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**A Comparison of Socio-Economic Inequality among US, India and the Philippines**

One of my favorite quotes is by Friedrich Nietzsche who said: *“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how”*. This quote materialized for me during our day trip to the slums of Dharavi in Mumbai. As we walked around the dilapidated structures and littered grounds, I observed an area in constant action. Women were sorting recycled materials, men were manning metal machines, teenaged boys were bustling around us carrying items to be delivered from one area to the next. Despite the terrible conditions of the environment around them, the citizens of Dharavi were productive and focused with the intent of working toward a better future. This scene was not unfamiliar to me. I’ve seen the same bustling of activity in the slums of Manila where the poorest of the poor lived and strived to overcome poverty. The stark inequality between the rich and the poor in places like India and the Philippines are blatantly obvious as grand skyscrapers stand right across the street from cramped shanty towns. The degree of poverty in these two developing countries are very similar. Unlike in the USA, where those in the lower scale of the economic hierarchy still receive government support through welfare and food stamps, many of those who live in the slums in India and the Philippines are largely ignored by their local and national government. Consequently, they become victims not only of circumstance but also of corruption that prevents the allocation of necessary funding to help them prosper out of their current situations.

If there is one thing that Dharavi in India and The Smokey Mountains in the Philippines prove, it is that: In general, people will work to improve their current states. It is a very

large misconception to think that the poor do not take part in productive work. Some of the most hardworking people I know still have a difficult time trying to provide for themselves and their families. There are still many things that prevent an ascent in the economic ladder such as the caste system which is still widely used in some states in India. When a person is branded as untouchable it is difficult for him to really rise through the level of hierarchy that has been given to him by birth. In Varanasi, I observed the role of religion as a means of coping with inequality. The image of multiple beggars in one of the holiest cities in the world is a contradiction that has never left my mind even until now. For me, religion appeals to the masses because it is seen as an avenue to make sense of suffering and a hope for the eternal life (a better life) that they were promised. It is a way in which a lot of the poor helps alleviate their problems and I observe this as well in the Philippines where majority of the Christian Church-goers are from lower income families who come to pray. I do admit however the role of religion in promoting inequality is still largely debated. As of now, my stance goes from one end to the other as there are many times I feel that although the Church preaches humility in spiritual and physical poverty, there are still a lot of practices it advocates that prevents people from becoming more educated and informed about choices they can make to alleviate their poverty such as that in reproductive health which I know is also a largely controversial topic in India.

Although the degree of poverty and the role of religion are different in the US, India and the Philippines, socio economic inequality is still a problem that permeates through all kinds of societies. Action must be taken to not only lower the gap but also to give opportunity to some of the most hardworking and deserving people in the world.

