The 2020 ISTR PhD Seminar has made its place in the history for going online for the first time, due to the spread of Covid-19 across the world. I was very excited when I got the news in 2019 that I had been selected for the 5th International PhD Seminar scheduled in July 2020 in Montreal, Canada. My happiness doubled when I heard my paper had been accepted to the 14th International Conference which was planned immediately after the seminar. I had started my preparations like organising funding, writing my paper draft, browsing how to get a visa and what to do in Montreal, and the preparatory e-mails from ISTR were building the excitement further. Then, in March 2020, came the news of the pandemic resulting in countries closing down their borders. This was followed by the announcement of postponement of the conference to 2021. So, this was not a very happy news as this was supposed to be my first international experience. Then on 4th April, 2020 I received an email that PhD seminar is moving online and that brought a mixed reaction. I would not get to do all those things which were planned such as personally meeting 49 other fellow-scholars, networking with diverse professionals, attending multiple sessions, enjoying the PhD party, participating in the 3-minute thesis competition and many more such activities. On the other hand, I was eager to still have a chance to discuss my work, learn about diverse perspectives on CSR and philanthropy, and be part of the ISTR community, in spite of the pandemic.

So, I sent my acceptance to attend the ISTR PhD seminar online. The finalized group included 37 students from universities in 21 countries, representing approximately 23 nationalities working on varied issues such as third-sector organisations, philanthropy, CSR, communities, community foundations, etc. All of us were allotted to small groups of around 8 scholars each with two to three faculty coordinators. We were given a link to go through abstracts of the group members and prepare our comments, feedback, questions. I was amazed to see the range of topics my colleagues were working on; not only in my group but in other groups as well. These ranged from indigenous philanthropy to philanthropy in conflict regions and criminal justice system. I had not come across this diverse a set of topics during my journey in the field of CSR of nearly a decade. And this was from just one group. This gave me hope and showed me the enormous scope of learning that I could expect from this online seminar.

The opening ceremony was planned on 5th of July, 2020. Dr. Ruth Phillips (President, ISTR) gave us a warm welcome, shared her thoughts that how this is a new experience for ISTR to take the seminar online and gave us some pointers on how we could enrich our learning experience. This was followed by a guest lecture from Prof. Deena White (Department of Sociology, Université de Montréal) where she talked about Canada’s third-sector. Her talk focused on how the capacity of third-sector organisations is challenged during Covid-19; what are the conditions that crush the sector’s capability; and how there should be organisations of third-sector organisations to collaborate with government and other stakeholders. She also discussed capacity leading to autonomy of the organisations. I got a chance to ask and know her comments on the third-sector organisations in India where the sector was losing its autonomy because of increased institutionalisation and autonomy. This was followed up by Faculty and Scholars’ introductions. The faculty shared their previous experiences of ISTR PhD seminar and advised that this should be a rigorous but fun
The PhD seminar started on 6th July, 2020. All the group members and faculty reported from their respective homes, locked down, nowhere to go but fully focused. We were in different time zones; for one of our faculty it was 0600 hours in Colombia, whereas for me it was 1730 hours in India. I was the first presenter in my group where I used my Conceptual Map to share about my study on community engagement in CSR projects in India: A post-development perspective. I presented for ten minutes after which the floor was opened for comments/feedback/questions. I would like to emphasise here that I received insightful comments from every single participant and they substantiated their comments. I was asked to narrow down the scope, relook at the methodology (from qualitative to mixed methods), revisit some of the concepts such as indigenous knowledge, exploring models of CSR in India, and so on. We had in-depth and thorough discussion for over an hour. These comments have helped me immensely to revisit my methodology and I am now re-working on it with my PhD supervisor. My colleagues helped me with some references also. This became the norm for every presentation. The scheduled time for a presentation was an hour but we went beyond that for every presentation. It was thoughtful of our faculty coordinators to allow free flow of discussion where we all could engage with each other. Also, the discussions were not only helpful for the presenter but for the whole group, as all of us were working on similar topics but in different countries and continents.

One of the highlights of these group sessions was the positive energy. I always felt welcomed to discuss and comment; the faculty made it a process where we were the primary stakeholders in engaging with the presenter. The sessions were constructive, encouraging, and with good doses of humour; due to this, I did not feel the ‘webinar-fatigue’ that we are getting used to in this pandemic period. The best part of the seminar was meeting and talking to so many people who are working on similar topics, which I do not get in my PhD experience. Generally, PhD is an isolated journey and getting so many knowledgeable people to discuss your research interest is a dream come true! Furthermore, the CSR discourse in India is rooted in the disciplines of social sciences and social work; which I found is different in the western countries where CSR is more of a business phenomenon. CSR in India deals with the communities which is not a typical case in developed countries. So, getting primary access to the management perspective was also beneficial for me.

I cannot forget to mention the PhD cafe sessions, which brought all PhD scholars on an informal platform (online) to meet and engage. I joined one of the sessions and shared some lighter moments with several scholars from other small groups; we talked about everything under the sun from our countries, politics, earthquakes, to scenic beauty. There was a natural camaraderie and I did not feel for a moment that I was meeting my colleagues for the first time. This was a wonderful initiative by ISTR to bring the vibe of ‘non-pandemic’ PhD seminars. With my university campus closed down and having spent four months of strict lockdown in one of the worst affected cities in India, I thoroughly enjoyed the intellectual and emotional space that the ISTR PhD seminar and my colleagues provided me.
Last day was the closing ceremony. The session by Prof. Susan Appe (ISTR Board Secretary and Co-Editor of Voluntas) on ‘Getting Published for PhD Students’, was one of the best sessions I have attended on publishing which made ‘thinking’ about publishing easy. Susan detailed out every single point from abstract to references, how to upload an article and even use classifications. The session was followed by Q&A and I was really happy that I could raise my questions and doubts and got clear explanations. ISTR does not leave you here with only organising the seminar – you become part of the growing pool of ISTR PhD seminar alumni network. Susan told us that as an ISTR family member we could reach out to her for suggestions, comments, and feedback on our writings. This was followed by discussion on emerging themes from small groups and experience-sharing. Margery Daniels shared with us some details about next year’s conference and inclusion of Covid-19 as a paper theme. Megan Haddock gave us the details of benefits we get as an ISTR member such as webinars, access to Voluntas, etc. With this, the 5th PhD seminar was closed officially.

I will cherish this unique experience and look forward to remaining connected with my new friends and colleagues. I cannot thank the ISTR team enough to make this successful and beneficial for me.