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Comparative study on equality

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Poverty is a universal language spoken in every region of the world. A home is a universal symbol of stability reflected in every region of the world. These concepts are not new, yet they seem to work incongruously. Though the social stratification may be highly viewable in certain areas of the globe, every country houses the poorest class of society. The level of disparity varies from region to region, however its existence should not be disregarded in its entirety.

There are obvious differences between the standards of poverty in the United States, England, and India. This can be shown in the physical appearance of poverty in these three countries. Take for instance, in the US, a wealthy nation, social infrastructure exists, which raises the standard of poverty and inadvertently makes homelessness less visible. The same is true for England. However, India, with a population four times that of the US and a geographic area only one-third the size, has a much larger percentage of its people living on streets. The existence of this homelessness is ubiquitous in Indian cities, making it viewable to residents and tourists alike.

For different people there are different stigmas attached to the word homeless, and the society of the geographic area in which they live often influences these associations. In each of these countries, the perception and connotation of homelessness varies. In the US and England, it is viewed as the lowest possible status in society, reserved for such a small part of the population that it isn't considered a huge issue. However, a negative reputation circulates around areas with high concentrations of

people living below the poverty line; these neighborhoods are thus considered poor, and even unsafe. In order to avoid this reputation, many local governments will take action to eliminate the issue, whatever the cost. My own hometown, a popular tourist spot in the state of Maine, did just this. When the number of homeless people began to affect the tourism industry, the government bought bus tickets for all of the homeless people to leave the town, and go to a different city about an hour and a half away. In a city in England, the local government took a different approach. Since benches are typically a common place for homeless people to sleep at night, the city planners started building arm rests, or bars, every couple feet on the bench so that it wasn't possible for a person to lay down completely. This type of construction has been named "anti-homeless" architecture. As horrific as it is, this is a perfect example of the general attitude towards homelessness in Western countries: an unfortunate social and economic condition, which should be dealt with, but also should not be seen in the meantime.

In India, this attitude seems to be the antitheses of the Western disposition. Instead of homeless people being a part of the smallest class, they are often part of the largest class. As a result of this, the negative stigma associated with extreme poverty is eliminated; since it is so common, it has become an accepted way of life for many people.

One of the primary images that became engrained in my memory was of our first night in India, as we drove from the airport of Mumbai to our hotel. As we entered Colaba, we passed a large parking lot that was full not of cars, but of people mid sleep. Each parking space acted as a designated sleeping spot for a whole family. This was a stark contrast coming from Boston, where parking lots are gated and require fees to be used, to Mumbai, where parking lots had now become a public space for those without a

place to call home. This theme of entire families sleeping in public continued throughout the entire trip. When we arrived in Kolkata at night, we crossed a bridge that looked like its sidewalk was covered in a colorful swath of fabric, yet was in reality just people sleeping side by side across the entire length of the bridge.

My initial reaction to this dense and ubiquitous poverty seems typical. *How can this happen? Who is allowing this to happen? What can I do to fix it?* Such inequality in wealth between nations, within a nation, and even within a city seemed unfair and unacceptable. I know that this reaction is a byproduct of the stigma encouraged by Western society; a tourist visiting from another developing nation may have a very different reaction to the sight.

Although it's unrealistic to think that India's government might make changes that would improve the economic status of the vast population of homeless people overnight, I am beginning to think that it is not only India that needs to make efforts to address homelessness. Displacing homeless people from my town only shifted the responsibility elsewhere, it did not address or resolve the issue of poverty. We, as Americans, like to think we live in a land of equality. In reality we just choose to ignore the inequality, and choose to believe that it's always someone else's obligation to do something. In contrast, India has accepted this inequality as a fact of life, and recently the government has made it a priority to facilitate economic growth for this sector of society. Now it is time for America to come to terms with the reality, and take initiative on a local level to break the cycle of homelessness.