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Inequality, as Seen in the Streets of Mumbai

Walking the busy streets of sweltering Mumbai, one cannot overlook the poverty that afflicts its masses. I mean this literally: it is not ignorable. One cannot walk a block in Colaba without being approached by someone desperate for food or water or money. One particular instance of this that stuck with me was the time that a little girl of the age of ten followed me for two blocks, insisting that I buy glow sticks from her for ten rupees.

“Ten rupees, please madam,” she urged, shoving the glow sticks in my face. “I need food madam, please madam. . .”

What really struck me about this incident was not how sad it was for a girl of her age to be in the position where she had to roam the streets at night, begging for a few pennies. No, what struck me was the sheer desperation and persistence with which she begged. This event was far from an anomaly: it represented a tendency I observed among Mumbai’s poor. I have been in impoverished areas before, I have experienced begging before, but never have I had someone on the street follow me two blocks for fifteen cents.

I think that the heightened level of despair-induced urgency can partially be attributed to the extreme heat in Mumbai. It may sound trivial, but that heat was much more physically taxing than I imagined. After twenty minutes outside I’d be drenched in sweat, complaining about wanting to return to air conditioning. I imagine that being

unable to escape those conditions, day in and day out, would severely amplify the woes of poverty. Being hungry and thirsty and not knowing how or from where your next meal is coming are unbearable concepts in their own right. . .add the feeling of being seconds away from bursting into flames into the equation and I don't see how any person could resist snatching the sweaty water bottle out of a tourist's hands.

Just before coming to India, I spent time in a rural village in Uganda. I was only there for a few weeks, but through living amongst the villagers I feel that I gained an understanding of the place. It was a place of poverty, with limited access to food, water, and medical care, yet the overall feeling was vastly different from that of Mumbai. I did not experience the same degree of desperation from the poor villagers; rather, there was a sense of contentedness with their situation. Granted, the two places are very different and cannot be compared as though they are not. That being said, I think poverty is particularly unbearable for Mumbai's poor, in comparison to Uganda's poor, partly due to the unbelievable wealth inequality within their own city.

The Ugandan village provides a level playing field with little outside influence for its inhabitants; everyone is born into essentially the same circumstances and, with nothing to compare their lifestyle to, they largely accept their way of living. In Mumbai, the 27-story home of the 5th richest man in the world is around the corner from Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia—1 million people living in 3 square kilometers of land. The contradiction infuriated me as I observed from my coach bus kept at a comfortable 70 degrees; I can only imagine how frustrating it must be to have nothing and witness firsthand such displays of excess.

I do not wish to imply that I fully understand Mumbai and the struggles of its poor inhabitants, rather I am merely stating my observations from the short time that I was there. Having just come from Uganda, it was hard not to compare the two places in my mind. What stuck out to me upon reaching Mumbai was the ferocity and consistency with which beggars sought money, something that I did not experience at all in the poor village in Uganda. I noticed two major environmental aspects of Mumbai that Uganda lacked: extreme heat and extreme wealth inequality. My inference is that the struggles of poverty are multiplied for Mumbai's poor due to many factors of their environment, including the suffocating heat and the absurd displays of wealth of their neighbors.