As part of the Department of Women’s Studies international curriculum, I conducted a Travel Abroad Program to India from the 29th of December 2009 to the 16th of January 2010. Twenty seven members signed up for this program. The members were not just from Women’s Studies but from disciplines such as Political Science, Psychology, Biology, Chemistry and many others. Most of the students were from San Diego State University but we also had five students from the Imperial Valley campus. The group also consisted of community members from the faculty and staff of SDSU. This diversity in the group as well as the age range from 19-77 years old created a cohesive group with each one helping out the other given their specific skills and experiences in life.

The three week trip to India was a Women’s Studies 597 course titled Women in India. The focus of the course was an understanding of women’s issues in India, the women’s movement in India and Indian feminism. Towards this goal, students attended lectures by leading feminist scholars, visited non-government organizations run by women dealing with gender specific empowerment needs, and by feminist activists. This curriculum was interspersed with tourism, Indian classical concerts and shopping. I was also careful to include visits to villages, to different religious sites (given India’s plurality) and to expose them to the diversity of Indian food. Many students also watched Bollywood films---around which we had very interesting feminist conversations----especially on the long bus rides out of town.

**Delhi**

Lectures:

**Zarina Bhatti:** Founding member of the Indian feminist movement and ex-president of the All India Association of Women’s Studies. Bhatti talked about the history of the women’s movement in India starting from the Independence movement to present day. She emphasized how the struggle for independence from the British led to women’s involvement in the freedom movement. Bhatti further elaborated on how the women’s movement is focused on issues of poverty, caste and challenging of rights which are derived from religious texts. Bhatti also pointed out how Indian feminism was different from western feminism.

**Kiran Khan:** Works for UNICEF and is a consultant to the Government of India on educational policy. Khan talked about education in India. She spoke how the high the levels of illiteracy, especially among women, were based in weak policies, corruption and lack of will to implement already existing policies. She also highlighted the low priority of the government to the issue of education given how insufficient the education budget was. Khan also mentioned issues of caste and class, and patriarchy which did not encourage the girl child’s education.

**Karen Gabriel:** Professor of English at St. Stephens College, Delhi University. Gabriel spoke about media, especially Bollywood and its role in the discussion of sexuality in India. Through her talk, Gabriel pointed to the persistent message of traditional gender roles in the media and lack of discussion of and acceptance of the issue of sexuality in the country. She emphasized the role of the right wing in its control over media.
Parnal Chirmuley: Professor of German Language and Literature at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Chirmuley complimented Gabriel’s talk by discussing similar issues of sexuality and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles through the print media, specifically women’s magazines. She also elaborated on the “westernization” of the magazines that have started devoting more and more space to body image issues and dating etc.

Deepali Bhanot: Director, Guild of Service. Bhanot gave a very interesting talk on the problem of widows in India. She gave a historical and social analysis on how widows in India are treated as impure, marginalized and even sent away from their homes. Guild of Service is one of the very few NGOs in India that has taken up their cause and has built a shelter for 500 widows in Vrindavan, a holy city which is inhabited mainly by widows from all over the country. Students were also able to visit the city of Vrindavan (3 hours bus ride from Delhi) and spend time at the home interacting with the widows.

Shohini Ghosh and Sabina Ghatioli: Professors of Communication, Jamia Milia University, New Delhi. Both professors showed their documentaries on women in India. Ghosh showed a documentary she made on the prostitutes of Calcutta and their successful struggles to unionize and regulate their trade. This film generated much discussion between the students and director. The second film was on the emergence of women photographers in India. Students were fascinated by their work and their success in such a male dominated field.

NGOs:

Naz India: Naz is a care home for HIV and AIDS children in Delhi. Naz is the first and primary NGO in India that openly discusses the issue of HIV/AIDS and also champions gay rights. Last year, their single-minded protests and demonstrations led to the Indian government decriminalizing gay activities. Students spent a day at this home attending lectures on various topics ranging from gay rights, to the governments role in HIV/AIDS programs, and the numerous programs Naz has for combating stereotypes and to educate the people.

Navdanya: This is an NGO run by Vandana Shiva. She is internationally recognized for her role in bringing to the forefront issues of environment and women. She is also very active in bringing to court international agencies that have been patenting Indian seeds and plants and also organizations that are trying to urbanize rural lands.

Jaipur

Diptima Mathur: Professor of Sociology Kanodia College, Jaipur. Mathur gave a scintillating talk on women’s political participation in the village Panchayat system (village council). Her talk also specifically highlighted the problems faced by women due to the persistent caste system and also issues of corruption. These issues laid the groundwork for the understanding of village hierarchies and lives of village women for our students when they visited two villages in Rajasthan.

Village visits:

Tilonia: This village is located two hours bus drive from Jaipur. It is a model village which houses a university called the Barefoot University. In the 1970s this village was set up to be self sufficient through generation of solar energy for lights and cooking and a water catchment system to prevent drought. In this village doctors and dentists are trained after the 8th grade to handle basic ailments. The ideology of such self sufficiency also involves the removal of the caste system, gender-based hierarchies and a more egalitarian
land distribution. These messages are transmitted to neighboring villages through elaborate puppet shows.

**Nyala:** This village is an hour away from Jaipur by bus. Many NGOs have helped women involved in the gold embroidery business to form cooperatives to bypass the exploitative middle men. Women are taught business skills like marketing, opening their own bank accounts, and have been encouraged to go into the city and sell their products directly to the merchants. This village also has an all-woman Panchayat that takes up issues of domestic violence, etc.

**NGOs:** In Jaipur the students spent a day visiting an all-women’s police station. There were a couple of speakers and the students were impressed with this concept.

In Jaipur students attended two classical music concerts. One was an amazing performance by internationally renowned tabla player Zakir Hussain. The second show was a classical dance performance, Odissi, by Madhavi Mudgal and her troupe. SDSU students also spent an evening with the students of Kanodia College. This was highly appreciated by our students. Students from Kanodia College put up a cultural show where they performed dances from different states of India. The high point of the show was the inclusion of our students on stage for the Bollywood dances. Our students ended up dancing and hanging out with these students till late at night. The group also had the opportunity to visit an Indian home. Rashmi Chaturvedi, Principal of Kanodia College invited the whole group to her house for dinner.

In both cities, the group did sightseeing and learnt to distinguish Hindu architecture from Mughal architecture. They also visited the Taj Mahal. The trip came to an end with a party at my parents’ house. They were very curious to meet my family and see how “we” live.

**Course work:**
Before the trip I met with the students four times for classes of three hours each. Students did book reports and term papers before leaving. These were based on required readings of books on India and globalization, and women in India. They also saw documentaries and films to familiarize themselves with India. They were required to see at least one film on India at the Asian Film Festival.

On the trip, students kept daily journals that I reviewed twice and wrote one short paper on the readings on widows and their trip to Vrindavan.

On their return to SDSU, they wrote a longer term paper based on some more readings and an issue of interest or an NGO they visited.

Graduate students wrote longer and more analytical term papers compared to the undergraduates.

As garnered from their journals and comments, the group was very satisfied with the trip. They felt “lucky” to have had this opportunity and felt that it had changed their lives. Many claimed that it had been an amazing experience, and some are already in contact with some NGOs in India with which they want to intern. A few students did feel overwhelmed by the whole experience. They felt that they were out of their “comfort zone.” They were bothered by the poverty they saw and could not cope with the level of urbanization in Delhi (traffic and crowds). But they did feel that it was a learning experience and were grateful that they went on the trip.