

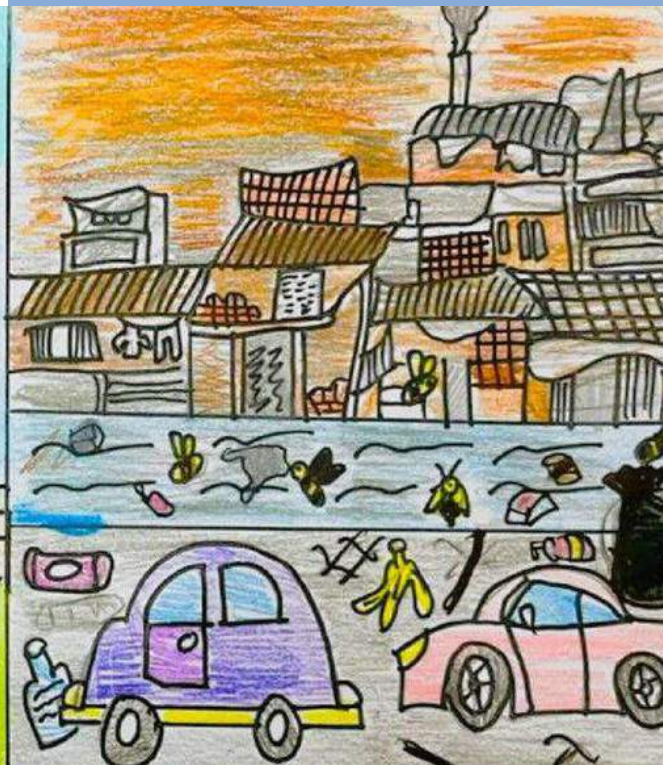
# IGCS EXPERIENCE REPORT 01/2023

Indo-German Centre for Sustainability (IGCS)  
at IIT Madras, Chennai



# postdocs & established researchers

Prof. Dr. Elisa T. Bertuzzo



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Experience Report on IGCS Fellowship in the category “Postdocs and established researchers”

***Fellow***

Prof. Dr. Elisa T. Bertuzzo

***Affiliation***

weißensee kunsthochschule berlin (Berlin Academy of Fine Arts)  
MA “Spatial Strategies”  
Bühringstrasse 20  
13086 Berlin

***IGCS focus area and project theme***

Land Use / Urban and Rural Development; Peripheralisation in an Age of Translocalisation

***Starting/End date of the research exchange period***

1 December 2021 – 28 February 2022

***Inviting IIT-Madras Professor***

Prof. Dr. Sudhir Chella Rajan

***Layout and Design***

Rahul G. Rajkarnikar

***Front Page Illustration***

Student result from Take Home Activity

Zurück zur Erde: A Workshop on Human-Nature Relationships and Sustainability for Students and Teachers

Co-organized by Goethe Institute and the Indo-German Centre for Sustainability (IGCS)

## My IGCS Fellowship

*Disclaimer: I am solely responsible for the content of this report*

Between December 2021 and February 2022, I was in Chennai as an IGCS fellow in the category “Postdocs and established researchers”. After an IGCS faculty had attracted my attention to the fellowship programme and encouraged me to apply, I searched for general information about the Centre and IIT-Madras on the webpage (at the time, it was somewhat tentative because of the pandemic and travel restrictions) and contacted the coordinating office in Aachen. I was impressed by the wonderful support I received from the Programme’s staff during this phase of application. All my questions were answered as quickly as professionally; also, the decision about the granting of the fellowship was quick to come.

Communications with the external affairs/international exchange department at IIT-Madras were excellent, their handling of the visa application was impeccable, and in this instance, I found the Indian embassy extremely cooperative as well.

Due to the pandemic, the IIT’s residential options for guest researchers were not available, and I was informed that I, therefore, would have to rent a room at my own expense outside of the campus. To help with that, the staff provided me with links to some web portals, but as I learnt upon double-checking with Indian colleagues, the rental costs of most accommodations were quite high compared to those advertised on the local



market. I booked a room only for the first month, and from the second month of my stay, I lived in a more convenient studio apartment, which I found with the help of other IIT researchers. I found it reassuring that in an age of hyper-digital communications (and Airbnb's hegemony), word of mouth revealed the best way of getting around.

The campus of IIT-Madras is the most beautiful large university campus I personally have ever visited. My marvel at the cohabitation of researchers, students, non-teaching staff, deers, dogs, monkeys, frogs, and innumerable bird species remained constant during the whole period of my stay.



I availed of a study room myself in the building which accommodates the Centre, and going to the office in the morning and leaving in the dark filled me with deep confidence in the possibility of human and human-nonhuman coexistence, in spite of the many turmoils and barriers put by man to peaceful and respectful living these days.

At IGCS, I was welcomed very warmly, with a whole morning introductions session facilitated by Prof. Dr. Sudhir Chella Rajan and a number of meetings and field trips with IGCS faculty Christoph Woiwode; both remained available for telephone consultations and personal talks throughout the fellowship. Unfortunately, I was not able to experience a fully “normal” everyday life at the Centre or Campus: after Covid-19 had shaken India in the earlier months of 2021, all departments were still working in a semi-remote mode, and in early January, the anticipation of a possible new wave led to precautionary re-closure. However, I definitely benefitted from conversing and exchanging with the different researchers gathered at the Centre and beyond it when this was possible.

Chennai is a bustling city with social contrasts and environmental features that make it a compelling case of urbanisation under circumstances of neoliberal urban development; encountering it, scholars in

Urban Studies, Migrations Studies, Geography, Environmental Studies, and a range of other disciplines will be faced with inspiring and challenging questions. In spite of my language barrier, I was able to circulate with ease by public transportation (bus, subway and metro) within a few days, not only in the central districts but also in the peri-urban areas that interested me the most in connection with my research questions. Taxis, Uber and TucTuc, are available options in the private transport sector, but I found them quite overpriced.

In my free time, I often took very long walks by the sea. The beaches are very scenic, and fishermen still use them, which is rare for a metropolis and points to the success of emancipatory Dalit- and Ambedkarian politics in Tamil Nadu. Compared to my experience in other Indian cities, I found the locals quite reserved but, once addressed, as welcoming and hospitable to foreigners as elsewhere. Tamil poetry and dance are highly sophisticated, and I would absolutely recommend visiting some performances in the many theatres and halls of North Chennai!

The fieldwork I carried out in Chennai boosted my understanding of the modalities of collective negotiation, sharing and co-use of space, political organisation, as well as solidarity, which determine the

production of space (especially) in peri-urban zones in our age of globalisation and climate change. It emerged that vis-à-vis outsourcing, economic restructuring, exclusion, and ecological damage, the inhabitants' need and capability for movement, adaptation and improvisation are immensely accrued. This is how, I believe, translocality mediates and informs the ways in which locals, new arrivals, and permanent and circular migrants (not to speak of non-human actors) contribute to the production of space today, each deploying different strategies and using space simultaneously, although perhaps discontinuously; and, obviously, in co-dependency with the trends, and moods, of political and economic developments.

Overall, the fellowship was a constitutive moment in my career as a researcher moving between the fields of Urban/Migration Studies and (Visual) Anthropology. Apart from the specific research output, I developed my thinking around the topics I intend to work on in the coming years.

I feel indebted to Vanessa Peter, Head, Mercy aka and her wonderful cp-mobilisers of *IRCDUC* for making me feel welcome in Peumbakkan and for heartening insights into its everyday life; Dr. Christoph Woiwode

for his general introduction to Chennai, many theoretical discussions, and the comforting evenings spent in the company of his wife and daughters; Prof. Dr. Rajan Chella for introducing me to IGCS' staff and to the research on Chennai and the "Pericene" collected at the Centre; Prof. Dr. M. Suresh Babu of *IIT Madras*, Dept. of

Humanities and Social Sciences and Prof. Dr. Lalitha Subramanian of *Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development* for their insights and information about Sriperumbudur; as well as to some of the PhD students at Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences for pleasant talks in the campus, and outside.

### About the IGCS Grants

*Through its scholarship program, IGCS is committed to supporting students and researchers whose projects benefit from a research exchange to India or Germany, helping to further knowledge and understanding of key sustainability issues. The scholarships consist of mobility and accommodation. IGCS fellows receive a one-time travel fund of up to 1.075 euros, as well as a monthly scholarship that covers travel and living expenses in accordance with DAAD funding rates. And now, with the new internship scholarship program launching in 2023, even more opportunities for practical work experience will be available to Master's students at German and Indian universities. If you're passionate about sustainability and eager to gain hands-on experience in this exciting field, we encourage you to [apply](#).*