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International Research and Training Grant for Incoming Graduate Students

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IRIS' International Research and Training Grant for Incoming Graduate Students allowed me to spend two months in England and India in Summer 2019 to conduct preliminary fieldwork for my PhD dissertation research. First, I attended and presented a paper at the workshop on "Urban Climates: Power, Development and Environment in South Asia" at the University of Cambridge on 7-8 June 2019. The two-day workshop introduced me to the latest set of ideas on geographies and anthropologies of South Asia from scholars committed to producing critical knowledge. I met several young and early career scholars of South Asia from the UK, US, Canada, and India, with whom I hope to continue a professional relationship. My paper received encouraging feedback from the workshop participants, and I am eager to share these perspectives with colleagues here at UW-Madison.

From Cambridge, I travelled to Kochi, India to begin my preliminary fieldwork on urbanization, construction, and the use of cement/concrete. In 2018, Kerala and Kochi faced the brunt of a 100-year flood and accompanying landslides which caused tremendous death and destruction in the region. Dredging of rivers for sand and quarrying of hillsides for stone (both for concrete construction) were identified as some of the reasons for the twin calamities. My research begins to understand the impact of cement/concrete construction on the local landscape and analyzes the relationship between people and an everyday material-cement/concrete. From the US, I could follow the traumatic events as they unfolded in Kochi through news reports and firsthand accounts from friends and acquaintances. The IRIS grant allowed me to be in the field and learn more about the circumstances under which these widespread changes in the built environment are occurring and its impact on people, environments, and economies.

I spent four weeks in Kochi travelling across the city meeting home owners, activists, architects, planners, urban designers, academics, builders, building contractors, former bureaucrats and elected representatives, etc. I conducted informal interviews and focus groups with some of the above participants and conducted visual surveys and captured images of the rapidly urbanizing city. I used a method of snowball sampling to connect with potential research participants. Since, this was my first foray into the city, the trip was meant to connect with the right people and ascertain the value of my research questions. The feedback that I received from participants was encouraging and extremely valuable. This preliminary research allowed me to refine my research questions and ask more clarifying questions that will help me hone my dissertation proposal.

I spent the next few weeks travelling to Bangalore, Goa, and Mumbai. Here, I met architects, urban planners, scholars, and activists at universities, policy think-tanks, and NGOs where I presented my nascent research in an informal setting. These networks were first cultivated during five years of professional architectural work from 2011-2016 in India. As I continue along the academic path, it is important to stay connected with practitioners and activists on the ground. The IRIS grant enabled me to reconnect with my architect-activist roots in order to build alliances between academia and activism and forge a scholarly-activist path for myself. I look forward to continuing these conversations and expanding these connections at UW-Madison.