Kim Hancock

Personal Statement

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

Every Tuesday and Thursday in 7th grade, I would stay after school for math team practice then immediately after go to dance classes. On days when I had math team meets, I would arrive late to dance. However, I was embarrassed by my inner ‘mathlete’ and never wanted to tell anyone why I was late. This childhood predicament speaks to a broader tension within my interests, much of which I attribute to my parents. My father is a mathematician, works long hours, and has always pushed my siblings and I towards pursuing a career in STEM. My mother has always encouraged my extracurriculars in the performing arts; further, her work with refugee communities shaped my desire to learn about other cultures, which was especially impactful given the homogeneity of the town where I have lived my whole life.

Coming to college, I had a natural rebellion against the expectation put on me to study mathematics, despite how much I enjoy it. Subsequently, I have prioritized taking many classes beyond my majors in computer science/math. My first year I took an anthropology course focusing on Indian culture, which I came into with a strong background in yoga. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the glimpses of Hinduism I saw through chakra posters, Sanskrit posture names, and plumes of incense. It was only when I read about yoga’s roots in the *Vedas* that I began questioning how western yoga is practiced and capitalized on. Ultimately, the course sparked a much broader interest in South Asian studies that now extends well beyond yoga.

Fast forward three years, where I am in New Delhi, sitting in the front row of the Republic Day parade with my friend Drishti. We had woken up at 4am, yet when we arrived couldn’t see anything past 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 just a few words (I was only 3 weeks into my abroad program!), the officer led us through the crowd to a section in the front. However, my now perfect view of the military tanks and soldiers only made me feel uneasy being there as a non-Indian citizen.

The reason I bring up this anecdote is because I felt tension due to my own lack of knowledge in what I was engaging in. The parade was one small example of many where I witnessed the special treatment being a white American woman in India grants me. Throughout my time in Delhi, I realized that dissolving this tension was simple: establishing a routine filled with conversations about the Delhi elections, getting *momos* with the teaching fellows at the elementary school I volunteered for, and Sunday evening Satsang at a nearby yoga studio.

In the years at Bowdoin leading up to my study abroad experience, the aforementioned tension in my interests dissolved as I pushed myself to find the connections between them. For instance, my computer science research at Bowdoin is focused on social networks, analyzing large sets of user data from Facebook. I have become more interested in the sociological side of this, which I looked at in a project for my Indian Modern Politics course focusing on the pros and cons of the proliferation of WhatsApp. In addition, one of the most rewarding parts of my work mentoring students living in Portland’s subsidized housing community is helping students with using computers, as the study center is the only place many students have access to them.

While my interest in South Asian studies stemmed from the side of me that grew up performing and wanting to learn more about people, I no longer think of it as separate from my love for mathematics and computer science. Rather than perceiving my broad range of interests as tension, I see it as what makes my skill set unique. Leaning into this will allow me to succeed in my proposed project as well as my continuous pursuit of understanding in all parts of life.