

GRANTEE EXPERIENCE REPORT

Indo-German Centre for Sustainability (IGCS)
IGCS Research Exchange, Grant Period 2023

experience report

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Experience Report on IGCS Research Exchange, Grant Period 2023

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Research Topic

Sustainable Urban Development

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A promotional banner for IGCS grants. On the left, a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt and a backpack, smiles. Behind her is a white mandala pattern. The background is a dark red color. On the right, the IGCS logo is at the top. Below it, the text reads: 'Grants For Students and Researchers', 'Conduct Research on sustainability topics in India or Germany', 'APPLICATION OPEN', and 'Floating deadline for the year 2024'. At the bottom right, a URL is provided: 'For more information: https://www.igcs-chennai.org/grants/'. At the very bottom, there are logos for funding partners: DAAD, German Science and Technology, Federal Ministry of Education and Research, RWTH Aachen University, CIAU, and TU9.

About the IGCS Grants

IGCS awards scholarships to students and researchers from India and Germany with excellent academic records, very good English, and intercultural communication skills. The scholarship consists of a mobility grant and an accommodation grant according to DAAD funding rates, as a rule. Learn more about the funding opportunities at IGCS [here](#).

Experience Report on IGCS Research Exchange, Funding Period 2023

As a beneficiary of the IGCS scholarship, the participant has committed to sharing their valuable experience. This report is designed to encompass two distinct parts:

Part I: Written Testimonial

I stayed in Chennai for nearly 6 months from the 24th of February until the 14th of August 2023 to do data collection for my master thesis. The idea for a research exchange with IGCS came up after I got in contact with one of the researchers at IGCS, Dr. Christoph Woiwode. He suggested that I could locate my case study in India and told me about the student grants offered by the IGCS. Although I had not been thinking of anything like this before, I was directly excited about the idea of conducting my research in India. Therefore, I decided to give it a try. To prepare for the application, I further developed my research topic and wrote an exposé including the theoretical background of my research topic, the main research questions, methods, and a rough timeline. Dr. Woiwode supported me in that process and wrote the recommendation letter that I needed for the application. End of November 2022, I finally applied online for the fellowship. Just about a week later I received the happy news that my application had been granted.

After that, the preparations started. Although the scholarships for graduate students are only for a period of three months, I wished to stay longer at my own expense. Fortunately, this plan was supported by my supervisors who provided me with an invitation letter covering a period of six months which I needed to apply for a prolonged visa. Apart from the visa application, there were several other things that needed to be planned and organized. In this report, I will provide some information about the steps that I found most important during that phase. I hope these will help you with the preparation of your own stay. After that, I will describe my experiences after arriving in Chennai and during my stay. As I was accommodated on campus, much of the information will be most relevant for people that are also staying on campus. But I will also provide a lot of general information that might be valuable for everyone coming to IGCS.

Preparing your stay

Time of stay

If you are a bit flexible with the timing, having a look at the local climate in Chennai might be a good idea to decide when to plan your stay. Someone once told me, that Chennai is known as the sauna of India and its season are referred to as hot, hotter, hottest. I think, the best time to be in Chennai is January and February, when it is relatively dry and the temperatures modest. From March on, the temperatures continually rise until they reach their maximum in May and June. After that they slowly decrease again, and it starts to rain more often. As I heard, the peak of the rainy season is in November and December. As I arrived at the end of February and left mid-August, I covered the entire hot season. At its peak we had around 38-39 degrees (Celsius) every day for several weeks. On a few days even above 40 degrees which, according to my weather app, felt like 52 degrees and I wouldn't want to

disagree. This is an experience, but not necessarily one that I would recommend. Especially if you are staying on campus with no AC in the rooms. So, if possible, I would recommend that you avoid staying during the hottest season. But in any case, I guess you won't be able to avoid sweating completely.

Visa application

As the Indian Consulate in Frankfurt has outsourced its administrative work, the service provider Indo-German Consultancy Services Ltd. (also IGCS, do not mix up) is responsible for processing the visa applications. After submitting the visa application online, you can either send all the required documents by post or arrange an appointment at the Consultancy Services in Frankfurt to hand them in personally. For my student visa application, I needed an invitation letter from an IITM professor. Dr. Woiwode took care of finding an official guest professor for me.

I won't list all the other documents that I needed for my application as it is better to check the up-to-date list of all the required documents online on igcsvisa.de. Be aware that it can take a while to gather all the required documents and you should calculate enough time for the process. From the confirmation of my scholarship, it took me one month to get the required documents. I submitted the application in person in Frankfurt because I hoped that would speed up the process a little. But I am not sure if it made a big difference. It took nearly one month from the date of my visa appointment until holding the visa in my hand.

Flights

In general, it is recommended that you book your flight after your visa application is confirmed. In my case, however, the timing was very tight, and I didn't wait until I got my visa but booked the flight beforehand. I mostly used Skyscanner and Google Flights to search for flights.

Regarding the time of your arrival in Chennai, please consider the following: If you are staying in one of the hostels on campus, please be aware, that there are no mattresses in the rooms, but you will have to buy one on campus. So, it might be better to arrive during the day while the shop where you can buy it, is still open. Otherwise, you might have to spend the first night on the metal bed or check if you can get a used mattress from somewhere.

Accommodation

Regarding your accommodation in Chennai, you have two main choices. You can either stay in one of the student dormitories (called *hostel*) on campus or look for an apartment outside campus for example via Airbnb. I decided to stay in a hostel on campus and never regretted that decision. Living on campus is not only the cheapest option, but from my experience it also offers many other advantages. The most important one for me was to be constantly surrounded by beautiful nature. The campus felt like a parallel universe and quite retreat compared to the hectic and noisy world outside. And although I really enjoyed exploring the city, I was always happy come back to the much more peaceful (and also slightly cooler) campus. Another advantage is that most things you need are just a short bike ride away,

including all the sports facilities the campus offers. Moreover, I met a lot of friends on campus, international as well as local. And although I have no comparison, I imagine it's easier to meet people when you live on campus.

Some of the main disadvantages of staying on campus are probably that there is no air conditioning in the rooms, no good facility to cook your own food and only limited possibilities to invite people to the hostel. Apart from that, I heard from other exchange students that the boys hostel can be quite noisy even at night. Luckily, the girls hostel was very calm.

I will give more information about the hostel I stayed at in one of the following sections. Maybe this will also help you in taking your decision.

Vaccinations and health insurance

Another important aspect is getting a foreign travel health insurance. You can just compare insurances online or check whether your German health insurance also offers special travel insurances. It is advisable to get an insurance that offers transportation back home not only when it is medically needed ('*notwendig*'), but also medically appropriate ('*medizinisch sinnvoll*').

Please also check with a doctor if you need any vaccinations for your stay in India.

Packing

Clothes:

What clothes you will need depends a bit on the season, but in general, due to the hot climate light clothes are a good choice. On campus, there is no strict dress code. Even as a woman it is not a problem to wear shorter clothes like tops, shorts, skirts, or dresses. Outside campus the situation is different. Out of respect for local customs (and maybe also your own feeling of safety and comfort), it is more advisable for women to wear clothes that cover (most of) the legs, the shoulders, and the belly. For men it is ok to wear shorts also outside campus. To protect yourself from mosquito bites, bringing some light, long clothes that cover your arms is also not a bad idea. For airconditioned rooms or slightly cooler temperatures at night, you might pack a light pullover or jacket or a light scarf. During rainy season, I guess a light raincoat also makes sense. Regarding footwear, I would recommend bringing one pair of trainers, one pair of comfortable sandals and one pair of flip flops for the rest rooms. In general, I would recommend choosing clothes that are rather robust and easy to wash. As the clothes can get dirty rather quickly, better not bring your most favourite clothes. No white clothes that you care about in particular. They might not be white anymore afterwards. Same is true for shoes. Especially as the roads on campus can be quite dusty from the red soil. Anyway, if you forget to pack anything or find that you are missing something, you can easily buy new clothes in India.

Medicine:

Although you easily get medicine at the pharmacy on campus or at any other pharmacy outside of it, it makes sense to bring a basic set of medicine. Especially those medicines that you are used to and usually rely on for common illnesses, because you will probably not get the same brands in India. Nasal spray, for example, does not seem to be that common in India. Medicine for digestive problems is of course available, though I was not able to find charcoal tablets (*"Kohletabletten"*). When it comes to mosquito repellent, I cannot give a clear recommendation. I had the feeling that the repellent I brought from Germany was stronger than the local brand but burned a lot on my skin. The local repellent *Odomos* was less strong but still effective and felt much gentler on the skin which is an advantage considering how often you have to apply it. As it is not possible - even with the strongest mosquito repellent - to completely avoid mosquito bites, you might consider bringing something like a *Bite Away*. At least, I was very happy when another research fellow brought me one from Germany.

Other:

There are a few other things that I would advise to pack:

- Copies of your most important documents like your passport and your visa,
- Four or five copies of a photograph of you (portrait, format 5 x 5 cm) as you will need them for some administrative processes in the first days,
- Earplugs, if you are sensitive to noise,
- A fitted sheet (*'Spannbettlaken'*) for the mattress, because in India you usually only get sheets without an elastic band that slip off the bed easily,
- A refillable bottle in which you can fill drinking water from the water dispensers; you can of course also get bottles in India, but if you already have one, there is no need to buy a need one,
- Some cash in Euros; as you are not allowed to carry Indian rupees (INR) outside India, you cannot get INR in advance in Germany. But you can change Euros to INR at Chennai airport. Then you do not have to rely completely on your credit card.

Arriving in Chennai

Arriving at the airport

During immigration at the airport, 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 check. The area where I arrived at the airport in Chennai was surprisingly small and I was surprised to find that there is no Wifi. There is a money exchange, however. To get to campus or to your accommodation in the city, you have different options. Of course, there are a lot of taxi and *tuk tuk* (motor-rickshaws) drivers waiting outside the airport. But as my supervisor had told me that there is also the possibility to get pre-paid taxis at the airport, I choose that option. I'm not sure, if this is the cheapest option but I would say it is the easiest and probably also safest one. The place to book

them is just before the exit inside the airport. I paid 700 rupees (~7,50 Euros) to get to campus. Be prepared that the driver will probably ask for a small tip.

Arriving on campus: The first day

Taxis and *tuk tuks* are allowed to enter the campus through the main gate. So, if you are staying on campus, you can ask the driver to bring you directly to your hostel on campus. When I arrived at my hostel, *Sabarmati*, the lady guard at the entrance was already expecting me and after filling out some forms, then they showed me my room. As already mentioned, there is no mattress in the room. But there is a small shop on campus called *Prime Mart*, where you can buy one. In my case, they even brought the mattress to my hostel. Here also, a small tip is surely welcomed. After moving into my room, I went to the *Office of Global Engagement (OGE)* to meet my contact person, Marisa. She informed me about the next steps and what administrative work there is to do. You will need to fill out some forms (*Form C, Form S*) at the OGE and at the office of your hostel.

Arriving on campus: The first week

During the first days, you might be a bit overwhelmed with all the new impressions and probably need a while to get used to everything. You will also still have several administrative things to do. For example, filling out a lot of forms (with often more or less the same information). After getting your Roll No., you can pay your hostel fee at the Office of Hostel Management and apply for your ID card at the administration building. Be prepared that you might need a little patience in the first days. It is not always clear which documents are needed and you might have to go to some places several times until you finally get what you wanted. If you need help in that process, you can always contact someone from the OGE. They are usually quite busy (and might need a reminder to do things from time to time), but overall, they are very nice and helpful.

If you are staying in India for more than 180 days, you also need to do your *eFRRO-registration* within the first two weeks after your arrival. You will get an appointment to do that from the OGE.

For me, there were two “*game changers*” during the first days that made life much easier. First was getting a sim card. As there is no Wifi in the hostel, communication without your own local sim card is not that easy. So, I would recommend getting a local sim card as soon as possible. There are two main companies offering sim cards: *Airtel* and *Jio*. I decided to get one from Airtel, but the connection in the hostel, especially inside the rooms, was not that good. Maybe that’s a general problem, though I had the feeling that a friend’s connection who has a Jio sim card was slightly better, also while travelling outside Chennai. I’m not sure where you can get Jio sim cards, but there are several Airtel stores around. I went to the one in *Vijaya Nagar*. The fastest way to get there is with a tuk tuk from *Velachery Gate*. If you tell the driver, you need to get to the Airtel Office in Vijaya Nagar they will most likely know what you mean. I paid 80-100 rupees (~1,00 Euro) one-way to get to the office. For the sim card, I paid less than 500 rupees (~5,50 Euros) per month for 30GB (data) which was more than enough for me. For this process don’t forget to bring your passport. You need that to get a sim card. And at the Airtel store they also needed an Indian reference number that they call during the initiation process. So better plan

in advance who's number you want to give them. Maybe someone from the IGCS, or from the OGE or another exchange student you know that is already in India.

The second game changer was getting a *bike* (or bicycle). Although there are free shuttle busses on campus, moving around by bike is much more convenient. Especially during the first days with all the administrative work, for which you will have to go to many different places on campus, a bike saves you a lot of time and energy. So, I would recommend that you get a bike as quickly as possible. I bought a second-hand bike at one of the bike shops on campus. There are several of them on campus, one for example next to *Usha Café* and one close to *Taramani gate*. Most of the shops do only repairs though and they might not always offer bikes to sell. Another option to buy a second-hand bike could be a Facebook group in which people sell stuff or also hostel WhatsApp groups. The prices differ of course, but I had the feeling that 2500-2800 rupees (~28,50 Euros) is a regular price, at least in the shops. If you want to buy a new bike, you can either go to *Decathlon* or to a bike shop outside campus. One is for example outside Velachery gate to the left and then left again around the next corner.

Life on Campus

The campus

The campus spreads over an area of more than 600 acres. It consists of three main areas: *The residential area* where for example professors and their families live, *the hostel area* with all the student hostels and messes, and an area where *all the different departments* are located. There are three gates through which you can get in and out of the campus: Main Gate, Velachery Gate and Taramani Gate. Shuttle buses run regularly between the different areas and gates.

Apart from this, the campus offers most of the basic facilities that you will need: several shops to buy food, snacks, drugstore products, stationery etc., two banks and ATMs, a hospital and a pharmacy, a hairdresser, a print shop and several bike shops. Inside and outside the shopping complex are also shops that offer repairing for clothes and leather items. Moreover, you will find a sports complex with a gym, many different sports grounds, a swimming pool, three different Hindu temples, India's first 3D printed house and even an open-air theatre. At the end of my stay, I heard that a massage studio was about to open but I'm not sure if this is true.

The hostel

There are several girls hostels and many different boys hostels on campus that are all named after Indian rivers. All the international students, interns, research scholars etc. that I met were either accommodated in *Sabarmati hostel* (females) or in *Mandakini hostel* (males). As I stayed in Sabarmati, I can only describe the situation there. I think the hostel only has single rooms. At least mine was a single room and I haven't seen any other type of room in the hostel. The rooms are not that big, but I found it sufficient (The rooms in the boys hostel Mandakini are bigger I heard). They (a room in hostel) are furnished with a metal (frame) bed, desk, chair, wardrobe, a small shelf, and a ceiling fan. Please note, that these rooms do not have AC! So, during the hot season, it can get quite hot inside the rooms.

On each of the seven floors are several rest rooms with shared toilets, showers, and basins. **It is not advisable to drink the water from the sink**, but rather on each floor and also downstairs in the lobby there are water dispensers, where you can get drinking water. On one side of the 6th floor, there is a room with washing machines and a lot of racks and lines to hang up your laundry. As there are only 4 automatic washing machines for the whole hostel, it can get quite busy, and you will probably have to wait a bit before you can use a machine. There is supposed to be a kitchen somewhere on the ground floor next to the lobby, but I never used it. I heard that it's rather poorly equipped and I know hardly anyone who actually used the kitchen. There is a fridge in the lobby though, where you can store food or medicine. Better put your name and room number on your items. Luckily, I didn't find mosquitos to be a big problem inside the hostel. Nevertheless, mosquito nets in front of the windows are advisable. If there are no nets in your room, there is someone you can contact to install them. You can find the contact number on a black board in the hostel lobby. Entry to the hostel for its inhabitants is possible at any time of the day (or night) as there is always a lady guard sitting at the entrance. But if you enter the hostel past midnight, you will have to sign in a list.

Eating on campus

Like most of the students on campus, I usually ate in the mess hall. There are several messes - named after Indian mountains - on campus which offer three meals a day. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. The food there is - probably like in most messes - not the best, but it's cheap and convenient. To be able to eat in the mess hall, you have to buy mess coupons at the *Hostel Management (CCW)* in advance. There you can chose, for which mess, for how many days and for which meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner) you want to buy coupons. Each time you go to the mess, you have to give the person sitting at the entrance one of your coupons. Usually, you can only buy coupons for up to seven days, which can be a bit annoying. I heard that it's also possible to buy some kind of mess card for a whole month. But in that case, if I got it right, you would have to pay for all three meals every day no matter if you are actually going to mess or not. The different messes slightly differ regarding the food they offer. Some offer only veg food, others also non-veg. Some offer more North Indian food, others more South Indian food. There is also a Jain mess. Vindhya mess has been only for girls, but I'm not sure if boys are allowed now too. At the beginning, I went to Himalaya mess ground floor, but changed to *Nilgiri* after a few weeks. As the caterers for the mess have changed at the end of my stay, I can't give a recommendation. You will have to find out, which mess hall you prefer. Apart from the messes, there are also other options to get food like the Himalaya food court, the campus café (which is not really a café but also more of a food court), and the restaurant Zaitoon. The food there is usually a little bit more expensive than in the mess hall, but still very affordable and a nice change from the mess food from time to time. Usha café located between Sabarmati hostel and the library also offers tea and a small variety of snacks like Samosa. A short way behind the library lies Café Coffee Day where you can get a variety of coffees, teas, cakes, and other snacks. Of course, you can also order food from outside via platforms like *Zomato* or *Swiggy*. If you want to buy food yourself, you find the largest selection at the shops in the shopping complex along *Delhi Avenue* (towards main gate on the right side) where there is also a shop selling

fresh fruits and vegetables. You can also get fruits at the juices shops next to Usha café and at Himalaya food court.

Be a bit careful with storing (opened) food in your room. I once had ants in my room, because they had been attracted from fruit remains on my desk. It doesn't matter if it's the 6th floor. They will find their way to your room! But storing sealed food or uncut fruits should be fine.

Free time activities

If you like sports, you will find a lot of different opportunities on campus. For example, you can play soccer, cricket, volleyball, badminton, table tennis, do yoga, go swimming or to the gym. You can also check the *Leisure Time Activities Program* (L-TAP). Every Saturday, the Student Film Club shows a movie at the Open Air Theatre (OAT). They change between current Western movies and Indian movies. Indian movies are usually shown with English subtitles. I always enjoyed going there and often found the reactions of the audience almost as entertaining as the film itself.

What I missed a bit during my stay were places to sit (or work) quietly or to meet with a bigger group of people (apart from Zaitoon or Himalaya food court). During my stay, several new benches have been installed on campus though as well as a new sitting area next to *Café Coffee Day* (CCD). CCD itself is also a nice place to sit, especially because it has AC. Apart from that, *Sangam Ground* or *Watsa Stadium* are common places to hang out. At Watsa, you will also see a lot of people going for a walk in the evenings when the sun is not that strong anymore.

Wildlife

The campus is located right next to Guindy National Park and is itself also mostly covered by lush vegetation. When I arrived, I couldn't believe that this place is really a campus. A feeling that never really left me during my entire stay. Until the end, I was always amazed by the beauty of the nature on campus. Especially by all these amazing trees and the monkeys, deer, blackbucks, flying foxes, and other animals roaming around freely. If you want to discover and learn more about the campus wildlife, I recommend you get in touch with the *Prakriti Wildlife Club* of IIT Madras. They sometimes offer walking tours on campus.

Besides this, there are some things that you should keep in mind. First, never carry food, bottles, or anything similar openly in your hand, if you don't want monkeys to come and take it from you (Carrying a phone is not a problem though). Second, please be considerate and patient to disturb the animals as least as possible. Third, I haven't encountered many snakes and scorpions, but they do live on campus, and you might not want to get too close to them. So don't be afraid but just be aware.

Rules

I guess there are a lot of written and unwritten rules on campus, but I just want to mention three that are maybe most important. First, you should know that smoking and drinking alcohol is prohibited everywhere on campus. Second, entry to the girls hostels is only allowed for female visitors. Male

visitors are generally not allowed. Similarly, girls are not allowed to enter the boys hostel Mandakini. In all other boys hostel, girls are allowed to enter during the day from 9am to 9pm. Third, please don't litter! The campus is supposed to be a plastic free zone. Still, I have seen it several times that deer are chewing on plastic bags or the like, which is a saddening sight to see. So please use one of the many dustbins on campus to get rid of your trash.

Research work at IGCS

The IGCS is located on the fourth floor of the *Biotech Building, Block 2 on Alumni Avenue*. A few days after my arrival on campus, I got my own workplace in a computational lab. Entry to the lab was possible only via fingerprint. After this was set up, I could enter the lab at any time according to my needs. I used my own laptop and connected it to a monitor, but I could also have used one of the computers in the lab. Fortunately, the lab has AC and although it was not always working properly, the temperatures inside the lab were usually (much) more pleasant than outside. I connected my laptop to LAN as well as to WLAN and all in all, the internet connection was mostly stable. Yet, you have to expect short power outages from time to time.

At the IGCS, I was affiliated with the [Land Use / Rural and Urban Development](#) research area. At IIT Madras, I was associated with the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences as my official ITM guest professor belongs to this department. The purpose of my stay at IGCS was to do data collection for my master thesis in M.Sc. "Sustainable Urban Development" at the *University of Duisburg-Essen*, Germany. Through qualitative research, it wanted to explore the relationship that people in Chennai have with nature and which role spirituality and culture play in this relationship. As I was working for my own 'project', I was very self-organized and independent regarding my work. Therefore, I was not always in the lab but also roaming around in the city or meeting people inside and outside campus. However, I was in close contact and regular exchange with my supervisor Dr. Christoph Woiwode, which helped me a lot with further defining and developing my research topic and identifying potential contacts. The joint meetings with my official guest professor and supervisor from IIT Madras also provided valuable input.

I was very glad that I had decided to stay for six instead of three months because I realized that the kind of work that I had planned takes time. Time to explore the city, time to get a feeling for the local culture and time to establish first contacts before I could actually dive into my main task of preparing and conducting interviews. Especially, making contacts sometimes requires patience and persistence. Many contacts only arise gradually through hints and recommendations from other contact persons, some people answer only after repeated requests, and others may not respond at all. Despite these challenges I really enjoyed my work and learned a lot.

What I also appreciated was the nice working atmosphere and the contact with other researchers from IGCS. Not only the professional exchange about our research topics, which partly overlapped or complemented each other, but also the private contact as some became good friends.

Life in Chennai

Chennai is the capital of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and one of India's megacities. Like in India in general, English is one of the official languages. The second official language and mother tongue of most of Chennai's inhabitant's is Tamil. The majority of people in Chennai are Hindus, followed by Muslims and Christians. As this was my first time in India, I cannot really compare Chennai to other big Indian cities, but from what I heard it is less hectic and crowded as cities like Mumbai or Delhi for example. However, I experienced Chennai as a buzzing city and being outside campus always felt like a constant rush for all senses.

Exploring the city

Although Chennai is not a tourist hotspot, I found there are still a lot of places that are worth visiting. First of all, there are, of course, a lot of temples. Two of the most famous ones are the *Marundeeswarar Temple* in *Thiruvanmiyur* and the *Kapaleeshwarar Temple* in *Mylapore*. Both are definitely worth a visit. But you will also find many other nice temples close to campus and all over the city. I would recommend you check online or ask people when there is going to be a religious festival. Because to see these temples during religious ceremonies is even more impressive than at a regular visit and a great experience. Other famous places are for example the *St. Thomas Basilica*, the Government Museum and *Fort St. George*. I would also recommend visiting the *Koyambedu* flower and vegetable market for perishable goods in Asia. If you want to see one of the oldest parts of the city, you should visit *George Town*, which lies North of Fort St. George and is reachable by foot from Chennai central station. When I went there, it was quite busy though and some areas were predominantly crowded by men. So as a woman, you might feel more comfortable not going there alone. If you are interested in art, you might like the *Cholamandal* artist village in the South of Chennai.

Due to my work, I also visited a lot of green and blue spaces in the city like parks, urban forests, rivers, lakes and of course the beaches. There are too many to list them all, but I will name a few examples. The most famous beach is *Marina Beach* which is the second longest urban beach in the world. Closer to campus are *Elliot's Beach* (Also called *Besant Nagar Beach*) or *Thiruvalluvar Nagar Beach* further down South. Don't keep your expectations too high though. Especially Marina Beach and Elliot's Beach are usually very crowded and dirty. The beaches further down to the South get a bit less crowded and cleaner. Swimming isn't allowed anywhere and although you will see a lot of people standing along the shore, you will hardly see anyone inside the water. At the Southern end of Marina Beach is a lighthouse from where you can have a nice view over the city. If you are in Chennai from January to April, I suggest you to get in contact with the *Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network* (SSTCN). They are doing turtle walks along the coast during the hatching season of the Olive Ridley Sea Turtle and during March and April they are releasing hatchlings into the sea. It's a great experience to join them on these walks and watch the little hatchlings being set free. From Elliot's beach you can also walk to the mouth of the *Adyar river* or to the *Broken Bridge* (climbing on the bridge is prohibited though). Unfortunately, the three rivers in Chennai are not in a good condition and are not always a nice experience, neither for the eyes (seeing trash) nor the nose. An exception is the *Adyar Eco-Park* which is a restored side arm

of the Adyar river. It is now a beautiful, calm habitat which can be visited during certain walking times or with guided tours. Another example of a restored area is the *Kotturpuram Urban Forest* which Nizhal has turned into a small but quite and green retreat from the hectic city. The top of *St. Thomas Mount* not only houses a religious shrine but also offers nice views of Chennai.

Moving around

A very common means of transport within the city are tuk tuks, or also called auto (from autorickshaw). They are cheaper than taxis but more comfortable than public transport. To book autos, I used the app called *Ola*. *Uber* can be used as well and sometimes, especially during rush hour, it can be useful to use both platforms parallelly to try to get an auto. Of course, you can also get an auto without these apps by just asking drivers on the street. But their prices are usually higher than the prices in the apps. It can be helpful to check which price the app shows for a certain route so that you can use this as reference point for bargaining with the drivers. Still, you will probably not get the same price on the street like in the app, especially during rush hour.

If you want to use public transport, you can choose between the metro, the railway, and public buses. The metro is the most expensive- something around 30-40 rupees (~0,40 Euros), but most convenient choice as it has AC and is not that crowded. Unfortunately, there is no metro station very close to campus so that you either have to take a bus or an auto to get to the station. With only 5 rupees (~0,05 Euros) per ticket, the railway is the cheapest means of transport. The closest railway station is *Kasthurba Nagar* station which can be reached within 10 minutes' walk from the main gate. From there, you can easily get to the *Kapaleeshwarar Temple* in *Mylapore* or Marina Beach, for example. Besides that, I mostly used buses to move around. There are countless bus lines within the city and several bus stops within walking distance of the three different campus gates. A bus ride usually costs around 10-20 rupees (~0,20 Euros) depending on the destination and the bus. There are also AC buses which are a bit more expensive. Pink buses are free of charge for women but can be used by men as well for the regular fee. In all buses, the seats on the left side are usually reserved for women. As one might already imagine, the buses can be quite full and sometimes you won't even be able to enter the bus but must wait for the next one. But it's not always like this and I also had some very relaxed bus rides. All in all, google maps proved very helpful in navigating within the city and finding the right public transport connections.

Food and drinks

Common dishes in Tamil Nadu are for example *Idli*, *Dosa*, *Vadai* or *Uttapam*. They are offered in many different varieties and are usually served with sambar and different chutneys. You will find countless restaurants all over the city where you can get these dishes. Not at any time though. Dosa for example is usually only available for breakfast and dinner. For lunch, many restaurants offer (mini) meals consisting of different varieties of rice, *Papadam* or bread like *Chapati* (also known as *Roti*), and various side dishes. On the streets, you will also find a lot of shops and stalls selling *chaats* (savory snacks) like *Bajji*, *Bhelpuri* or *Panipuri*. Other street foods classics that you can get for example on Elliot's Beach are

spring potatoes and freshly roasted corn. To find good restaurants it is best to ask friends for recommendations.

If you want to consume alcohol, you should know that Tamil Nadu only allows alcohol to be sold in bars and restaurants with a license or in liquor shops by the Government-owned company called Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (*TASMAC*). I think the closest *TASMAC* to campus is in the *Phoenix Mall*. There are other shops selling alcohol closer by, but they have a rather shady appearance and are probably illegal. Please also note that alcohol consumption in public spaces is prohibited. So, even if you buy alcohol legally at a *TASMAC*, it is illegal to drink it outside on the street or the beach for example.

Shopping

If you want to buy anything you can go to one of the many shopping malls. The closest one to IITM campus is Phoenix Market City. At the Phoenix Mall you get products from local as well as various international brands. If you want to have a more 'authentic' shopping experience, you can visit the *Pondy Bazaar* in *T. Nagar*. The shops around the *Kapaleeshwarar Temple* in Mylapore sell a wide range of religious items, accessories, and souvenirs. In particular, I recommend a visit at *Sri Vijaya Stores*. I was always fascinated by the huge amount and variety of colourful and wondrous objects that are offered there.

Going out

Chennai is not very famous for its nightlife. I would say the number of clubs is rather limited and it is more common do just go out to a restaurant, (resto) bar or pub with friends. The prices for drinks in bars are comparable with the prices in Germany and thus rather expensive for local students. Going to the cinema is also common. There are several cinemas all over Chennai, the closest one, *LUXE*, being inside the Phoenix Mall. You can check the program and book tickets on in bookmyshow.com, for example.

General Information

Money

Withdrawing money from a European bank account is not a problem as there are even several ATMs on campus (two from State Bank of India (*SBI*), one from *Canara Bank*). You cannot withdraw more than 10.000 Indian rupees (~110,00 Euros) per withdrawal though. I found that paying in cash can be inconvenient sometimes as people often do not have the right change, especially if you are paying with bigger cash notes. In most places inside and outside campus, digital payments based on *UPI* (Unified Payments Interface) are much more common than paying in cash. The two most popular *UPI* apps are *PhonePe* and *Paytm*. As you need an Indian bank account to use these apps, I decided to open a local bank account at *SBI*. This process was quite annoying, and it took me about a month and several visits at the bank, until I could finally use *Paytm*. When it finally worked though, it was very convenient and

considering the length of my stay, it was definitely worth it for me. But if you are only staying for a shorter period than two or three months it probably won't make sense. In any case, I would recommend that you bring two different credit cards from two different bank accounts. At least, I was very glad that I had a second one with me after I lost my first one. For cases like that, you should also save the emergency numbers to block your credit card. If you want to transfer money from a European bank account to an Indian account, the bank fees can be quite high. Instead, you can use the app *Wise* to transfer money. It is much much cheaper and very fast.

Health

All the international students I know had some health issues sooner or later, including me. Most common are of course food related problems. Your body will surely need some time to adjust to the new diet. Luckily, I could avoid a really bad food poisoning. It is difficult to give a general advice where and what to eat. You can have problems after having street food as well as after going to a fancy restaurant. I felt it's rather a case of (bad) luck. Nevertheless, there are a few principles that I tried to follow:

- I ate mostly vegetarian and was especially careful with eating fish and sea food.
- I tried to rather avoid eating things that have been lying openly for a while like in food stalls on the street. For example, I ate fruits from street vendors only when they were cut freshly. When I bought fruits for myself, I mostly stucked to fruits that could be peeled.
- You should also be very careful with water. It is not advisable to drink tap water. In restaurants, you usually get a jug of water for free. This is mostly not a problem as the water is filtered. But if you want to be sure, you can always order bottled water.
- Same for drinks with ice. If you don't want to take a risk, order without ice.

I found that using the tap water in the hostel for brushing teeth is not a problem though. Regardless of whether you have digestive problems or not, it is advisable to consume electrolytes regularly due to the hot climate and filtered drinking water which lacks minerals. Electrolytes are sold in pharmacies as powder or as ready-made drink. A natural source of electrolytes is coconut water. So don't miss out on enjoying the fresh coconuts offered in and outside campus!

Catching a cold or other similar infections are also common health issues. Probably because of the harsh changes between the hot and humid climate outside and ACs inside.

Dengue fever is another health risk. Preventing mosquito bites by using mosquito repellent and wearing long clothes is the best protection against an infection. However, it is impossible to entirely prevent to get bitten by mosquitos. Luckily, most of the mosquito bites do not lead to an infection.

In any case, there is a hospital directly on campus where you can find help. If you have any problem, you can just go there and talk to a doctor for free. Next to the hospital is also a pharmacy where you can get medicine with or without prescription.

Safety

Indian traffic is maybe one of the first things people think about when it comes to safety issues. Although the traffic in Chennai is probably not as chaotic as in other big Indian cities, it can still be overwhelming. It also took some time for me to get used to the *left-hand traffic* which is a heritage from the British. Although other internationals used their bikes outside campus, I never did this because I did not feel comfortable with it. I also never drove a car or a scooter myself. Even walking along the street can feel a bit dangerous sometimes as sidewalks for pedestrians are often missing or in a bad condition (be careful not to trip on uneven ground or step in holes). Also crossing the street can be challenging. I found it helpful to follow other pedestrians when they cross the street. Some might even help you crossing. Anyway, you will get used to it and more confident over time.

Another safety aspect I want to mention is based on my experience of traveling alone as a woman. All in all, I experienced Chennai as a safe city. During the day, I mostly felt safe also when I was travelling alone. And even if something would happen, by day there are usually always people around that one could ask for help. At night however, the streets are rather empty, and it is not advisable to walk around alone in the dark as woman. Also travelling alone by sleeper bus etc. is maybe not the best idea. In most cases probably nothing would happen, but from my experience I guess I would not really feel comfortable and would not want to risk getting in any precarious or unpleasant situation. On campus, I felt safe at any time of the day, with and without company.

Interacting with locals

In general, I experienced the local people to be very friendly, hospitable, and helpful. People are eager to get in contact with you, to show you their culture and maybe even to invite you to their home. As Chennai is not a tourist hotspot, there are not that many foreigners and especially not many white people. This is probably why me and some international friends, as white Europeans, attracted a lot of attention from locals when we were outside campus. People show their curiosity or interest in many different ways from stealing furtive glances, to staring blankly at you, to smiling and waving brightly. Some would even tip their friends on the shoulder and point at you. Many people will also start talking to you by asking questions about where you are from etc. To get this much attention felt very weird to me, I must admit, and I never really got used to it. What I found most disturbing was the habit of people asking for selfies, no matter if you had already talked to them or were just walking by. Same is true for strangers that stretch out their arms in passing by to shake your hand. After a while, I decided not to do any pictures or shake hands with completely random people that I hadn't really talked to before. That might seem a bit rude, but it felt better for me. I think in that context, everyone must find out for themselves what they are comfortable with or not.

Exploring South India

If you are coming to India, you might not only want to stay in Chennai but also travel and explore the surroundings a bit. India as a whole of course offers countless opportunities to travel. But as the distances are usually quite far and travelling can be exhausting, I concentrated on travelling in the South of India and can therefore only share my experiences with that.

Where to go?

One of the closest and most popular tourist destinations is *Mahabalipuram*. It is famous for its wonderful old temples and other historical sites. As it is located just a short way from Chennai further down the coast to the South, most people just do it as a day trip from Chennai. But we stayed overnight, and I was glad that we had more time to explore the temples and enjoy the relaxed atmosphere of the old fishermen village. Swimming is possible, but also here, don't expect too much regarding the water quality.

Just a few hours by bus further down the coast you can visit another famous tourist spot, *Pondicherry*. The city has been a French colony and the old part of the town, called White Town, is still famous for its French flair. If you want to eat some nice French bakery products, you can go to "Bread and Chocolate." "Surguru Restaurant" offers good Indian food. Close to Pondicherry lies the experimental township *Auroville*. We stayed in Auroville for several nights and visited Pondicherry as a day trip from there. If you are planning to visit Auroville, I would recommend that you book a visit of the Inner Chamber of the *Matrimandir*. For me, this was a very special and unique experience. As the places are limited, you will have to book several days in advance.

The neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, is also a popular tourist destination. We spend one week in Kerala and stayed in *Munnar* with its beautiful hilly scenery full of tea plantations, in *Alleppey* with its famous backwaters and in *Kochi*, where I liked the slightly artsy vibe with several galleries in the old part of the town.

Further away but still definitely worth the trip is *Hampi*, a UNESCO world heritage site located in Karnataka. Apart from many historical sites and temples, it offers a very beautiful landscape and hills with some really nice views.

Apart from these places that I have been to, there are several other places that I would have liked to see. In Tamil Nadu for example, hill stations like *Ooty* and *Kodaikanal* invite to escape from the Chennai heat, cities like *Thanjavur* and *Madurai* are important historical sites and *Rameswaram* is a place of great religious significance.

How to travel?

To get to closer locations like *Mahabalipuram*, you can get there either by public bus or you can rent a scooter to drive there yourself. Some people even make a bike trip out of it. To get to Pondicherry, you can either book a private bus in advance or you can take a public bus leaving from a bus stop South of *Kasthurba Nagar railway station*. The public buses might be less comfortable, but they are cheaper and leave regularly. To get from Pondicherry to Auroville, the easiest way is to get an auto which will cost around 400-500 rupees (~110,00 Euros). For longer distances, it's common to travel overnight either by sleeper bus or sleeper train. As I haven't travelled by sleeper train, I can't give much information on that. I just heard that there are different types of sleeper trains depending on how many levels of beds there are or if they have AC or not. I also heard that the trains are usually more comfortable and cheaper than the buses. But there are not train connection to every destination and you have to book the train tickets quite some time in advance (usually several weeks). Even then, you might not get the ticket directly but get on a waiting list instead. Sleeper buses can be booked more spontaneously. Often even just a day in advance is sufficient. There are many different companies offering sleeper buses. To book tickets, I used the platforms [easemytrip.com](https://www.easemytrip.com) or [redbus.in](https://www.redbus.in) or I booked via Paytm. I think the same platforms can be used for booking train tickets. Be sure to arrive at the bus stop early enough, because especially at bigger bus stops it can take a while to find your specific pick-up point.

Though I would recommend travelling overnight as it saves time and money for accommodation, you should be aware that travelling by sleeper bus is not the most restful experience. The bus rides can be quite bumpy and noisy. And as there are no toilets in the bus, the bus stops regularly. But you never know, how long it is going to take until the next stop and there are not women's toilets at every stop. Sometimes you also have to change buses unexpectedly. But all in all, even if things sometimes seem a bit chaotic and unorganized, they usually work out fine.

Tourist visa

If you want to travel before or after the period of your scholarship, you will need a separate tourist visa for that. **Please note that it is not possible to apply for another visa if you are still having a valid visa.** And without a valid visa, it is not advisable to stay in India. So, you will have to leave the country for a few days to apply for a new visa from outside India. One option is for example Sri Lanka which is pretty close from Chennai (still only reachable by plane though). Luckily, the tourist visa is an e-Visa and you will get it within just a few days. So, applying for a tourist visa after your stay at IGCS is not a big problem, if you leave the country for a few days. Travelling in India before your stay in Chennai is much more complicated as the application process for a student or research visa takes much longer.

Conclusion

One of the first things I saw in the hostel on the day of my arrival in Chennai was a writing on the wall saying: “Will it be easy? Nope. Worth it? Absolutely.” I immediately had the feeling that this might be the motto of my upcoming stay. And I was right. Of course, living and researching in India is not always easy. But overall, despite ups and downs, I really enjoyed my stay. It always sounds a bit stereotypical to talk about an enriching experience. But I don’t know how else to say it. My time in India has indeed been a formative and enriching experience for me. Professionally as well as personally. I am still thankful that I got the chance to do this exchange which I can highly recommend. And I am grateful for all the precious memories I will keep from these past months.

I hope this report will help others to enjoy their time in India as well. If there are any questions left, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Part II: Digital Media

Grantees are invited to share their experiences in digital media, encompassing photographs, illustrations, or graphics within the context of the IGCS scholarship.

