

**SHAMPA PANDA**Class of 2013
San Jose, CA

Shampa Panda

“Six kilometers seems so much longer when balancing two overflowing pots of water on your head.” This was all I could think the first time I gathered water and trudged through the rolling Ganjam hills back to my summer field site—the small subsistence farming village of Gothagaon in the east Indian state of Odisha. Six kilometers is the average distance that a woman in the developing world travels to fetch water for household use, and this summer I was one of the nearly billion women worldwide who did this on a daily basis.

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PARTICIPATORY IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT IN ODISHA, INDIA

It was in Gothagaon, as far from my home in California and as close to my birthplace of Berhampur in Odisha as I could possibly be, that I began to uncover the myriad intricacies of development, gender equality, and water access. I attempted to frame every scene through the 55-300 mm lens of my camera, even ones I couldn't quite capture. Eventually I understood when to put my camera down and pick up my notebook and later still, how to simply nod and listen. The villagers of Gothagaon taught me the merits of dedication and the importance of community. For that, I will always be grateful.

I traveled to India the summer before my senior year of college as part of the World Bank-funded Odisha Community Tank Management Project (OCTMP) to assess water resource conservation and community governance in the state of Odisha. Armed with an abundance of theoretical academic experience in the functioning of coupled human-ecological systems in developing countries, I was



resolute that even against the backdrop of India's notoriously corrupt bureaucracy and crumbling infrastructure I was going to produce concrete change for those who needed it most. This was going to be my capstone summer, the one that would allow me to delve into all of my passions – environmental policy, water quality, and gender empowerment – at once. With only the naiveté of youth to guide me, I was wholly unprepared for what I found.

I spent the majority of my time in Gothagaon collecting stories of environmental disparities through household surveys and oral interviews perched on a straw mat in the village

square. However, the resounding theme in the village was one of scarcity. There was no water in the canals or the water tank, making it difficult to cultivate the vegetables and grains that were necessary for survival. This summer there were fewer of the opulent weddings and grand feasts than is customary during the rainy season. The paltry rains and collapsing irrigation network had resulted in a crop yield that fell dangerously short of expectations. Regardless of these unfortunate circumstances, villagers were unerringly gracious to their firengi (foreign) visitor. I learned to bathe at public tube wells next to women who expertly wove their worn-out cotton sarees so that no inch of skin was visible to passerby and who hurriedly donned the obligatory aanchal to cover their head when village elders walked by. The girls of the village showed me how to roast parathas on biomass cookstoves and where to make the ten-kilometer walk to gather firewood from the forests at the base of the hills when we ran out of fuel.

At times, the summer was so

physically and emotionally trying that I wanted to quit. As a woman working and traveling alone in rural Odisha, the burden of all my perceived feminine shortcomings had never seemed so immense. I was constantly reminded that the independence that I had grown accustomed

to living in America was restricted by the mores of this ancient society. Prominent politicians assured me on national television that it was the changing size of women's skirts that provoked harassment, sentiments echoed by men in government offices and villages alike. This culturally condoned misogyny should not have been possible in this lush homeland of mine, which has had a female prime minister and where there are major festivals dedicated to female deities. It was unacceptable to me that the world's largest democracy was so dominated by men whilst the voices of women were heard only lightly based on arbitrary judgments



of gender and worth. However, I was determined that I would not be cowed by these societal restrictions. I worked with women's empowerment groups in my field site to assess the efficacy of alternate livelihood programs and member-based micro finance groups for female-headed households and scheduled caste families and presented my findings to OCTMP officials to assist in capacity building for these marginalized stakeholders. At the end of the summer, I had learned just as much about conservation and resource management from the daughters and wives of the village as from their leaders.

During the last week of my internship, I formally presented my final policy report to the OCTMP project director and Odisha's chief engineer. During the course of the summer, I was assisted by many passionate and engaging individuals on both the state and district level who offered copious amounts of institutional and personal support. My Burch Fellowship was instrumental in allowing me to fully realize my passion for social justice, environmental science, and developmental policy. I will be attending law school in the fall. I plan to pursue a career in environmental policy and law and use my legal education to advocate for the sustainable use of natural resources and the inclusion of communities in environmental decision-making.

