

Kim Hancock

Personal Statement

Assessing the barriers to access for Women Information Entrepreneurs in rural India

My interest in Indian culture began in the most American of ways imaginable—studio yoga classes. Glimpses of Hinduism were shown through chakra posters, Sanskrit phrases, and plumes of incense. It was only when I participated in a yoga teacher training and learned more about the history of yoga that I began questioning how western yoga is practiced and capitalized on. Why did we spend one day rushing through the story of the Bhagavad Gita while days were spent on how to make ourselves more marketable as teachers?

Fast forward two years to a very different setting. I am sitting in the front row of the Republic Day parade in New Delhi with my friend Drishti. We had woken up at 4am, yet when we arrived couldn't see anything amidst the dense wall of people that had engulfed us. Drishti comes from a military family, so she spoke to an officer in an effort to get us closer, then asked me to introduce myself in Hindi. After a few butchered sentences (I was only 3 weeks into my Hindi classes!), the officer led us straight through the crowd and to a special section in the front.

In both of these situations—my yoga training and the parade—I acknowledged how the more I learn about cultures that are not my own, the more my own white privilege and identity is revealed. The training made me realize how the history of yoga is diluted to make it more palatable for a western audience; it is a double-edged sword since it is white people like myself who benefit most from yoga's 'exoticism.' The parade was one small example of many where I witnessed the special treatment that being a white American woman in India grants me.

I was born and raised in Brookfield, CT, a predominantly white town in one of the wealthiest counties in the country. My father is a mathematician, and has always pushed pursuing a career in math and science on my siblings and I. While I have always been a natural math student, it was my mother's work with refugees and immigrants that framed my desire to pursue a career path that is more interpersonal in nature. Throughout college, I have focused on two very different academic interests—math/computer science and anthropology/Asian Studies. It was a class titled Modern Indian Politics that inspired me to study abroad in India; it helped synthesize these seemingly disparate academic interests and expand my interest in South Asian studies beyond yoga, anthropology, and religion. We learned about the ways in which the rising IT sector and new forms of media have impacted politics post-liberalization, and I completed a research project focusing on the pros and cons of the vast proliferation of WhatsApp.

Looking ahead, I am interested in a career in data ethics, particularly how big data analytics can be a resource for humanitarian and development aid. With US tech giants gaining immense power internationally, it is crucial that computer scientists consider the implications of cross-cultural data misuse. Who are we creating this technology for, and how are we using it? These are questions that require both a technical and anthropological perspective to answer; this project will help me broaden both of these perspectives from a grassroots level in communities whose voices are often left in the shadows of technological advancement.

Much as I am still unsure of whether it is my place to be teaching yoga, I am still unsure of the nuances of cultural exchange in terms of how I can best engage in an international setting. What I do know is that I am always willing to ask a lot of questions, have an open mind, and self-reflect. If awarded a Fulbright grant, I would be able to engage in a culture I love learning from in a more direct and meaningful way that I can carry with me for life.