was a reminder that identity can hold many truths simultaneously, and that there is no such characteristic which can excuse us of our capacity - and duty - to help others.