

## **Cross cultural journal**

### **A. What have you learned about Finnish lifestyle, culture, history, society, communication etc.**

I had been in Finland for barely two days when I wrote to my father in India, "This society is built on trust." It came as a surprise to me when bags were allowed in supermarkets and the supermarkets trusted you to put the right numbers for the fruits/ vegetables. I saw that in Ikea, one could easily carry a mug with him and get coffee for free if one had the shameless audacity to beat the system. The trust factor was verified at several occasions before we actually learnt it in class. When I compared the security checks in airports of Helsinki, Barcelona, Amsterdam, New Delhi and Mumbai, I found the one at Helsinki airport to be the least mentally stressful. I do not in any way imply that they were doing their job wrong. It just felt less stressful and more polite subtly sending the message that they trust us. The trust factor was further corroborated when I saw people leaving their jackets on the hangers in the university openly. The same factor was visible when I saw that there was no strong mechanism to check if the people are pushing the right buttons while using the public transport. The only mechanism was trust. In my mind, it was already a country where people trust each other, businessmen were less cunning and manipulative, government and people trust each other and in the words of McDonalds', I was loving it!

I had learnt earlier was that Finland was the least corrupt country in the world and it was interesting to discuss the same in class and my brain was patting its own back for making the right assumptions about the trust factor of Finland. Another thing that I instantly linked to was a phrase that a British-Finnish comedian said once, "Finland is called the Japan of Europe by some people". Trust forms an integral part of Japanese society and so it does for Finland.

Honesty too was evident everywhere. I saw some professors easily confessing to the things about their own topic which they were unaware of. This was not just a singled out incident but it happened many times. Coming from a culture where teachers are revered and there is always a distance between the teachers and students, it appeared that the Finnish society in my mind was sending me a message that 'Teachers are humans too, they are fallible'. During the course we learnt that it is quite difficult to become a teacher in Finland. When I combined this fact with their openness to new ideas and humility, I was pleasantly surprised and awed at the same time.

The wonders of Finnish education system became more evident when I took a trip to Lapland. I expected people there to have a lesser command over their English language. An average Finn speaks about 3-4 different languages – this is something we had learnt during the course. But I thought, given that the place is in a remote corner, I expected the education there to be a bit inferior as compared to the urban areas. To my surprise, even the reindeer herders were comfortable in spoken English with a visible sense of ease.

A chat with a Finnish friend who likes to speak in a British accent, the visit to museum which and a chat with my hairdresser reveal that the television also has a role to play in the good command over the English language among the Finns.

The article, 'Finland has a shyness problem' echoes some of my concerns. I feel bad that this country does not advertise itself or its products very well. I learned on coming here that Linux (an operating system) was built here. If people around the world knew it, I am very sure that Finland would become an ever more powerful hub of the world's best software engineers. We also learnt that Alvar Aalto left the country for MIT during the course. On interacting with another Indian friend of mine who is in Spain, we were discussing how we have started feeling attached to our respective countries of residence. Caring and worrying for our new home countries has become a part of lives now. Thus, the fact that great things are not advertised to the world properly worries me.

Hope I will have more to add at the end of my stay in Finland ☺

**B. Your observation /description and opinion / analysis on some event you saw**

Observation	Analysis
Whenever you ask any Finn for help, they oblige wholeheartedly. Even when I think I have received the help I needed, they go on to complete their sentences.	I have observed this behavior consistently, repeatedly and sometimes just to confirm my own hypothesis. I have travelled around Helsinki without a GPS device and sometimes, people have walked up to bus stops with me, taken out their cell phones for the GPS in the freezing cold and asked the cab driver for me even if they were getting late. Given the fact that they go on to complete their sentences, I get a feeling that it is a duty bound society where people feel that it is their duty to oblige when someone asks something from them. The level of discipline and deontological ethics could have a relation to the compulsory military training. I am curious to explore more parameters involved in this equation.
Facial expressions don't matter much, particularly eyes	I got a taste of this when I saw the airhostesses on the Finnair flight smiling with their lips but not with their eyes. I noticed a similar trait in other Finns when I arrived here. I also learned via other sources that it is quite rare for a Finn to disclose a lot of his personal info in the first meeting itself. It could have its roots in the fact that in the earlier times when there were no heating systems, the tribes used to cover their faces most of the time leaving little room for the face to express more. Another good thing about this is that, unlike some other cultures, people are not encouraged to appear happy all the time even when they are not. It is a concept which I like to call, 'Manufactured Happiness' and I am glad it is missing from Finland.
I don't get surprising looks when I say that "I am a vegetarian"	I got strange looks from people of other countries and one of them even tried to make me uncomfortable on purpose. But Finns and restaurants here have been really cooperative on that front. That is maybe because the society is very inclusive and opens differences with open arms despite having a desire for consistency. The staff of the main building's cafeteria has a nice diversity and represents the openness of the Finnish society to me. I however heard from a few of my Finnish friends that the politicians aren't as open to change as the students.

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