

Paavan Sawjani: 'Sex and the Post-colonial city: University students' understanding of the accepted boundaries of public intimacy in New Delhi, India' (University of Cambridge)

What inspired you to choose your dissertation topic and how did you narrow down your focus?

I had spent the summer of my first year in New Delhi for volunteering and I was staying with the family who run the charity I was working with. One evening during dinner, we were talking about the ongoing crisis of women's safety in the city where my host suggested that TV and film portrayals of a 'modernising India' were not consistent with the realities. Her point in short, though, was that this was misleading to young girls growing up who would look up to the clothing and behaviour of the actresses, thinking it was the norm in a society that has proven to be unforgiving of the very same. I do not for one second believe that she was *blaming* women – and I would say that she, herself, has done much to challenge the patriarchal system – more that the changing media was creating a culture clash with severe effect.

This discussion prompted the origins of my dissertation idea. I was really keen to investigate the observation my host had made about the rapidly changing popular culture in India, and what she saw as a disconnect with real society. Specifically, I was very interested in the changing geographies of gender and sexuality that might have been emerging from this. This developed into the central theme of my research and was the starting point for the exploratory reading I did. The focus on university students served both practically in the accessibility of interviewees but also, more importantly, as an appropriate focus given the literature's split opinion on trends of youth being more liberal or conservative and the previous generation.

Whilst doing my reading it became more and more apparent that this topic had intersections with space, postcolonialism, gender, sexuality, youth cultures, nationalism, media studies and regulation. This often felt overwhelming as each of these were important to consider and I felt that to omit any of them would weak my argument. I think what this process taught me most was that finding a focus does not necessarily mean picking a distinct area of geographical thought to run with, but it can be done by finding the time to really work out where the overlaps are strongest and most relevant, and then teasing out those intricacies. Such is the nature of geographical research that this is likely the case with most dissertations so the same process of finding the overlap should work for others.

How did you find the dissertation experience? What were the highs and lows (challenges and rewards)?

I'll begin with saying that the dissertation experience was a fantastically rewarding experience. Having had the opportunity to do it abroad was an added bonus as it meant I got to spend time getting to know and understand people who are similar to myself in many ways but also have very different backgrounds and worldviews. I spent 3 weeks 'in the field' which in hindsight was plenty of time, but whilst being there often felt like it might not have been. Interviews, whilst being an exciting research method, can be quite difficult to organise. This means that a lot of days were spent messaging/emailing/ chasing people up which could be quite frustrating. This was not a situation that was helped by trying to do research with students at Delhi University during election season and the monsoon.

The write-up process was surprisingly enjoyable. When faced with a 10,000-word dissertation it can feel quite daunting, but equally manageable when you realise it can effectively be broken down into a series of short essays. It can be cliché to say that everyone has their own way of working, but also it

is entirely true. I decided to block out a few weeks out of my final year to concentrate on the write up. For me this worked really well and helped maintain a consistent argument and narrative throughout. In hindsight, this maybe hurt my revision and preparation for my exams, but I was very keen to make the most of the effort I had made in gathering responses and conceptualising my research by producing a well-polished finished product.

What advice would you give other undergraduate students undertaking a (GCYFRG-related) dissertation?

Firstly, definitely spend some time reading around your chosen topic. The research proposal is an excellent opportunity to do this but try and start as soon as you can because there is nothing more crushing than the inflexibility a submission deadline offers. In other words, the later you leave it to read around and put your ideas down into the proposal, the less opportunity you will have to explore other themes and really nail down what you really want to get out of your 8,000-10,000 words. A lot of GCYF-themed dissertation involve some form of interview/focus groups and it is really helpful to get in touch with potential respondents as soon as you can to ensure you can have an efficient research period without much stress. Equally, do plan how you are going to conduct the interview. This is not just about the questions you ask, but it helps to at least think about how much you want to respond to their response and where you place the balance between letting the respondent lead the discussion and keeping the focus on your specific topic. Also, there are many logistic considerations with interviews. Where and when they take place can influence the responses the interviewee gives but also some locations and circumstances may be more appropriate than others.

My final piece of advice relates mostly to the write-up period but also applies though the whole process; always know what you want to say. My dissertation had many different themes and intersects which meant at times it was very easy to get lost in where my own work lay. Good research questions can be really helpful here because if you situate your research questions well within the GCYF theme (or any other) and then always refer back to them during the research and write up, then you will always keep that focus. Having said that, do not be afraid to change your focus or research aims; few dissertations keep the same aims throughout and this is often a result of continually making improvements. My point is more that whatever the focus is, keep that in mind throughout and you will be halfway there to writing a great dissertation!