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ISB's Galit Shmueli on working in India, academic research

E. Kumar Sharma October 9, 2012

The Indian economy - dogged as it is by scams and slow growth - is still exciting to many. Many professors in other countries are keen on working here, but there are some flies in the ointment. Salaries here are relatively low, and finding suitable jobs for spouses and schools for children can be tough.

But Galit Shmueli, an Israeli-American professor of statistics, data analytics and information systems, made the move. She came to India in 2011 to teach at the **Indian School of Business, Hyderabad**. Having nearly lost her voice, thanks to a series of lectures and a nasty cold, she told Business Today in an email interview: "I spent a few weeks on campus in 2010 while co-teaching a data mining course and really liked the experience." Because of that, and having travelled extensively in Asia, she did not experience culture shock, she says. However, she adds: "Relocation ... is often a challenge for the spouse and children."

In her case, things fell into place, though. "We were eager to move to Asia after spending a sabbatical year in Bhutan," she says. "My husband's career is location-independent and my daughter happily attends school in Bhutan."

She says: "Our choice to relocate to the Indian subcontinent is obviously uncommon, and reflects our view of living and experiencing life beyond just academic credentials and net worth. There are many ways to educate oneself, expand horizons, and contribute to society."

{blurb}She says that living in Asia allows her to lead a dual life, which she describes as "a faster version of reincarnation". She says: "In one life I am an active academic who conducts research, teaches on-ground and online, and performs other academic roles. In my second life I am a social entrepreneur in Bhutan, where I co-direct the Rigsum Research Lab." Through the lab, she teaches short courses on decision-making and technology for the government, corporate and private sectors." She also implements technological projects for education institutions in the Bhutan.

Shmueli's life in Asia is quite hectic. "I do tend to work quite frantic hours due to my many endeavours as well as the sad fact that countries couldn't agree on a single time-zone," she says. "However, I feel lucky to be doing what I love.... I also love to read, travel, play the piano and walk. When I am on the ISB campus, I frequent the swimming pool and yoga classes. Spicy food has also become an absolute joy, ever fuelled by the fiery Andhra cuisine and the even hotter Bhutanese chilli!"

She describes India as a "happening place" but adds that life here seems "much more bureaucratic on a daily basis". A sense of humour is a necessity, she says. "Luckily, the Indian mindset seems to be in sync with my Israeli chutzpah."

She says she would recommend teaching in India to "anyone who can take spicy food and is a stellar teacher". But research is a different kettle of fish. "For those interested in a **research**-oriented position, a move to a university in India requires careful consideration. First and foremost, academic research is quite rare in India." She says ISB is an exception, as its research culture matches that of overseas universities in terms of rigour, importance and funds.

ISB's tenure process adheres to global norms, too - six years after joining as assistant professor, candidates are evaluated on research quality and compared with global peers. Researchers in top schools are invited to assess their work. Professors who are denied tenure are asked to leave.

Shmueli says those who wish to work at an Indian institute should assess its productivity in terms of the level of research and publications. "I recommend spending a sabbatical in India to gauge what life here is about," she says. "Because of the nascent stage of academic research in India, it is important to connect fully with the core research community in your area before moving here. Once you are part of the community, it is relatively easy to maintain a strong connection via virtual collaborations, conferences and so on."

She says: "I must confess that I would not have contemplated such a move 10 years ago, because I would fear isolation from the research community in the West. Yet, today geographical location is much less of a barrier."

And what about money? "It is true that compensation is much lower than in the US, especially when the rupee has been depreciating so quickly," she says. "It is therefore a matter of personal priorities. Obviously, I have made my choice."

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