

## **Student Stories Project: Payal Shah**

Audio version available at: <http://www.alumni.indiana.edu/profiles/students/shah.shtml>

[IU fight song]

**Welcome to the Indiana University Student Stories Project, a production of the IU Alumni Association. I'm your host, Alana Salata. In this series, you'll get an insight into what it takes to be a student leader here at IU, from the perks –**

*“The Alumni Association here at South Bend had selected me to go to IU Bloomington’s annual LeaderShape training program for a week.”*

– to the hard work –

*“Time management: it’s hard because I love the group so much and I just – I want to volunteer for everything and I want to do everything.”*

– to the memories that will last a lifetime.

*“I’ve met so many people that have touched my life in so many ways.”*

**Join me on this journey through the lives of IU student leaders.**

[IU fight song]

**SALATA: Today we’re speaking with Payal Shah, a doctoral student in IU Bloomington’s School of Education.**

SHAH: My name’s Payal Shah, and I am a third-year doctoral student in the education policy studies program at the School of Education here at IU. I focus in international and comparative education within education policy, and I do my research mainly in India. I am originally from Wellesley, Massachusetts, which is a suburb of Boston, and I moved to Indiana in 2004 – moved to Bloomington in 2004 when I started the program. My interests include anything having to do with being outside – so I cycle, and I run, and I hike, and I trail run. When I’m near the mountains and the ocean, I also like to ski and hike and swim quite a bit.

**Why did you choose to attend IU?**

Well, unbeknownst to me, through my search I kind of realized that the faculty members of the international and comparative education program were really, really strong here. I visited a bunch of different schools, and in meeting the different faculty members and kind of understanding the process of the program, it just really seemed to fit well. Specifically, my advisors have very, very similar interests, seemed incredibly supportive

and interested in my work, and IU gave me a very competitive funding package as well, so all of those reasons combined made it a pretty easy choice, despite some reservations of moving into the Midwest. [laughter]

**Tell me about a meaningful or enjoyable experience you have had at IU.**

I have to say that I'm really lucky that I've had a lot of enjoyable experiences at IU, academically as well as personally. Academically, I think in general my experience here has just been really amazing. Whether it be in my department or across departments, I've found professors and colleagues, peers, you know, to be incredibly supportive. It's not – oftentimes, especially in the doctoral programs, there can be a kind of lack of collegiality and competition, and I feel that the IU atmosphere really isn't like that, whether it be in the department of sociology, in the School of Education – so I think the support I receive from people around me to pursue my own interests, to really kind of reach for things, to help give me support and confidence I wouldn't have had, has been, overall, enjoyable.

Perhaps personally, I started cycling when I came to IU and have met this wonderful group of women who are all somehow affiliated with IU, and we've started kind of cycling together quite a bit. And so that's been a way that, through IU, I've been able to kind of broaden my peer associations and get to see parts of the state that I would never get to see, biking through it. And also getting to meet people across different disciplines and different schools across the campus, and that's been really useful to just get a better understanding of the university and build personal relationships.

**What advice would you give to incoming doctoral students just starting out at IU?**

I guess my biggest piece of advice would be to slow down a little bit. Especially your first year in a Ph.D. program is incredibly intense – you're going to feel really, really overwhelmed, there's a lot to get used to in terms of moving to a new place, getting to know new groups of faculty members and colleagues. I know when I came in I really wanted to motor through. I think I put a lot of pressure on myself to just continuously do more and more and more. And I would say, now that I'm nearing kind of the end of my tenure in Bloomington, to really enjoy this time of life academically and personally, and to really take advantage of what's around you – Bloomington is a beautiful, beautiful place – and to kind of delve into that as well as the university with open arms, I think would be – and slow down a little bit. I mean, be intense, this is why you're here, take it really seriously, of course, but give yourself a little bit of time.

**Tell me a little about the research you are doing as a Ph.D. student in the School of Education.**

Well, my main interests – my main research interests – are kind of in the areas of gender and international development policy. So specifically, I look at issues regarding inequality in education, specifically between girls and boys. And I look at marginalized, poor girls who don't have access, often, to *any* education or definitely not a quality education, either because physically access isn't there or culturally there are a lot of

barriers. And I look at different policies and programs that have been set up to kind of ameliorate the problem and see whether or not they work and if so, how. I do qualitative research – I spend time with the people that I’ll be researching and often live with them and take a lot of interviews to kind of understand what their day-to-day processes are like, and then from those experiences put together kind of a larger picture for you to understand really what’s going on, why is there such inequality still, what are the different factors that may contribute to the persistence of inequality. And all within the kind of idea of the role of education in development of different countries, whether it be a developed country like the United States or a developing country....

**What have you gained through your interactions with IU alumni?**

I think maybe it goes back to a little bit of what I was talking about before, the kind of support system and the network. Our department is a pretty close-knit department, and therefore most of my interactions with alumni has occurred through, kind of, previous graduates, and we meet at conferences or they come back to campus. They’re always really, really willing to kind of give you advice, whether it be during the process or when you’re starting to look for jobs, there’s a lot of, you know, cross-year kind of communication, which is nice. And so I think it’s a kind of larger support network to have and it’s interesting because I went to a really small undergrad and I’m pretty – somewhat – involved in the alumni, at least in terms of keeping in touch with people, but it’s a much smaller group of people, and I can only imagine that if I were to, you know, take advantage of the larger IU alumni kind of network, how huge that would be. But I think for basic support, to gain entrée into areas or think about things that you wouldn’t have thought of, but “Oh, look, this person from my department –” or “Oh, look, this person from my school is doing this” – it gives you something else to think about.

**What are your future goals, and how do you think IU has helped prepare you to meet those goals?**

Well, my future goals are still evolving, but as of now, I’m hoping to be a professor at a university. More of a teaching university than a research university, but of course a university that also takes research seriously. You know, being at a doctoral program, that’s exactly what it prepares you for. So in that respect, IU has done everything that it can to kind of prepare me for that. Like I mentioned, with the alumni network there are tons of people placed in a lot of different universities that you can kind of get in touch with and get advice from them and maybe get your foot in the door a little bit more than you could have. IU has – it’s an excellent research university and it has a lot of resources at its disposal that have been incredibly useful for me, whether it be libraries, access to electronic journals – the professors are doing amazing research and it’s always great to kind of be a part of that and be mentored through the way that they do research. Also, being at the School of Education, it’s kind of great that I get the best of both worlds, because it’s oriented towards teaching, which is something that I’m very interested in. I might not, you know, be interested in *studying* pedagogy or curriculum, but I am interested in teaching as a profession, and so being in the School of Education and kind of getting a larger exposure to how we prepare future teachers, what kind of philosophies

go behind, you know, becoming a good teacher and whatnot, is something that's pretty implicit in everything that I do. And so I think that's been really useful to balance the research exposure I get through my department and program as well.

**What will you miss the most when you graduate?**

I think I'll miss the resources. I think I will really miss – I think I take a lot for granted in terms of access to technology, access to support – technological support or research support – the libraries are really excellent – and I think I'll just miss the kind of larger academic community and being around people who do very similar – you know, they may not study the same things, but they're all doing – they're in a similar place in life and doing similar things and having a somewhat similar outlook on life and their future. And I think maybe I won't leave that – maybe I'll be in another, you know, university setting that's like that, but it will be different than IU, and the culture of IU, I think I would really – I will miss. It'll be an adjustment to go wherever I go.

**We've been talking with Payal Shah of IU Bloomington's School of Education.**

[IU fight song]

**This series was produced by the Indiana University Alumni Association, with special thanks to the IU Marching Hundred and director Dave Woodley. I'm Alana Salata.**

[IU fight song]