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Inequality Reflection

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As an electrical engineering major and physics minor, I'm a pretty analytical guy. So when I became curious about wealth inequality in India as compared to wealth equality in the United States, I first researched the GINI coefficients of the two countries. India's is 0.339 and the United States' is 0.450. Based on this brief research conducted solely out of curiosity, I boarded a plane expecting to land in a poorer albeit slightly more equal country. To any casual observer of wealth in India, this is not the case at all.

On just the second day in Mumbai, we went to tour Dharavi, the second largest slum in Asia and the third largest in the world, with more than a million estimated people living in only 500 acres. Halfway to the edge of Dharavi, we passed an elaborate skyscraper with floor to floor elaborate hanging gardens and picturesque balconies. Our tour guide heard our inquiries and explained to us that the skyscraper was in fact a house, that of business mogul Mukesh Ambani, named Antilia after a mythical Atlantic island. The house had cost over a billion US dollars to build and required a staff of 600 to maintain.

One day after our visit to Dharavi, we were visiting IIT Bombay, the premier Indian technological institute. In casual conversation with an IIT student, I mentioned that we had visited Dharavi the previous day. His eyes lit up in a way of motherly concern. "I have lived in Mumbai for seven years, and I've never visited Dharavi. People simply don't go there". And this was only the first of a slew of related comments heard over my five weeks in India. Those with money simply publicized ignorance, with a hint of fear, towards those living in poverty practically on their doorsteps.

In addition to those living in poverty directly beside the contrasting rich, an additional large poor population exists deep in rural areas. It reminded me of the ancient saying “ignorance is bliss”, and this is ever so apparent in those living modest but comfortable lives on almost no money deep in the mountains. Though these individuals may not be looked upon as incredibly poor because of the reasonable life they can lead, though they are decreasing the average wage in India. Few places in the United States are communities so isolated from lines of communication that they are unaware of the wealth disparity between themselves and cities nearby. This disparity in communication between the two countries is proportional to the resulting wealth disparity. Similarly, there is a greater geographic gap between areas of significant wealth disparity in the United States. In iconic rich areas like West Palm Beach and Beverly Hills, there are not people living in shanties or on the streets beside the nation’s billionaires. This separation leads to make lower class populations less apparent in the United States.

India represented to me the greatest divide between the rich and the poor I have experienced. In Bangalore, a friend from school wanted to watch a movie, so she sent her driver to pick us up in a Mercedes. On the way to her house, and even on the same block, we passed dozens of people begging for money and living in shanties or on the streets. So many people we met on our trip were living on less than two USD a day that even those making what would appear a meager wage in America could live like royalty. Additionally, this gap led to making the rich appear even more rich through the acquisition of incredibly cheap labor. Ambani’s 600 housekeeping employees are surely paid a minuscule fraction of the construction cost of the house, a total amount of money that could hire perhaps one twentieth of the employees in a developed nation. Furthermore, Ambani and his family do not even live in their billion dollar undertaking for

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fear of an Hindu astronomer's word that there are too few windows facing east, meaning that the house is unlucky and will curse them should they live there.

While the top percent or so of the population are equally apparent in India and in the United States, the lower tenth of the population are far more noticeable in India, especially while studying climate change, due to their rampant contributions to pollution AND THIDFN. Walking through Dharavi, we witnessed hundreds of completely unregulated informal industries, many of which were dumping their waste directly into the streets or into the Mithi River.

Though India is mathematically more equal than the United States, it appears quite the opposite to a casual observer. The rampant poverty and pollution in India showcase the presence of the lower class despite the fact that this population is largely ignored by the rich. Visiting India gave me a completely opposing view to any information I would have researched in books or online regarding wealth disparity between India and the United States.