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Inequality Reflection

Back in the United States, I have always been exposed to a wide spectrum of ethnicities and cultures, a byproduct of the US's characteristic of being a melting pot. However, with the mix of diverse beliefs, backgrounds, and genetic makeups, the presence of racial inequality in the country continues to be a very serious problem. Because European colonists originally founded the country, and have historically been in power ever since, white supremacy continues to exist as an institutional system in the US even today, in a *de facto* capacity more so than *de jure*.

I have always been aware of the fact that despite the fact that racial discrimination and segregation are illegal, these behaviors still persist, often in more subtle ways. The United States' history as a society built on the enslavement of Africans for agricultural labor and the view that dark skinned people were less civilized has never released its influence on race relations ever since. Each time some legalized form of racism has been outlawed, a new one rears its head. The emancipation and abolition of slavery only led to segregation and disenfranchisement through Jim Crow laws and voting obstacles. With the passage of the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act in the 1960s, in school we generally are taught that that was when racism "ended". But that isn't true at all.

Racial profiling, segregation through economic status, and restriction of jobs for incarcerated individuals are just a few of the methods that are most infamously employed in the present day to prevent blacks and even minorities such as Hispanics from rising to the same socioeconomic levels that most middle-class white Americans possess. When I went to Selma, Alabama for Alternative Spring Break, we learned that despite the city's role as a focal point in the Civil Rights Movement and securing voting rights, a whites-only private school still existed, with this racist policy not explicitly laid out, but accomplished by the fact that it had a high tuition and a difficult entrance test, standards which poor blacks would not be able to meet.

Here in India, there is a glaring lack of racial diversity. The subcontinent is, for the most part, ethnically homogeneous, with more or less dark, brown skin and black hair. As such, as far as I have been able to tell from my time here, there doesn't seem to be as much racism amongst

the citizens of India because of skin color, since the citizens of India are all of similar skin tones. I have noticed though with all the advertisements on billboards, on signs in stores and malls, that the Indian models featured wearing the latest designer clothes are more often than not light-skinned rather than dark-skinned, which is more representative of the Indian populace. This is likely due to the westernization of India and the presence of US and European companies, where whites are the majority, and thus whiter skin became the norm for Indian models. Although it hasn't come up in our personal interactions here, I would assume that this preference for light skin in the commercial arena holds true in actuality as well, and that in particular, females with a fairer complexion are found to be more desirable than those who are darker. Sadly, the general trend across the world seems to look upon light skin as more favorable, rather than celebrating all the nuances of skin color. It's not just exclusive to the US.

As an Asian American in India, I've also experienced a few instances of casual but relatively harmless racism. In the United States, I have noticed that people are more careful to not make assumptions; they usually ask about your ethnic background before directing any conversation on that topic. While I've been in India, the behavior I've come to expect about my race has been drastically different. As we were walking back from the sunrise on the Ganges in Varanasi, a lady passing by asked me out of the blue if I was from Japan, to which I responded that I was from the United States. At the Varanasi airport, the man scanning tickets before boarding greeted me with a "Konichiwa!" when it came my turn. Upon receiving no response from me, he inquired, "No Konichiwa?" to which I uncomfortably said, "No." Though these weren't particularly damning instances of racism in any capacity, I thought them incredibly interesting encounters in that with the white people in our Dialogue group, people would *always* ask where they were from, as white people can hail from the US or any of Europe's many countries, yet with me, they didn't bother to ask anything before engaging me, but would just come to their own conclusions about my ethnic background. These interactions weren't degrading in my eyes, but I still interpret it as definitely an example of being treated differently due to skin color, as well as a greater reverence or respect from the Indian populace for Caucasians.

Though racial inequality does not seem to be as embedded in Indian society as much as the black-white inequality is in the United States, and from my time here in India, not as discernable or palpable either, the fascination with white skin is obvious. The billboards

featuring light-skinned Indians and the multiple occasions in which the people here would take photos of our Dialogue group comprised mostly of white people or when they would legitimately ask to take a picture with one of us (but never me) all illustrate this mentality. Additionally, the occurrences of slight racism I've experienced here differ from the US in that racism in the US in general stems from harmful intent and the US's cultural background as a white-centric nation whereas in India it comes from the lack of education or care for the various Asian countries that can spawn Asian tourists. It was truly remarkable and intriguing to come from a country teeming with white people to a country comprised solely of dark people to see the same idea of "light supremacy" present and to observe how similar yet dissimilar the US and India are in regards to their mentalities on race.