

Rhithu Chatterjee, Mentor
Shreya Dasgupta, Mentee
Post-New Orleans Narrative

India has few science and environmental journalists, and there are hardly any opportunities for the small community to meet and get acquainted. The SEJ conference gave me the much needed chance to meet up with old colleagues and friends, and new people, both fellow journalists and sources. Topics and issues that I'd been mulling over on my own – population, reproductive health, women's rights and education, urbanization, food – I was able to discuss with and learn from more experienced colleagues and sources at the conference. The discussions helped me get a global perspective on the regional stories I cover. They also gave me story ideas, some of which I'm already pursuing.

I was also delighted to be able to contribute to the conference as a moderator for a panel on visual journalism and a speaker on another, on environmental health. The former panel helped me think better about my multimedia work, while the latter gave me new story ideas and contacts. Besides, they were both a great way to connect with fellow journalists and sources.

The field trip to the Ninth Ward and other neighborhoods in New Orleans to understand rebuilding efforts was inspiring. The topic is very relevant to India, as it continues to witness powerful storms and devastating floods. And I hope to be able to apply what I learnt about New Orleans' rebuilding efforts to stories about coastal cities in India, as well as in neighboring Bangladesh.

And it is at the conference that a couple of my SEJ friends asked me to join a small email group of freelancers, which has completely transformed my freelancing experience. I can now turn to my fellow group members, all accomplished journalists, for advice about the mundane and less mundane questions and conundrums that come up at work.

Last but far from least, I got the opportunity to meet my mentee, Shreya Dasgupta, for the first time. We had emailed and talked over the phone, but nothing replaces meeting someone in person and spending time with them. I believe Shreya was also inspired and encouraged by the conference. I can already see the outcomes of that, as she churns out one great article after another in publications like *New Scientist* and BBC Earth.

In 2008, back when I was a novice environmental journalist at my first magazine job, I benefited tremendously from the SEJ mentorship program. I was a mentee and my mentor, Michelle Nijhuis taught me a lot about environmental reporting and writing. Michelle is now a dear friend and someone I turn to often, for inspiration, support and advice. The mentorship program and the fellowship to attend the annual conference gave me the opportunity to give back to the SEJ community as a mentor, a personally rewarding experience for me.

In all, the SEJ annual conference was one of the highlights of this past year for me. And I am deeply grateful to the Elyssa Rosen Mentoring fellowship for giving me that experience. – **Rhithu Chatterjee**

My SEJ mentor, Rhitu Chatterjee, had assured me that the SEJ Conference would be an incredible experience. And it was indeed an unforgettable one.

The city of New Orleans, extremely charming and exciting, lived up to all the hype surrounding its music and food. The best part of my trip, however, was meeting and learning from some of the most talented environmental journalists and writers in the world. For a start, it was at the conference that I met Rhitu in person, for the first time. While we had exchanged numerous emails, and spoken over the phone in India, it was at New Orleans that we finally met. It was also exciting to meet some of my colleagues from publications for which I have been writing for a while, as well as journalists and editors I have admired for a long time (and maybe occasionally stalked over twitter). For an early-career journalist like me, this networking opportunity was an invaluable one.

The conference's theme this year, Risk and Resilience, was also very relevant to India. I found several story ideas at the workshops and sessions that I attended, learnt some new reporting tricks, and discovered different ways of sourcing data that I'm sure will be very useful for investigative journalism. I especially enjoyed the sessions on freelancing, including the ones on funding the freelancing life, and writer/editor relationships in the Wifi Age. At these sessions I found a great list of fellowships, grants and funding opportunities that I can apply to in the future. I also discovered how powerful collaborations can be, especially for international journalists, and how I can place Indian research in a more global context. I also attended my first freelance pitch slam at SEJ 2014, which I had really looked forward to. I learnt some very valuable tips on how to pitch stories, and also, how not to.

But the highlight of the conference for me was the field trip to the barrier island rebuilding and marsh restoration project sites on 4 November. It was a great opportunity for me to learn from reporters on the ground by observing them take notes, ask questions and interview experts. Our team also had an excellent seafood lunch at the Woodland Plantation, and I took an airboat ride for the first time in my life, in the rain!

Freelance journalists based in India have limited opportunities to network and learn. There are very few conferences for journalists, and it is also difficult for us to attend conferences in other parts of the world. But the SEJ Elyssa Rosen Mentoring Fellowship was immensely helpful in making this a possibility for me. And I'm very grateful for the opportunity. – **Shreya Dasgupta**