

To a Western eye, the slums of Dharavi represent the level to which the people of India neglect their poor. The shacks, made of what appears to be corrugated sheets of metal on the roofs, weak muddy walls, encroach upon the cobbled roads, covered by mud and puddles, littered by trash, and long since abandoned as a dignified path. The people who lived there lived publicly, the men bathing publicly in their underwear as plastic and metal scrap machines churned loudly from all directions. People were barefoot with what appeared to be soot dimming their clothes and faces alike. In Dharavi, this was normal. Accepted. It was the standard. But was it a standard of poverty? Or was it a standard of luxury? Compared to other slums across India, this area was a land of opportunity. The people there knew that they were living better than those from the other slums. Had they travelled from those regions, they would've seen the differences.

But for us Americans, it was hard to see this as luxury. The polluted air filled my lungs and the urine and sewage filled lake insulted my nose. The particulates spewed out by the recycling machines threatened my asthma, and I was suddenly aware that I may or may not have remembered to take my malaria pill that morning. All the signs of poverty and desperation were present: poor working conditions, low or no wages, a smell that made you wonder if something had recently died in the vicinity. Seriously, it smelled really bad, I can't get over that.

But the most insulting part of being in Dharavi was looking up. Up above the people, above the slums. You didn't really have to look that far above before you saw them. The skyscrapers. Those cookie cutter, sand colored, copy and paste, expensive, triplet skyscrapers. They dimmed the skyline as a constant reminder that behind this world lie the type of luxury that the western world enjoys. Air conditioning, city views, bathrooms with running water, and a comfortable place to sit down inside the building. But the people of Dharavi weren't there yet. They were walking barefoot in the elements, happy to be making a living for their families.

In a way, the people of Dharavi are strong. They don't see the inequality as a reason to complain, but as part of life. Throughout the entire walk, I couldn't help but imagine that if this were a European country, the sharp contrast and desperation would have demanded changes or war a long time ago. Perhaps they already have. Regardless, the political realms of India are at least aware of the poverty and working condition of their poor and are working to confront the issue. Still, those in the slums remain hard workers, dignified by the type of luxury that they could afford.

As we headed back to our 5-star hotel, after brushing aside the beggars to sit within reach of the AC and shade of our bus, I thought about how this related to luxuries and poverties across the world. Here in India, a developing country with an exploded population with a loyal democratic people, part of accepting inequality stems from understanding the nature of the country. Meanwhile, in the US, inequality is seen by the liberal political faction as a plague that threatens to shred the American dream. But in the US, the measures of inequality that distinguish poverty from rich are much greater. However, the reminders are not as ubiquitous. We don't imagine that congressmen have 7 houses, or that their kids start businesses with half a million dollars in capital from their parents. We like to look up at the skyscrapers of New York and imagine a successful business is run their, but don't like to think that an individual owns the top floor. Meanwhile, on the streets of the city, we still have beggars who are shooed away from buildings like lost dogs looking for a home again, only to be treated as a stray animal. I'm not saying that inequality is an issue that should have been solved by now. Many political theorists have devised ways to bring some concept of equality to life, be it with ownership, work value, or political value. We see inequality as a painful display that somebody else's desires are being disproportionately served. But there is another solution: accepting inequality as part of life, as the people of Dharavi do. Then, we may seek a better standard of life on an absolute basis, seeking to provide for our desires regardless of how others have provided for theirs, or even in conjunction with how others have provided for theirs.