A new passage to India

We have all read about our heritage and historically relevant places in school books but how many of us have actually visited those places to experience our rich culture and tradition? Encouraging students to move out of the confined space of classrooms and seek education beyond books, Foundation of Liberal and Management Studies (FLAME) has started a novel programme called ‘Discover India’.

The year-old initiative involves mandatory field trips to hinterlands of India as a part of the undergraduate research programme of FSLE (FLAME school of Liberal Education). The motive being to acquaint youth with their roots and to enable them to view their history contextually and critically. With a tight budget and a time period of 8-12 days, the students are supposed to do a thorough research of the place they are visiting and make a presentation summarising their study and experiences. An exhibition organised at the FLAME campus last week to showcase the presentations of the students who had recently gone on such field trips, was quite insightful for visitors like us as well.

Bubbling with energy and enthusiasm, the students spoke about their observations and reported interesting tidbits of their travel including the lifestyle of various tribes they lived with during their stay. What was commendable about the exhibition was the accuracy and detailing with which each group had recreated the places of their visits. Whether it was the mountains of Himalayas or the excavation sites of Hampi, the young exhibitors had taken every effort to create the essence of the Indian heritage within the environs of the college campus.

“Taking us through the beautifully recreated hut of people in a village called Maredumilli in Visakhapatnam, Ishtendra Munit, a fourth year student, excitedly told us some characteristics of the ancient entrepreneurs of Andhra Pradesh. ‘They have tremendous knowledge of botanic plants which can cure diseases like cancer. But they don’t share it with anyone. They will cure you but they won’t part with their knowledge. It’s our goal to be passed on to their generations. What we observed was the vast difference in the meaning of entrepreneurship for them and us. For them it’s all about leadership and for us it’s all about money. We got to understand their culture as we were living with them like them,’ Munit explained.

The programme not only aims to explore various cultures but also the young men by putting to use different art like photography and filmmaking. The presentations include the display of photographs wherever the students have taken. “It’s actually a learning experience and also full of capturing the thrills and frills in my life,”’ Himal Mehani along with her group swelled to Uttarakhand in the Himalayas, coming back completely awestruck with the way people followed rituals and unquestioned beliefs there.

“We have only heard about such myths but people there are living them. And the most interesting part was that when we travelled to places where these beliefs have originated. We were literally with the gods there. Our presentation’s main focus is on Rishikesh as it’s called the moksha dham where one attains eternity. People there were so astonished when we were enquiring about these age-old beliefs. They couldn’t believe that anyone taking such interest in all this.” Mehani said excitedly.

The other places featured were Bylakuppe in Karnataka, Auroville in Pondicherry and Nelligiri hills in Ooty. While Auroville was depicted wonderfully through mediums of recycled art and craft, film photographs and a solar kitchen serving food typically made in the solar kitchen situated in the utopian town, what was fascinating was the explanation of this town in terms of its aspirations. With ‘I Auroville a utopia?’ forming the centre of the study, the students had brought out the difference between what this muddled town has aspired to be and where it actually stands today. Another interesting exhibit was the comparative study between two inhabiting tribes, Toda and Keta, in the Nilgiri range.

The project revealed the contradicting practises, customs, beliefs and traditions of the two ancient tribes and the impact of globalisation and technological progress on them. “The culture of Todas is dying. There are very few of them left as they have this custom of marrying in their own families. Due to this, the head member of Todas is trying to spread awareness about their community in India and abroad with fear of them going extinct soon,” Ria Nandani, a student on this project, informed us.

Discover India” was evidently an enlightening process for the students of FSLE, making them responsible and vigilant in many areas of life. Needless to say this innovative method of education is essential for personal growth of every youngster — to prepare him for the world that awaits outside the comfort of home and classroom.