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Comparative Cultural Reflection

I didn't really know what to expect when I came to India. I had grown up hearing about people clinging to the sides of trains and crowded train stations and streets. My Mom was actually unwilling to return because she hated the poverty and dirtiness. So, my understanding of the country was through old photographs and stories about dramatic experiences. The entire country seemed somewhat surreal.

It's strange how quickly I adjusted upon arrival. After the first few days, seeing people living in abject poverty no longer affected me. Admittedly, the culture shock was fairly limited, but still, the way of life in India is so different from what I am used to. I don't think that inequality is much worse than in the United States, but a blanket statement is hard to make about such a diverse country. It is clear that the overall quality of life is lower than I am used to.

About three weeks into our Dialogue, we visited IIT Kharagpur and met some students there. After accepting their invitations to "hang around" by the lake we spoke to them about the United States and India. At one point the conversation shifted to racism and one of the students casually mentioned that "there is no racism in America." We struggled to respond to that statement, especially in the wake of the violent demonstrations that had erupted in Baltimore.

Looking back, it strikes home a point that, even if you have lived amidst a culture for some time, it's hard to truly understand it.

I have spent a month in India, from the Bay of Bengal to Kerala and from the slums of Dharavi to the foothills of the Himalayas. But I haven't really seen India or explored its culture, or that of its regions. I don't understand the complex social structure that is expressed by the caste system or the paradoxical religious and racial relations. To say otherwise is approaching arrogance. That said, I'm going to at least attempt to share my perspective.

India hasn't has the same type of widespread racial discrimination as in the United States, but the US has also never had a strong class system, largely due to the circumstances of its foundation. The main fault lines in Indian society seem to instead be religion and caste. Caste still has a large role in Indian society and regional politics often involve caste-based groupings. On an individual level, caste can often determine socioeconomic status and one's treatment by others. Religion seems to have a more visible role in conflict with both Sikhs and Muslims colliding with Hindus. The neo-Fascist BJP is a group that particularly scares, especially their tie to the RSS, and the increasingly intolerant attitudes, that they have demonstrated. They definitely mirror the rise of the Tea Party in the United States, and conservatism in Europe, albeit with a more violent manner. I think to a certain extent, it has been disappointing that we have not discussed these types of major political movements in India or their roots among the populace as we have instead focused on an idealized and perfect India: in a sense, ignoring the serious social issues in favor of a description of idealistic religious harmony.

This leads into one of my regrets for this trips, namely the fact that we haven't spent very much time learning about Indian culture, either first-hand or through academic sessions.

Although we did have a single cultural session at the beginning of the year, it was a gross

oversimplification bordering on propaganda. The statement that all Indian religions are essentially Hinduism was disturbing on both a personal and objective level. Although we did have some nice commentary about the regions we were visiting, it was relatively infrequent and didn't involve a lengthy discussion as I would have liked. It would have also been nice to walk the streets and interact with locals more often, as the vast majority of my limited experiences doing so were fascinating.

Additionally, I think that our approach to exploring India was far too sheltered. Our bus, while air conditioned and comfortable, isolated us from the goings-on of the city and, on a personal level, made wandering around on foot feel much more uncomfortable. I noticed that in Dharavi, some of my peers were upset when several residents took pictures of them, ignoring the fact that they had been taking pictures of people without their permission all day. This type of behavior, coupled with the idea that we have “experienced” India, demonstrates just how we have approached this trip, not as a new culture to be explored but as one to be studied along with its denizens from the safety of a camera lens or an air-conditioned bus seat. I am far from innocent in this regard, but I think it is essential to at least recognize our own flaws.

I can make grandiose statements about inequality and poverty in India all day, but in the end, they will likely seem as strange to Indians as the comments that those students had made about racism in the United States. I have learned a lot about India in my time here, and I have really enjoyed the experiences, but I have not “experienced” India. I have not even visited the majority of the country. And I believe that I could spend a lifetime here without truly being able to understand the differences between equality in the United States and India.