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Her Visiting Report

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (MCRG) for offering me an opportunity to work as an intern with the organization. It was indeed an honour and a privilege to have had the opportunity to work under the guidance of Dr. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and associate with such passionate intellectuals, academics and activists who inspired me not only with the wealth of knowledge and experience that they possess (and were never hesitant in sharing) but also with the devotion and fervor that they invested in their intellectual explorations and academic activism. The close ties they have with Sri Lanka and the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA), the organization that I represent, created an immediate bond and rendered my stay, though brief, more pleasurable. I found great stimulation in the limited but insightful conversations I had with Dr. Sabyasachi and found his extensive knowledge and perceptions on Sri Lanka and his interpretations of the socio-political dynamics of the country captivating and thought provoking.

My work as an intern comprised mainly of the compilation of a paper on internal displacement in Sri Lanka which critiqued the right of the internally displaced to return home and the issues surrounding it, based on the recent return movements which took place in Batticaloa, in the east region of Sri Lanka. This was followed by a presentation of the paper at the CRG premises, which was commented upon by those present, especially by Dr. Paula Banerjee, whose critiques and suggestions inspired me to add a novel perspective to my analysis.

As someone involved in advocacy in the field of humanitarian work, I found the internship extremely rewarding, both intellectually and professionally. In our workaday lives we rarely get the opportunity to pause and reflect upon the work that we engage in and its impact on the larger society, the micro effect on the macrocosm. The internship, and specially the process of drafting my paper on ‘The Right to Return’, gave me the time and space to reflect, and identify some of the gaps and traps in humanitarian processes, advocacy endeavours and ‘good governance’, which Dr. Paula perceived to be a solid basis to advocate for policy changes with regards to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and their return home, and in finding durable solutions for ending displacement. It was also useful in understanding the cultural implications in policy formulation as well as application, and the scope and potential for improvement. There are certain aspects of a particular issue that one is able to identify only with exposure to different contexts, and I realized that it’s extremely important for those playing an active role in the field of development to have exposure to ‘differences’, for it nurtures understanding, it enriches one’s consciousness, which capacitates

and motivates the individual, and thereby the community, to strive towards peaceful co-existence. To advocate, one needs substantial understanding of different contexts, and the lengthy conversations, comparisons and critiques I had with my colleagues at CRG, Sanam and Ishita, on diverse aspects of social life in India and Sri Lanka, were illuminating and contributed towards broadening the sphere of my perceptions. It was also instrumental in making me realize many of my professional limitations as well as the scope for improvement.

There was also great intellectual stimulation especially during a day long workshop on 'Social Justice and Law in India' which I was privileged to attend, where the articulation and the application of 'social justice' was extensively debated. The exposure to the zealous deliberations of renowned intellectuals and experts in the field was a unique experience and motivated me to contemplate on a variety of issues and concepts ranging from 'the Anti-Citizen' to 'transitional justice'. This intellectual stimulation and the exchange and exploration of ideas, I realized, are extremely important in the field of development, specially in advocacy. For in Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, there is a considerable gulf between theory and practice. Concepts, theories and ideas are articulated at a different level, yet rarely step down from their pedestal to reach the ground, whereas the implementation of development projects and proactive advocacy takes place at another level. It's rarely that one finds equilibrium, an interesting fusion. However, reflections upon the discussions made me realize that advocacy efforts could be strengthened to a great extent and rendered more meaningful if theory, philosophy and practice could somehow be merged, and the individual given exposure to a holistic experience.

Back in Sri Lanka, the exposure and the experience gained at CRG has become invaluable when engaging in advocacy efforts, specially in relation to internal displacement. Not only has it developed my sensitivities and understanding of the socio-political complexities and the host of issues associated with the prolonged plight of the internally displaced persons in Sri Lanka but has also enhanced my capacity in dealing with these issues while giving me a clearer understanding of the method of advocacy that is required to redress the situation, which, in my personal capacity I attempt to pursue to the greatest extent possible.

The experience in its totality was extremely rewarding and enriching, and I'm much indebted to CRG for this exceptional experience. It was a great pleasure working with the CRG team and their gracious hospitality will always be remembered with earnest appreciation. I hope for future collaborations with the organization and to sustain the close bonds that were formed with my colleagues there.