

India Ki Khoj: In Search of India

Exhausted by the trials of finals week, 10 Caltech students boarded an Airbus 380, and headed off to the opposite end of the globe. 24 hours later we were greeted by students from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) at Gandhinagar in the Ahmedabad airport in the state of Gujarat. For some of us, this trip was a return to India, and for others, the first time in a new country. For all of us, however, this brief glimpse of India would unfold into a serendipitous adventure of discovery. We embarked on a journey of India Ki Khoj (In Search of India) to witness the society, culture, economy, and people of India as it is today.



Colorful spices on the street.

Rita Kothari, an author, linguist, and professor of English in the humanities department at IIT Gandhinagar and Professor Jaison Manjaly conceptualized and created an 8-day schedule consisting of trips throughout Gujarat and talks by experts in their respective fields covering topics ranging from Indian fashion to the role of caste in India. Our search was not meant to be a reflection on a preconceived notion of what comprises the nation of India, but rather to observe and analyze the shocking, confusing, or exciting

moments that make India such a remarkable place to visit.

India Ki Khoj began with two stimulating discussions by Urvashi Butalia on portrayal of India outside of the country, particularly in the context of rape in the cities and women's issues followed by Nasreen Munni Kabir's analysis of the use of song in Hindi films. Both talks opened the floor for a weeklong discussion amongst both Caltech students and IIT students who also partook in this search for India. As foreigners, our first conception of India had been through the media and its portrayal of a very specific idea of India. Urvashi Butalia urged us to think critically about this perspective, and primed us for the more intimate discovery of India we were about to experience first hand. Before the Caltech students had the time to recover from jetlag, we were soon out in the middle of the old Ahmedabad city to walk through the historic neighborhoods called 'pols'. Ahmedabad's pols preserve a part of Gujarati history in a rapidly modernizing city. The heritage walk through the pols was our first real exposure to the sights, sounds, and smells of India that words or pictures would not do justice. We encountered cows, camels, and dogs alike while strolling amongst the locals on a bustling morning.



A house in one of Ahmedabad's pols.

No cultural experience would have been complete without a taste of the distinctive sweet flavors of a Gujarati thali meal. With too many dishes served to count, we learned to feed ourselves with our right hands at a beautiful lunch spread following our walk. In the following days, we explored more of the city, visited the Sarkhej Roza mosque, Adalaj step well, and much more.

While traveling on the bus or eating together at the dinner table, our Indian counterparts at IIT Gandhinagar shared every moment with us. They offered their stories, opinions, and experiences to give us a more local perspective during this trip. India Ki Khoj was an exploration of a wildly foreign country for the Caltech students, and of their own backyard for the IIT students. Although Indian, many of the IIT students also found the distinctive Gujarati architecture, food, language, and culture to be unfamiliar. The IIT students came from different ends of India's vastly diverse nation to study in Gujarat. An obvious and important indicator of Indian diversity is in the multitude of languages spoken throughout the country. Gujarati is one of thousands of languages that have been spoken in India, many of which are only spoken in small communities or have

been lost to history. We visited the Bhasha language research center and tribal academy, where we heard the sounds of dying languages and learned about the Adivasi tribal community. School-age children there learn in their local language as opposed to Hindi or English.



Students learning outside under a tree at Bhasha

Off-schedule, we braved the terrifying Indian traffic to shop, visit street markets, stroll through the Sabarmati riverfront, and spend time with an amazing group of talented, fun, and spirited IIT students. Despite a too-short trip, we formed life-long friendships and memories. Many of us have left this week with more questions than answers, but our curiosities have been piqued, and we will surely be back in mind or in body to continue India Ki Khoj.



The Caltech/IIT group celebrating India Ki Khoj on our last day together.

-Aleena Patel '15