

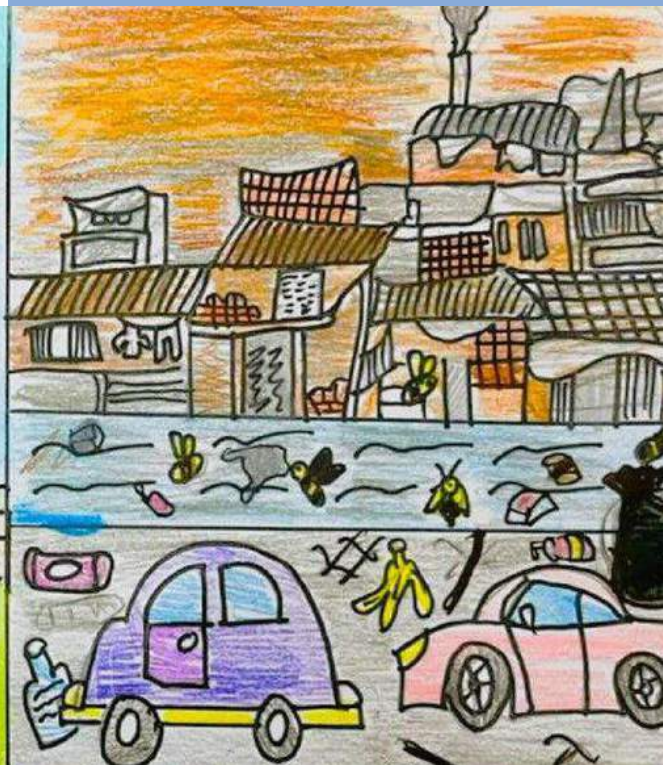
IGCS EXPERIENCE REPORT 01/2023

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



postdocs & established researchers

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

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IGCS focus area and project theme

Land Use / Urban and Rural Development; The role of faith in the localization of environmental SDGs in India

Starting/End date of the research exchange period

3. March – 30. April 2022

Inviting IIT-Madras Professor

Prof. Santosh R (IIT Madras, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences)
Dr. Christoph Woiwode (IGCS, Postdoc Land Use, Urban and Regional Development)

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1. Introduction

I stayed at IGCS at IIT Madras in March and April 2022 for my doctoral thesis. I could work on my empirical data, connect to different researchers, and improve my general research outline. Although the stay itself was less influenced by the covid-19 pandemic, my overall planning and setting were highly impacted by the sanitary situation in Germany and India.

The idea to conduct a stay at IGCS in Chennai for my research was kindled when I was a participant at the IGCS Winter School in 2020, which was a wonderful and rewarding experience. I was able to present my research outline, and Dr. Christoph Woiwode suggested that I could come back for a more extended research stay at IIT Madras. I was thrilled by the idea of applying for a fellowship in the upcoming year of 2021. Still, all my aspirations were put on hold by the rise of covid-19 to a global pandemic. This development happened almost simultaneously with the winter school and culminated in travel restrictions, more or less the moment after I had landed back in Germany.

I kept in touch with several people from the IGCS team, among others Christoph Woiwode, and informed myself regularly about the situation in Chennai itself as well

as the travel restrictions by the Indian and German governments as well as IGCS. As soon as the situation became stable in autumn 2021 and on-site fellowships were possible again, I applied for the program, benefitting from the floating deadline put into practice by IGCS.

As I wanted to go to India as fast as possible at the beginning of 2022, I needed to plan and do as many travel preparations in advance or simultaneously. As I had already traveled to India several times, my experience helped me a lot. This report can hopefully help future students benefit from my experience and travel, study, and research in India. I will summarize the main preparations for the fellowship and the journey itself. Next, I will describe my situation in Chennai and India, focusing on the aspects that can be helpful for future students. The information is all based on my experience and depends on my circumstances. Potential changes are possible and should always be considered when preparing for a trip to India.

Finally, I want to take my time to acknowledge the most important people who helped me to realize this journey to India: First and foremost, I want to thank Christoph for suggesting a stay at IGCS and

supporting me throughout my journey. A big thanks also goes to Santosh R and the IGCS team for helping me with my visa application throughout my stay. And last

2. Preparations

2.1 Application Process

A fellowship at IGCS at IIT Madras is an excellent opportunity to collect data and also to connect to other researchers and the students. Your research needs to align with the four core research areas, though discussing a possible alignment to these topics with the coordinators is best. They know the current research best and can help connect to potential supervisors at IIT Madras. Next to the German supervisor (in my case and most normally: the supervisor of your research project), one needs a researcher from IIT Madras to get the required supervision during one's stay in Chennai. I didn't know my Indian supervisor in advance, but I contacted him with my research project and asked if possible guidance would be possible, which he confirmed.

For precise documents and further application details, check out the website: <https://www.igcs-chennai.org/>

Please note that you need to register to an online portal for your application and that

but not least, I want to thank my team at home, particularly Carola, who kept the ship running while I was taking photos of monkeys (and doing relevant research).

your written statements cannot exceed the given word count.

2.2 Preparation of journey

As soon as I got the confirmation of my funding, I had to prepare for my journey. The preparation period was very short, and I had to do these things simultaneously. However, the highest priority was my visa, particularly as you should only book a flight when you get your visa (or you book a flight with an option to rearrange your dates in case your visa gets delayed).

Visa process

For my visa, I applied at the Indian Consulate in Frankfurt, which has outsourced the administrative work to Indo-German Consultancy Services Ltd. (also IGCS, do not mix up). I applied for a student visa. I won't list the needed documents here as it is better to check the website for the most updated required documents. However, it can take some time to get all the documents together, and you should apply two months in advance though there are occasions where it can

happen in two weeks. My visa process (calculated from sending the documents to IGCS Ltd.) took in the end almost three months.

Flight

When I traveled to India, the flight options were still restricted due to the pandemic. Thus, there was no direct flight to Chennai, and I had to travel either via Mumbai or Delhi. I traveled to India with Lufthansa via Delhi and returned home via Mumbai. Both options worked out well, though I checked in advance if I had to change terminals for the domestic flights. In case that is the case, some buses take you to the respective terminal, but you need more time to change terminals, and it can be a burden if you reach in the middle of the night.

Immigration in India always happens at the first airport where you arrive. You have to fill out a little document already distributed on the plane. Please have your address in India and an Indian phone number with you, as you'll have to name them during your immigration.

Your suitcase is usually not automatically transferred to your domestic flight; hence you have to collect your pieces of luggage and check in again at the (domestic) terminal. You also have to go through all the security measures again. Please note: You

can only enter an airport with a valid flight ticket in India. If you choose to exit the airport in between, always have your ticket and your passport with you, as you wouldn't be able to reenter again without them.

Insurance

For my journey, I got extra travel insurance that stated that it offered transportation back home not only when it was medically needed ('notwendig'), but also medically appropriate ('medizinisch sinnvoll')

Packing list

Clothes: I choose light clothes due to the climate in Chennai in spring. Though I might carry some fancy summer dresses or skirts for special party occasions, I generally focus on clothes that cover also my legs and shoulders and that I can easily wash. I carried a light jacket, and in monsoon times, a light rain jacket might be handy. You should bring some lightweight sandals; I also have one pair of comfortable black trainers that could work as professional shoe wear. I also always have a shawl with me as it is an easy protection from sun, stares and air pollution.

Anyway, you can buy clothes very easily in India; western as well as Indian clothes can be purchased at very reasonable prices (though the prices can go up as well, depending on where you buy them and what

you want). If desired, one can get clothes stitched.

Medicine: I carried enough quantity of my needed medication as one cannot be sure to get the exact brand in India. For the rest, you can get most of the common medicine in pharmacy shops (green cross) much cheaper than in Germany. However, I carry some medication that I am used to for most general illnesses, like colds, light flu, and digestive problems. For example, I found that nasal sprays are not that common in India. As stomach flu and diarrhea are also very common for Indians, you can get good medicine locally (Immodium is called Eldoper, Electrolytes, etc.) I carried a malaria medicine for first symptoms though I have never used it in all my journeys to India. You can get a good mosquito repellent for tropical mosquitos in Germany, though I recommend you to buy odomos, the local brand which is quite effective on the local species.

As I was traveling during the Covid-pandemic, I carried self-test kits and FFP2 masks, though I found that I could also purchase all of these things in India in supermarkets and pharmacies.

Money

You cannot get Indian rupees (INR) in advance in Germany as it is not allowed to

carry INR outside India. Consequently, you can carry cash for conversion or, much simpler, rely on credit cards that don't charge you when withdrawing cash in a foreign country. I carried two credit cards to be safer if one got lost or stolen. You should store the international numbers to block your card in case this happens. You can find ATMs everywhere in India, except in very remote areas, but some banks charge you for withdrawing with a foreign credit card. I usually relied on SBI-ATMS (State Bank of India) to withdraw cash. Please note that you cannot withdraw more than 10.000 INR per withdrawal, though this is already a huge amount for commoners, and you shouldn't brag about your finances in front of other people.

Since the demonetization in 2016, India has advanced rapidly in online payment methods like Paytm, google pay and a lot of other local apps. Those are connected to your credit card or bank account. I didn't connect to these apps during my two months and I only had once a problem that only online payments were allowed. Also, on campus, for example, online payments have become more and more popular in the canteen, but cash was still a possibility. Just note that you will always be in need of the small 10, 20, and 100 rupee bills, and it'll be a constant challenge to exchange the big 500 and 2000 rupee notes.

3. Accomodation

As a research fellow, there are two main options you have: you can live on the Campus of IIT Madras, or you can live 'off-campus', meaning that you find an accomodation in the city. Both options have advantages and disadvantages, and you must decide which suits your situation best. The campus is for sure the cheapest option, and you can meet a lot of students there. However, you'll be less flexible concerning traveling and exploring the city, particularly women's hostels, which have the reputation to be restrictive (but as I didn't stay on the campus, I can't confirm it for IIT Madras). You tend to only stay on the campus, where you find everything you need. The hostel rooms don't have air conditioning, a loss that can be quite a burden if you are not used to Chennai's climate. Furthermore, you are always dependent on eating out, as the hostels offer no kitchen facilities to students.

When I arrived in Chennai, the campus had just opened up again after the pandemic lockdowns, and I wasn't sure how long this would last. During my stay, there was one covid outbreak, and the whole hostel area was put into lockdown. It was at that time that I was glad that I had chosen to stay off-campus to have more freedom.

Administratively, it is easier to stay on campus, but as soon as you have your student card, it is not that difficult to enter and exit the campus. If you want to stay off-campus, you can look for serviced apartments or other ways of accommodation. I used Airbnb to check out some apartments, and after the first few days in one B&B, I discussed an individual rate with the landlord for a long-term stay. I had my own AC room with breakfast, and I could get lunch or dinner upon request, but I could also use the kitchen facilities. The apartment was in the south of Adyar, which was a 10 to 20 minutes auto ride from the Campus (Velachery gate). Adyar is not far from the beach and has quite a few pubs and restaurants and several shopping streets. I had the feeling that it was a popular residential area, and I enjoyed staying there, though I also spent quite some time in Teynampet and T.N Nagar with friends.

Due to covid and my research, I didn't travel to the campus every day. Most professors and staff were also not there every day, and we only arranged meetings on particular days (more about this in the following chapters). Hence, it was essential to have a decent desk, and the A/C helped, particularly in the last weeks of April.

4. Research Work at IGCS

As I came to IGCS with my own project based on my dissertation, I worked very independently. However, I was very grateful for the guidance of my two supervisors, who took their time to help me get started. We had several meetings, and they got me in touch with other researchers in my field, which proved valuable. In general, I was affiliated with the Land Use / Rural and urban Development Area, but I also met the other area supervisors at IGCS. At IIT Madras, I was affiliated with the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. This was particularly important for my registration at IIT Madras.

Field research in India differs a lot from practices in Germany. It is very important to

have an Indian phone number, and you must be persistent in calling several times and resending your emails. Sometimes, you should consider just passing by in person, though, by German standards, this would be very rude. Furthermore, long data security forms can rather confuse than assure people, and my supervisors advised me to follow a more open consent approach.

At the end of my stay, I was invited to give a presentation about my research work and my preliminary findings. It was supposed to happen in person, but due to a local covid outbreak, we had to reschedule to an online format. However, this was a good occasion to summarize my work and to get some last feedback before traveling back to Germany.



5. Working and Living at IGCS

When starting and ending your work at IGCS and IIT Madras, please consider enough time in advance for the administrative work. I was busy the first two weeks and three days during my last week to get all documents, signatures, and stamps together. Your contact person is always the Office of Global Engagement staff, who were all very welcoming and helpful. However, it was not always clear which documents I needed and which I did not, and I had to fill out documents several times, come back, get things done, and in general, have persistence in dealing with the bureaucracy. Out of this, it does not make any sense to come to the campus for less than two months as you would just spend most of your time dealing with bureaucracy than doing research. However, I was one of the first international students/fellows to come to IIT Madras after the pandemic travel restrictions. It could be much smoother now that the system is again used for international visitors.

I started my work between 9 and 9:30 am and tried to get back to my apartment between 5 and 6 pm before it got dark.

Usually, I took my lunch break between 12 and 1 pm. When I was on campus, I went to one of the several canteens and messes where I could get fruits, chai, whole meals, or just some smaller snacks upon my choice and preference.

Though I worked a lot in home office and traveled for my research, it was always a pleasure to find time to work and spend time on campus. The campus is situated next to a national park though it feels like the national park has already taken over the campus. You share the campus with a lot of wildlife like monkeys, deer, blackbucks, and flying foxes. Except for the monkeys that can be quite feisty (though very entertaining!), the rest of the wildlife lives peacefully with its human neighbors.

The campus is very big and if you stay longer, it is advisable to get a bicycle (I'd recommend just asking some students for online or 'mouth to ear' offers). There are also busses that can take you from one end to another, which is particularly handy if you want to travel to the main or Velachery gate

6. Everyday Life in Chennai

Chennai is the capital of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, and according to the census of 2011 (the census of 2021 is still not published), it has 4,6 million citizens, though it has grown in the past 11 years for sure. Hence, it is one of India's megacities. In comparison to other cities like Mumbai and Delhi, however, the ambiance in Chennai still feels smaller, and the traffic is not as overwhelming. The main language is Tamil and English; in most southern states, Hindi is not the most spoken language. People are very proud of their own heritage, and Tamilian culture differs a lot from north Indian culture(s). As a visitor, Chennai has not a lot of tourist attractions. There are the beaches (though no swimming) and some beautiful temples (though no entrance into the inner part allowed for foreigners). There is the grave of St. Thomas, one of the three existing graves of catholic apostles in the world. For more tourist attractions, one would need to travel outstation. You can easily reach the temple town Kanchipuram, the old archeological sides of Mamallapuram, and the former French

colony Puducherry with Auroville right next to it. With a bit more time, you can travel to the famous temple of Tirupati, Bangalore, Mysore, and the inner lands of Tamil Nadu with its beautiful nature. I once traveled to Delhi for my research, and it is a good opportunity to discover other cities if time permits.

When staying and living in Chennai, you can easily meet friends in restaurants and pubs, go to the cinema or go shopping in its shopping districts (like T. Nagar or TTK Road) or one of its many malls (the closest to IIT Madras is Phoenix Mall). When you want to explore the local restaurant scene, you should use the app Zomato as it shows you all the restaurants in your area (and you can also easily order home) and rates the quality.

You should ask locals about things happening on the weekends. For example, I once attended an Indian handicrafts flea market at a traditional dance school (you can check out Kalakshetra Foundation).

7. Practical Information

7.1 Communication

As soon as I landed, I got an Indian SIM Card. The requirements change every time I go to India, and I have to say that this time, it was the easiest experience I have ever had. My landlord recommended me an airtel shop that I visited with copies of my passport and visa (for copies, look out for XEROX shops). I got a SIM Card that was valid for the time of my visa, and with 300 INR per month, I got free calls in India and 1,5 GB of mobile data per day. This way, I even had more than enough internet when wifi wasn't around (which was not that often the case). When traveling to another Indian state, you have to allow roaming, but nowadays, the packages offer the same services in another states than in your home state (but to be sure: check it with your provider).

India has a very good network coverage, though, of course, there can be blind spots in rural areas. On campus, I mostly used eduroam on my phone, and for my laptop, I got the official IIT Madras network. However, for security reasons, I could not connect to my home university VPN through this network, which was another reason why I found working from my apartment easier.

7.2 Getting around

I mainly used ola and uber for traveling in the city and even for some outstation trips. Nowadays, you can link your app to your credit card, but I've found that auto drivers prefer cash over online payment. I usually ordered autos or minicabs for my everyday needs. Nowadays, you can also order a bike ride, but I didn't try that out. A new app for this would be rapido.

When I traveled outstation, I had several options:

Railways

Train journeys are a wonderful experience in India, but the booking process can be a bit confusing in the beginning with its different classes and booking options. On top of that, you cannot book tickets online as a foreigner, and you need either an Indian friend or a travel agency that books it for you. The third option is to go to the train station itself to buy the ticket there in advance. If you do that, you can benefit from the tourist quota, which reserves seats for tourists. Still, it also means that you must go to the train station a few days in advance, wait in the queue, and be sent to different people who are (or are not) responsible for the tourist quota. I

recommend the Shatabdi Express to Bangalore, as it is the fastest option. Other trains take much longer but, of course, also offer a more diverse observation of Indian society.

When traveling with a train, make sure to be at the train station early (though it is not necessary to be there 2,5 hours in advance in the early morning as my landlord tried to make me believe...)

Air Travels

When traveling long distances, the easiest mode of travel is by plane. If booked early in advance, flying to India can be very cheap. As in Europe, you must check if luggage is included and if other services cost extra. I booked my flights over www.makemytrip.com, but there are other websites too.

You should plan enough time to reach the airport, due to traffic congestion, it can sometimes take much longer than expected. You can pre-book cabs for the airport via uber and ola or ask hotel staff/landlords for guidance to reach the airport on time.

The security line can be quite messy at Indian airports, and there are always two different queues for men and women.

Busses

Bus travel is very common for Indians if they want to travel medium- and long distances. You can also book them on websites like ww.makemytrip.com. Be sure to be on time at the specific pick-up spot as it can get quite busy at these places and it might take some time to find your specific bus.

Rental Cars

When traveling to remote areas or for day trips, it can be easiest to rent a car. If you dare, you can rent a car on your own, but the most common way is to rent a car with a driver. Nowadays, you can book outstation cabs via uber and ola for day trips; if you want to travel for a few days or to remote areas (f.e. for field work), you should book it with a travel agency. IIT Madras has its own travel agency, and you can ask your fellow students/ supervisor/ colleagues for support in case you need a rental car.

7.3 Safety & Good Health

Safety in General

India doesn't have the best reputation concerning travel safety, particularly for women. However, I experienced Chennai as a safe city, and traveling outstation is not a risk when following a few guidelines. Of course, one should show respect for local traditions. For my personal feeling of safety,

I try to wear modest clothes that also cover my shoulders and legs, I have a charged phone with me all the time, and when it's dark, I try to take a booked cab and don't walk home alone.

Concerning physical health, the highest risk in India is to fall sick due to the wrong food or to get a cold due to A/C rooms and the hot climate. Dengue can be quite a risk in the rainy season, and constant prevention of mosquito bites is the best solution. Though, particularly in Chennai's climate, it is not really possible not to get bitten by mosquitos. But not every mosquito bite leads to dengue and malaria... If something happens, there are very good clinics in big Indian cities, and it's best to ask local friends for recommendations for good doctors. On the Campus of IIT Madras, there is also a hospital that caters to the students and staff on the campus.

Food and Drinks

Street food is amazing in India and can be found on every corner of Indian cities. There is always a little risk, but if it is freshly made, it can usually be consumed without the risk of falling sick. For restaurants and pubs, I normally use Zomato/ google or TripAdvisor to check the quality of the restaurant in advance, or I rely on local recommendations. Particularly the last

method gets you normally to delicious food stalls and restaurants. When traveling outstation, crowded places that already exist for quite some time are more trustworthy. I've learned that if you follow these rules, you're fine 95% of the time. 5% is just (bad) luck.

In case you want to buy alcohol (particularly as a woman): Tamil Nadu only allows alcohol to be sold in restaurants with a license or state-run liquor shops called TASMAL. If you're a woman and want to purchase some alcohol outside of the restaurants, you should only go to TASMAL Elite. And note that alcohol is not allowed on the campus.

Photos with Locals

Depending on your skin color, height, and hair texture, you might be a photo image for locals, particularly in rural areas. My personal rules are that aunties and kids usually get a photo with me, but with younger men, I am more restrictive. A clear (and repeated) no is sometimes necessary.

Road Safety

The facts first: Indian traffic still carries the British heritage of driving on the left. Except for that, there is only little that reminds one of the western traffic norms. It takes time to adjust to it and to come up with the needed

courage. In the beginning, it can be helpful to follow a group of Indians when they are crossing the street. A signal with your hand (but don't show your palm to people, that's considered rude) and eye contact with approaching drivers can also be helpful. In general: Fake it till you make it! Always look confident when crossing; people will (most probably) break for you. I never drove in India on my own. However, in places like Goa and Pondicherry, renting a scooter for

traveling around is a popular activity, and many foreigners succeed there. In Chennai, I mostly used apps like uber and ola to book cabs and autos. When the apps didn't work, I hailed an auto on my own. Use the rough amount for the distance mentioned in the apps to know your starting price for the fair. However, accept that it might get more expensive, particularly when it's dark or raining.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I can stress how much I always enjoy having the opportunity to go to India, and this stay will particularly stay in my memory. Doing research in India can be strenuous and exhausting but also enriching and exciting. The infrastructure and support by IGCS and IIT Madras helped me a lot during all the different – small and big – challenges, and I would recommend everyone this experience.

If any reader is now excited to travel to India and you have any questions about your journey, feel free to contact me.

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](#).