

University of Toronto – International Human Rights Program  
Final Internship Report – Rebekah Church

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This summer I had the privilege of working with the M.C. Mehta Environmental Foundation (MCMEF) in New Delhi, India. MCMEF is an organization run by M.C. Mehta, a renowned Indian environmental lawyer whose dedication has been recognized by the Goldman Environmental Prize and Ramon Magsaysay Award. The organization seeks to preserve and defend environmental quality in India and South Asia, provide legal resources for victims of pollution, and protect the cultural heritage of India. These goals are primarily achieved through capacity building programs for NGOs and environmental lawyers. Mr. Mehta also takes on many public interest litigation (PIL) cases, a unique type of action within the Indian legal system which provides lenient and inclusive standing rules for any issue deemed to be in the public interest and serves as a powerful tool for protecting human and environmental rights.

During my time in Delhi I concentrated most of my efforts on a case challenging the legality of a series of potentially devastating hydroelectric dams which were being constructed in the Himalayas, near the glacial sources of the Ganges River. By diverting the river through tunnels for dozens of kilometers at a time, these dams are threatening to displace local populations, damage the fragile Himalayan ecosystem, and prevent millions of Hindus from engaging in age-old cultural and religious practices. These dams are also predicted to amplify the negative impacts of climate change by disrupting the region surrounding the already endangered Himalayan glaciers and by potentially increasing the damage resulting from the frequent and extreme flooding events associated with climate change. As such, one of the primary focuses of this case is how the Indian government will manage and mitigate the impacts of climate change through their energy and development policies.

My role in the case included preparing research for and writing petitions, counter-affidavits, and rejoinders which were submitted to the High Court of Uttarakhand. In addition, I produced campaign material which included pamphlets, a website, and press releases. In order to gain political support for the cause I also composed letters to prominent Indian politicians and policy makers. Though the construction of the dam projects has been temporarily suspended, the case is ongoing.

In addition to working on the Ganges case, I spent a great deal of time researching Indian and international law and policy related to climate change, as well as assembling scientific research on the impacts of climate change in India and South Asia. This body of research will not only provide evidentiary support for the Ganges case, but will also provide a knowledge base for MCMEF in future cases defending the rights of the victims of climate change.

I greatly appreciate the hands-on experience that this internship has provided me with. Above all, experiencing the Indian approach to human rights work was challenging and eye-opening. I spent the summer collaborating with passionate people who have dedicated their lives to working for social and environmental justice in India and around

the world. Perhaps most inspiring was working with Dr. G.D. Agarwal, a prominent 76-year-old environmental scientist who embarked on a 'fast-unto-death' in protest of the dam construction. The fast ended after seventeen days when the state and federal governments finally agreed to suspend the projects until comprehensive studies on the impacts of the dams were completed.

Many thanks to the M.C. Mehta Environmental Foundation, the University of Toronto, and the International Human Rights Program for making it possible for me to participate in this internship program