

## On Overtness, Perception, and Communication

Our first night in Mumbai, travelling from the airport to our hotel, the first thing that hit me was the number of people sleeping on the streets. Hundreds of mats, on the sidewalk, on road midsections, in random lots. I'd never seen that before. There's people who sleep on the street in Boston, too, but in corners and nooks of building walls and the underground T stations, and even then nowhere as many as on the streets here (but then, I wonder- how many are there, really? And could it be that we just don't see most of them?). Not in the middle of the sidewalk in front of ABP, always on the side, never right in front of my face. It's easy enough to look straight ahead and keep going, but here I remember the mother nursing her baby, the man lying in the parking lot outside our bus, the three children lying together quietly. Meanwhile at Northeastern one can earn community service hours by sleeping in a cardboard box with friends in Centennial once a year.

And when I think of people asking for money on the streets in Boston, I think of primarily middle aged to older men. The idea of a little boy or girl asking strangers for food, water, anything- I can't really imagine it in Boston. I haven't experienced that in China, either, although my time there has been limited. Again, mostly middle aged to older men there too.

Poverty exists in both places, but it manifests itself differently. Thinking back, what's struck me the most about poverty in India is its overtness. And it makes me think, comparatively, of the two ends of that concept. I think in America, most of the times we don't want to see the poor. It's an inconvenience, an inducer of- what's that little feeling called again, that feeling that tickles our insides as we walk by and pretend we don't see? (Guilt.) And on the other end, I feel like (but I suppose I don't actually know) in America there is a sense of shame to sitting on the street asking for money. People choose to sleep in dark corners and underground- not under streetlights or right on the sidewalk. Here, I wonder and don't know what the perceptions are on either end. I remember Nikin saying during the reflection about Dharavi that among the poor people here don't have the same sense of privacy we

have in America. I wonder, regardless of how true that stands, how that reflects in the differences in which we see poverty between here and in Boston.

And that leads me to think of appearances, and perception. I remember one of my earliest memories of going to my grandparents' apartment in Nanjing, China. The road there is narrow and dirty, with scattered stalls akin to those of here. Outside, it smells like waste and bad air, perhaps a "developing city in Asia" smell that's been common here as well. The building itself is a dirty grey, concrete, decrepit. Walking up to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor is semi-precarious: dark, dank, and steep concrete stairs. And yet- albeit small, my grandparents' apartment is clean, stocked with fresh produce from the market my grandma goes to each morning. They have AC and recently even got an internet router. Outwardly a picture of low class, perhaps, in America, and yet in China- just an average couple, living average lives.

After we went to Dharavi, we reflected, and there were many different emotions all around. There was a mix of feeling uncomfortable about the concept of a "tour" through people's homes and places of work, fearing objectification and obstruction while walking through looking around, and also thinking that perhaps by walking through and taking pictures we were honoring the residents. But I think the fact of the matter is that we don't actually know our impact, walking through like that. There was no real way of knowing, and that was something people expressed as well- wishing to know people's stories rather than simply obtrusively snapping a photo while walking by. And so this brings me to my final reflective point: failure to communicate, and thus, understand.

A literal example of this occurred when I was walking down the Causeway in Colaba. A little girl had been following me for a few minutes, repeating something over and over again. I couldn't figure out what she was saying, and didn't know why she had been following me in particular for so long. But after a while I realized she was saying "water," over and over again, grasping for my water bottle. In my privilege I didn't even realize the value of what I held in my hand.

But at the same time, this language barrier: it's universal. We share the same language in Boston, the same city- and yet, we don't. More often than not we don't stop and talk to people, very infrequently seek out other people's stories- and by remaining passive and going about our lives, I believe that we choose not to know.