

Sydney Hubbell
Inequality Reflection

Stepping off the plane in Mumbai five weeks ago marked my first steps outside of the United States. Since then, travelling throughout India has been a whirlwind: fourteen hotels in nine cities, rural farmland and enormous megacities, temperate mountains and arid lowlands. We have been able to see and explore so much of this beautiful country in a relatively short span of time. With so little travel experience in the past, I had very few expectations coming in. In most ways, I have been completely blown away. Everyone I have met has been so friendly, the food is incredible, and the landscapes are breathtaking. However, one of the most surprising and appalling things I've witnessed is the proliferation of garbage and lack of sanitation.

In almost every city we have visited, I couldn't help but notice the extreme amounts of waste. In Dharavi, toxic, black wastewater from the unregulated businesses pooled and ran down the streets. In Kolkata, I saw public toilets drain into an open canal just a few yards away. We learned extensively about the pollution of the Mithi River that is now filled with sewage and chemical runoff. On the train in Delhi, the toilets emptied right onto the tracks in the middle of the station. I remember photographing a cow standing on a pile of garbage twice its size in Rishikesh.

Despite my almost constant exposure to it, I never became accustomed to the low sanitary levels. Each new place we visited surprised me all over again. Mostly, I was disgusted to realize that in a matter of weeks, all of these areas would be flooded by the monsoons, spreading the contamination into clean water sources. Sewage, toxic runoff, and garbage would soon reach the drinking water sources for each of these regions. It horrified me to imagine the millions of people who would be exposed to the contaminated water and subjected to health risks and disease.

Coming from suburban Wisconsin, I never once had to worry about the water I was drinking. Anytime I was thirsty I would just grab a glass and fill it with tap water. I even have memories of drinking hose water on a hot summer day while playing outside. I never wondered or worried about where the waste went after I flushed the toilet. Every Friday I would carry our garbage bins to the end of our driveway to be picked up within the hour. Waste disposal and water contamination never crossed my mind; they seemed like such elementary things that I took them for granted.

This disparity in sanitation between India and the United States was one of the most jarring differences I observed throughout my time here, but I believe that the waste management systems are indicative of the larger governmental state of each country. While both countries have regulatory laws surrounding chemical pollutants, human waste treatment, and garbage collection, India and the U.S. diverge in terms of the infrastructure and enforcement necessary to carry out these policies.

In the first war game, I learned that India's developing economy and exponentially growing population have resulted in poor infrastructure, especially in rural areas. However, the largest issues with sanitation occur in the cities, where the close proximity and sheer volume of people are incredibly taxing on the existing resources. Without adequate plumbing, water treatment plants, garbage pick-up and landfill systems to meet the needs of the people, sanitation issues arise - as we have witnessed across the country. The U.S., however, is at a different stage in its development, and has more money, time, and physical resources to prevent some of these waste problems. I believe that these disparities in sanitation infrastructure boil down to the state of India and America's economies as well as the amount of funding and resources allotted to public works and public health projects.

In addition to the underdeveloped infrastructure, we have observed that the enforcement of sanitation and pollution laws is relatively ineffective throughout India. Part of this issue stems from the fact that much of India's industry exists in the informal sector, making chemical pollution from places like Dharavi very difficult to measure and track. Similarly, in severely underdeveloped areas like the slums, it is impossible to enforce responsible garbage and human waste disposal without adequate plumbing or landfill access. In the United States, sufficient infrastructure along with stronger governmental agencies facilitate the enforcement of regulatory sanitation policies.

Overall, the lack of sanitation and abundance of garbage was the most visual source of inequality I witnessed between India and the United States. Seeing people picking through enormous piles of trash and defecating on the side of the highway shocked me into looking deeper into the larger economic disparities effecting sanitation levels in India and the United States.