

**Report for IPENG Fellowship**  
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**Study Abroad in JNU, India**  
**Fall 2001 Semester**

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### **The Epilogue:**

More than anything else, I grew to love the campus itself -- its red brick architecture. The sprawling spread of wild greenery. A round ring road around a seasonal lake, winding across a little canyon shrouded with hidden possibilities. Rumors of love and despair, of hope and hopelessness, of politics and spirituality, of love ... and despair. When the lights went out on the road, and as I walked alone along that chilly winter night, I remembered. I remembered the many miles I had walked, just pacing up and down, lost in conversation, lost in the alluring idea just learnt, lost in the attentive ears of the many, lost within the silence of that land.

### **The Prologue:**

As I heard former study abroad students describe their incredible experiences and adventures, I sat back looking around hoping that no one would ask me where I was going. I was too embarrassed to even talk about it. But once the introductions were done, the to-be abroaders were asked to

stand up one by one and tell the rest of the group where they were headed for the summer or for the fall. As I heard the words – Australia, Spain, France, beaches, fun, and "yeah!" repeated over and over again, I began to question the wisdom of heading to a dry-dock such as JNU. The paperwork was well underway and its probably too late to back out now, I considered. So, I set my mind to ignore the horrors that the last semester had

unleashed on me and finally be able to relax and take it easy in a very quiet, very academic and what I thought to be a very very dull place...



architect to the naturalist. And for the adventurer - the caves should provide plenty of fascination.

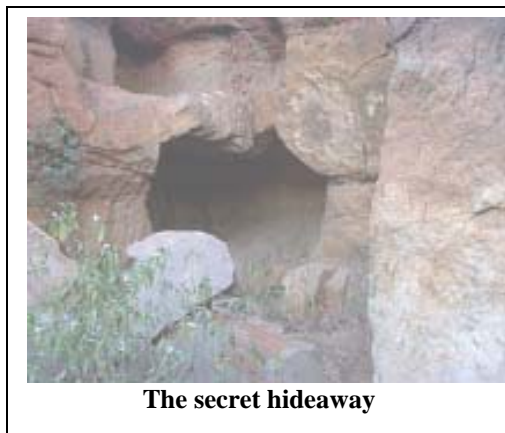
The campus has a rustic, unadorned look-n-feel to it which transforms mundane hostel and campus life to an addictive and active life.

It is difficult to get away from the impassioned people at JNU. Everywhere you go, you will find people engaging in heated (but friendly!) political and social discussions - without a second glance to the



**The wild outdoors**

Oh, boy! Was I in for a shock! Very deceptively quiet when I first set foot on campus, I was amazed by the incredible greenery of the campus. Huge portions of the JNU campus are forests! True, dense wooded areas where one can simply get lost. JNU boasts breathtaking scenes evoking deep emotional responses from the



**The secret hideaway**

clock. It is not uncommon to find students coming late to class because they had been fervently discussing the ramifications of changes in Brazilian foreign policy or on the geo-political situation in South-East Asia.

In the day, you can find intense competition present in-between students in classes. But come the night, and the spirit of rivalry changes to a spirit of cooperation. Opposing camps of political activists come together, shedding their differences of the day - studying, debating and intensely pondering upon everything from the day's homework to the political problems facing the world and nation.

JNU. The capital of Delhi's intelligentsia. The world's last communist bastion. A free love hangout. Home to the worst dress-sense possible. All in all, it is undoubtedly India's premier Liberal Arts university. JNU is a place caught in a vortex between the past and the present.

There was this time when I was introduced to this rather interesting student. He appeared elder to me, by quite a distance in time - but that in itself wasn't that unusual. During our casual first conversation, I touched upon my field of study and the length of time I've spent in college. Curiously, he didn't reciprocate with similar information; and I didn't press on. Later on, my friend who had introduced us, informed me that that fellow had spent the last 8 or so years at JNU! I was indeed surprised, for he appeared intelligent in conversation, so I doubted the possibility that he had failed a year or two. So I asked what course he was enrolled in, thinking that there must be some field of study requiring such an extensive period of study. My friend gave a polite laugh, and explained to me that that person was just an year ahead of us in the program, yet he had intentionally taken so much time to progress, just so that he could live and 'hang about' at a place like JNU. Although I'm a bit skeptical about the accuracy of this 'hearsay', a semester at JNU was enough to convince me that this was indeed very possible.



**Camping out  
...on campus**

JNU often plays host to visiting dignitaries from foreign countries, as well as to prominent people within the country. Such events are always well promoted and well attended - a result of the small and tightly knit community that it is.

Various sports facilities are available on campus. Clubs such as the Mountaineering, Trekking and Yoga clubs utilize the unique environment JNU is situated in, in order to provide better facilities to the student.



**The cafeteria – a venue for meeting,  
eating, or just hanging out with friends**

The admission process for JNU is of a highly competitive nature - less than a few hundred of thousands of applicants are able to clear the rigorous entrance examinations. Those statistics are a reminder that the person next to you is of a certain caliber – in his own right. Students from all parts of India bring their own unique and diverse experiences, lending intriguing perspective to their arguments.

### **The Political Life**

Internal politics is a major part of JNU life. Although as a casual student, I avoided the seriousness which everyone else took it. Elections are held every year to elect a student representative to the posts of president, vice president, joint secretary, and general secretary, among other posts within each department. Of these, the president and general secretary are most important as the president's signature is needed for all major decisions, while it's the general secretary who implements things.



From the very first day, the new student is bombarded with pamphlets and people each touting their own political party. Although brazen in their approach, the help they provide proves to be invaluable. The first week, misnamed 'Orientation', is a harrowing saga of dealing with JNU's bureaucracy and endless paper shuffling between buildings. I was facing a minor issue with my application and therefore I approached one of these parties with my problem. Although they had not encountered such a problem before, I was quickly shuffled up the echelons of the party. The presidential candidate himself took up my case - we walked brazenly into the offending bureaucrat's office. There I witnessed why most of India's political think-tanks are graduates of JNU. As I stood there gaping, he went on about how the inept administration of JNU causes them to have a bad name in the international community, and how India, the land of diversity was being such a terrible host to a foreign guest such as myself. All this, right in front of the now-very-red-cheeked official. Two minutes later, my paperwork stamped, I was out the building.

### **Materialism Mentality eXtreme**

What most foreigners love about India is that everything is dirt cheap. Everything from trinkets to electronic goodies to fabulous food items. And JNU is the epicenter of food at rock bottom prices. (No comment about quality -- naturally there are a lot of horror stories about every college cafeteria).

The Masters program in Political Science has about 4-5 courses each semester, each of which requires readings of 10-15 books (or sections from them). The best part is that, instead of having to purchase each of these books, the library system is geared towards lending out the books to students. The students then avail of the low cost photocopying services in order to secure a copy in which they are free to scribble upon. Most precious are the notes and photocopies which the seniors used - often they underline the crucial

sentences and note down the important points mentioned in class. These can be obtained by establishing a good rapport with the seniors in the department.

There is a 'bazaar' nearby, open only on Sundays which sells only books and other educational material. There one can find items ranging from obscure titles to pirated prints of the latest bestseller. The curious aspect in this are the booksellers themselves - usually with little schooling, they are nevertheless self-taught in English, with an amazing memory - able to recall the exact title, even if you are struggling with it. If one particular vendor doesn't have a particular title, don't worry, he'll send someone in the back to network with other vendors and in minutes you'll have a copy of it. There are bazaars like this for everything and haggling is *always* an option. Usually westerners are so bowled over by the offering price that they buy the item on the spot, but an Indian will be able to purchase it at a third of that price.

### **The Education: Liberalism Liberated**

A place like JNU is renowned for producing some of the finest minds in India. But surprisingly in this figure is the number of liberal minds produced. JNU is not a cult college preaching Marxism in a world of Capitalism; it is a testing ground for theories galore.. Many avowed liberals find themselves drawn to the captivating discourses of Socialism preached by fellow students and professors alike. Yet, the students themselves are closer to the outside world than the professors themselves. Many, which belonged to leftist student organizations have gone on to practice and preach the very opposite of what they learnt.

### **... and Marxist Maddening**

Strangely enough, I have learnt more about Capitalism and Liberalism than I could have in the States. No doubt there is more material present here on every aspect of Capitalism possible, but there is this sense of bias and prejudice present in political thinking here that clouds the questioning mind. The word 'Communism' is laughed at, the term is scoffed at. "Communism failed, so there!" is a fairly common retort amongst the layman. Yet, if it isn't discussed at length, there would be this era of humanity from which we have nothing to learn. The teachings at JNU seek to learn the pros and cons of every aspect of human thought, without which we cannot hope to understand the present day any better.

### **The People of the Land of the Elephants, Tigers, Peacocks, ...**

In a country as diverse as India, it is not surprising to find that the people there reflect the rich culture, traditions and values of the millions that have inhabited its land throughout its rich five thousand years of history. Numerous distinctive habits, faiths, practices and observances have all contributed to the rich texture of Indian life and living.



Deep-rooted family values continue to exist in Indian families. The surname of most Indians is based on his caste or place of origin or his family occupation. Men are

considered the head of the family and are consulted for all decisions. A wife will always serve her husband before she eats. Parents are looked upon with respect and regard. Children are financially supported by their parents throughout their education.

Indians believe in sharing happiness and sorrow. A festival or a celebration is never constrained to a family or a home. The whole community or neighborhood is involved in bringing liveliness to an occasion. A lot of festivals like Diwali, Holi, Id, Christmas, Mahaveer Jayanthi are all celebrated by sharing sweets and pleasantries with family, neighbors and friends. An Indian wedding is an occasion that calls for participation of all family and friends. Similarly, neighbors and friends always help out a family in times of need.



Although different languages are spoken in different regions of India, Hindi and English are popular in northern India and major metropolitan areas. Shopkeepers and other trademen can easily converse in English, especially when numerical figures are involved.



The much needed morning coffee

### **Personal Experience: The Learning**

Any experience we encounter in our lives adds to ourselves in either subtle, hidden or in broad, path-altering ways. There is no doubt in my mind that I began my experiences at JNU with a skeptical and unhopeful eye – I had been through the Indian system of education, I *knew* it was no comparison to what I had seen here at University of Illinois.

### **... and the UnLearning**

What most American students, I believe, are looking for in a study abroad trip is basically a fun time – easy courses, relaxed learning, fun place to party, the list goes on. No wonder destinations such as Australia and Spain are the most popular. But, in my opinion, it is important for every first world citizen to visit and stay for a while in any third world nation – you experience a world culture and spirit that you may never want to return. It was difficult at first, easier as I went along – to break from the typical in-college-lets-party mold, into a character open to sensitivities of a unique culture, which although embedded deep in my heart - I had never found it till now...

