As part of their travels, the students visited Versova, a fishing village in Mumbai.
SSA students learn about poverty and community in the classroom and in the field in Mumbai

As the monsoon season began to wind down, a small contingent of SSA students arrived in India this August. For more than three weeks they studied in the classroom and in the field in Mumbai, the largest city in India and an intense urban setting of vibrant streets and startling poverty.

The program, “Poverty, Marginalization, and Challenges to Community Practice in India” introduced the eight master’s students to how social welfare is organized in India, the nature of its urban poverty, key issues confronting vulnerable populations, and the intent, organization and implementation of local models of community practice. Organized by Associate Professor Robert Chaskin, the program included reciprocal peer learning with master’s students at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and field work at a number of community agencies and organizations.

“I think it went remarkably well,” says Chaskin, who accompanied the students for the program. “The goal was to throw into relief and begin to question what we think we know about poverty and the responses to poverty at the community level. What is different, what is relevant to our work in the U.S., what are the possibilities and limitations and challenges to our assumptions that working in these other contexts suggests?”

The students participated in two full days in the field each week, observing several different local NGOs at work, and engaged in classes, seminars, reading assignments and reflective writing, all in a comparative framework of community organizing and development practice in India and the United States. Chaskin points out that even the pedagogy was different: At TISS, students spend much more time in the classroom, where coursework can routinely run from 9–6. However, the biggest eye-opener was experiencing first-hand the deep deprivation that exists in pockets of the city, especially in the poorest slums. “We did readings and orientation before going, but you don’t really begin to understand until you experience it,” he says.

The program was a milestone for SSA’s growing international program, providing the first opportunity for SSA students to study overseas. “It really exceeded our expectations, and it certainly served as a very concrete example of the development of our programming,” says Cristina Gros, the manager for
Gros says that the program also was a great learning experience for her and the partners who made it possible, helping to pave the way for ongoing opportunities. Chaskin is planning to replicate the program for next summer, and he hopes similar courses, perhaps with different academic focuses, can also be developed. “The intent is to continue to build experiences such as this as part of a broader set of opportunities at SSA that are focused on social work internationally,” he says.

The following pages are filled with thoughts and descriptions of the experience from the SSA students who participated, excerpted from their daily field journals, e-mails and blog posts during their time in Mumbai.

Meeting in the Market
Katie and I were paired with three TISS students to explore the informal and formal components of the Chembur Market, and the ways in which we witness and understand the manifestation of poverty and inequality. Katie, Avad, Saumya, Ujjwaal and myself split into two auto rickshaws and headed to the market. Jumping out, we were immediately surrounded by children asking for money. There is a similar hand gesture that most children display when they are asking for money. They gather the tips of their fingers, as if holding a small wad of rice between them, dragging them from their imaginary plates drawn in the air toward their lips, looking up at you with round, deep brown eyes.

We weaved in and out of traffic, the students grabbing our hands telling us the optimal moment to make a dash and how to carry ourselves. In the market, we talked to an “auntie” (a word commonly referring to a woman in informal conversation) who was selling onions. She sat on the ground with a knife, separating the white bulbs from the green stalks. She was in her sixties, widowed, telling us that she had been doing this work since she was 10 years old. She likes it, she told us, it makes her happy, because it is through this work that she is able to provide for her family.

— Kirsten Dickins

Life in a New Building
Today was the first day of field placement. I am placed at an agency called the Slum Rehabilitation Society. Basically, the agency works with the governments to place people who are forced out of slums (due to land use for infrastructure projects, etc.) into permanent housing and organizes the people in housing projects. Today, we went to the field site with our student hosts, Ashish and Pradeep. The goal is to organize women in one of the projects to develop groups devoted to gaining some type of livelihood, such as embroidery, sewing or running a canteen serving food.

We first were welcomed into the home of Sumitra, the president of the women’s group at one of the buildings. The flat was essentially in two rooms, a small kitchen in the back and a main living room with beds that double as sitting spaces. The dimensions may be around 200 square feet. Sumitra had set up her space beautifully, with brightly colored sheets on the beds, decorative art such as a small glass chandelier, and plants in the kitchen. The space was comfortable, orderly and immaculately clean.

When asked about her feelings about her flat, she choked up. She was so happy to have moved in, she said. In the slum housing where she lived, there were 16 toilets for 2,000 people and now she has her own toilet. In her flat she has running water for 15-30 minutes a day. She told us she was used to fighting to get water with hundreds of others in the short time period the taps were on. She
laughed when she talked about the fights that she witnessed at the water taps and the toilet lines. It amazes me that so many people struggling for survival have such a good sense of humor, but I guess, how else do you survive? Other women and children came to the flat to talk with us, and we discussed families and marriage and laughed with each other.

— Katie Gambach

Living without Resources

Today we visited a different part of the settlement—Rafi Nagar, which is located much closer (or directly on top) of the garbage dump, as new migrants act mostly as scavengers within the dump. Made out of wooden sticks and tarps, the housing seemed less sturdy and it had a sense of illegitimate establishment, as if at any moment there may be a family moving in or out. It is becoming more and more apparent that the migrant pull to Mumbai for work is a large contributing factor to the unyielding growth of this community at the macro-level.

Other environmental factors added to the feeling of worsened quality of life: even worse sanitary conditions, the location directly on top of the dump, and the general feeling that these “homes” were dropped and could be removed just as easily, contributed to the unsettling feeling and overall difficulty of the day. Aside from my own, perhaps selfish, concerns with my own health, I had a hard time grasping that these conditions (no running water, no public toilet, high levels of pollution, use of rain water for bathing and washing) were the reality of so many individuals. I struggled to understand how one might attempt to survive in these dismal conditions, and the idea of basic home needs came back to mind. Without access to proper nutrition, running water, and health security, then education and awareness may be difficult points to stick within the community.

— Allison Yura

The Dilemma of the Poorest Slums

Visiting Rafi Nagar helps me understand a bit better the policy dilemma lawmakers in India must face. On one hand, the migration from rural areas is not going to stop while people cannot make a living there. On the other, the government will condone the migration and possibly make it worse if they create the necessary infrastructure to support the influx of people. In a harm reduction world, it seems like the most humanitarian policy would be to try to accept the migration and provide services and sanitation as quickly as possible, but I also understand that may not be politically feasible.

Though 60 percent of the population of Mumbai lives in slums, only a small portion of that are undeveloped slums like Rafi Nagar, and the people who live here are not a population that I perceive to be easily mobilized. The load they carry just to survive seems to preclude that. From my experience here, I get the sense that people who live in the developed slums are not too keen on the arrival of the new migrants, even though they themselves may have been migrants at one point (though, according to the TISS students, this could be as much as 20 years ago). With more people comes more pressure on resources, and this area is already resource poor to begin with.

It’s amazing how your concept of poverty can change in a very short time. Before I’d been to Rafi Nagar, the recognized parts of Shivaji Nagar seemed poor and run-down, but now that I’ve seen the unrecognized slums, I am able to see the resources that are clearly available to the people who live here: water, electricity, drainage, social services, community, commerce, etc. These are thriving communities, despite their poverty.

— Elizabeth Siegel

Children with Special Needs

One of the day cares at Apnalaya [an organization that provides education, health services and a variety of other social supports, primarily in the slums of
Govandi is for developmentally disabled children. It provides a safe environment, education, and health care to help them gain either employment or to help them matriculate into a school specifically for developmentally disabled children.

Children often start coming to the day care after the developmental disability clearly manifests in physical appearance, when the child fails out of school, or when the family is unable to care for the child and they cannot be left alone (this would be something like a behavioral or emotional disorder where unlike the other slum children, who can be taken care of by siblings or who can play communally, the developmental disability prevents these options). There are often no means or resources to identify developmental disabilities at birth or during early onset.

— Amanda Wilson

Social Work and Empowerment

I have been struck from the very beginning of our time at TISS by the overwhelming foundation of self-empowerment that exists in notions of “social work.” Rather than playing the role of the trained expert coming in to “help” these communities, they are seen much more as facilitators of local, community-centered, self-empowered autonomous choice; giving people a space to have their voice heard and listening to what they are expressing as their needs. That’s clearly not to say this happens all the time in India, but it’s something I have found far too often missing in notions of “social work” I’ve encountered in the States, and I find this gravely problematic.

— Roanna Cooper

Wives, Mothers and Infant Mortality

In the afternoon, we were exposed to a program that is researching the high prevalence of infant mortality in the slums. Along with Kirsten, I joined a TISS student and community worker in visiting two different homes of women who had lost infants recently. Both women were suspected to be victims of domestic abuse, and at the second home we visited there was a second wife living on the other side of the wall/tarp. Both women would like to stop having children, and in one case the husband agreed. Both women seemed exhausted, and unable to provide their living children with the love and attention they need.

After the second home visit, the TISS student explained to us some of the issues in the infant mortality rate. She linked the lack of education and awareness as a large contributing factor; many of the families, she found, did not know how to treat a sick child and were generally unaware of the importance of hygiene. Additionally, she felt that the emphasis on the man’s happiness and satisfaction led to an uneven distribution of the family’s food resources in favor of the father and other older males. She hoped that the findings of her research would reach the organization and call for further education of mothers.

— Allison Yura

The Human Touch

I often think about how the culture in the United States, particularly in settings such as schools, hospitals, and various other social service organizations are becoming increasingly “touch-phobic”—we seem to fear what human touch might suggest, and moreover, the repercussions that we may incur from provoking these interpretations. Legal and social ramifications are constantly at stake.

I don’t see that being the case here in India, but rather the opposite. People are inclined to touch, to rub your shoulder, to put their arm around your back, to stroke your hand. The comfort I feel expressed through human touch is astounding, and I wonder how expressing affection and care through these means may aid in the strengthened development of micro level community ties.

— Kirsten Dickins