

The Indian Experience

Billy Wilson

“India is not a nation, nor a country. It is a subcontinent of nationalities”
-Muhammad Ali Jinnah

Numerous times throughout our stay has the concept of the “Elephant” surfaced in our discussions. In this allegory, blind men are feeling what they believe to be seemingly different things—one feels the trunk, another feels a leg—and the belly felt by a third. India is this elephant, with an anatomy that is richly diverse in nearly all its societal facets: in history, in religion, in economy, in language and dialects, in architecture, in the balance of tradition and modernity; in the roles of *youth*, in the roles of clothing and style, and in the subjective replies to *what it means to be Indian*. These classifications run wide and deep, creating a mosaic of various shades of what we can refer to as *regional identities*. The macro-scale reveals the IBM/software India, the industrialized India, the poverty-stricken India, the historically-rich India, and the indigenous (*Adivasi*) India. And if we narrow our scope, and focus on the day-to-day individualized habits of thought, we can see how the micro-scale is also intrinsically varied—married couples, for instance, can be sought through pre-determined arrangements, impressive ad listings, or through plain old reliable luck (or the lack thereof)! The methods and styles of *Saris* likewise emulate the micro-scale variations in culture—women drape the *Saris* over a specific shoulder depending on which region their in. So, before I go into the details of the trip, I just want to concretize what I believed to be the one big message: India is vast, India is colorful, and no-matter how it is defined, there is always room to define it as something else! This is the magic of Elephant of India.

It was a hot day in early May when we began our informative tour of Mumbai. The city is the financial capital of India, housing 25% of India’s industrial output, and 70% of India’s financial transactions. In terms of the flow of capital that the city sees regularly, Mumbai is ranked within the top ten commerce hubs of the world. So of the 20,000,000 or so inhabitants of Mumbai, there is a fraction who

have gained a lot of economic traction through India's industrializing modernity. One such family is the Armani family, who is highly involved in a petro-chemical refinement company known as Resilience Industries Limited (RIL).

Looking around however, it seems that Mumbai's population is heavily composed of an impoverished underclass. We toured briefly through a community not far from the governor's house, where we got a sample of intricate lifestyles cultivated by tradition and function. A living is earned through the impressively specific trades of Mumbai's micro-economies. Wages were made from niche jobs such as washing clothing using well water, collecting old newspaper from recycling, selling vegetables on the streets, or delivering lunches from the clients' place of living to his/her place of work.

This flavor of informality is innate to the Indian context. It is cheap, it is dirty, but it has amplifies productivity of Mumbai's micro-economies to a point where major corporations, like Gucci, hold stakes in these operative enclaves. Specifically in mind is the enclave of Dharavi, one of the largest, most productive slums in all of Asia.

As we stepped off of the bus onto a main thoroughfare—an overture into the blazing heat and bustling traffic of midday Mumbai—we became immersed into the densely operative surroundings. Ironically enough, this “immersion” into Dharavi is only a mere walk-onto-the-surface beneath which the slum’s activities, capabilities, overall astounding resilience can be found. What we entered into was, in fact, just the tip of the iceberg. The sizeable five-hundred acre enclave is inhabited by roughly one-million occupants, nearly all of whom are involved an economy of some sort. Pottery, tanneries, tailoring, food vending, and the recycling and reuse of plastics and scrap-metals appear to make up a large percentage of Dharavi’s occupations. All of these occupations are of course apart of the informal economy which, as we’ve learned from Ms. Sequira, represents almost 70% of Mumbai’s population. But housed within these clusters of shanties is an enormous capacity to do work. According to an article in The New York Times (Yardley 2011), Dharavi’s economic output is estimated to lie somewhere between \$600 million to \$1 billion annually.

One of Dharavi's most amazing traits is that it houses people and economic operations that fulfill locally-required functions (eg: potteries, bread-making, laundry), while simultaneously taking care of municipally-required functions (eg: recycling of all plastics and aluminum), while even providing corporate services for designer labels (eg: stitching Gucci shoes). These are informal economies, and the government is hardly involved in any of it—all of it is market-based. That said, economies within Dharavi are so dense and convoluted, it's nearly impossible to keep a census of it: transactions are all unregulated, and there's no form of social security. The place is also filthy: there is little piping between the bathrooms and the canal than connects to the Mithi River. Interestingly, the residents of Dharavi—many of whom are migrants—don't actually own any property within Dharavi. The shanties and chawls are, and have historically been, squatter settlements. Numerous times has the government attempted to remove the Dharavi inhabitants to make room for commercial development, but it's so far failed (three times). The city planners are now trying to compromise: to construct high-rise condos to house inhabitants, but they face two major impediments: 1) because no population census is kept, and no properties are formerly owned, there's no precise way to gauge the amount of people who'll need compensation. There are roughly 1 million inhabitants, but it's difficult to even say how many constitute has Dharavi residents, since many are seasonal migrants, or maybe just friends of the family. As for the second reason: 70% of activities in Dharavi are estimated to be economic, rather than residential. Spaces are required for operating machinery, drying clay—those sorts of things. Housing these operations originally hadn't been considered by planners and architects when designing these potential highrises, so that's what caused the most recent development scheme to fall through. Most city governments could probably just claim eminent domain over these types of areas, but the reason Mumbai's hasn't yet it because of Dharavi's economic capacity, which ultimately stands for political power. It's for this reason why I think Dharavi is a successful slum.

Dharavi arose out of being a dump site. Back in the early 1900's, low castes migrated and built the community, fulfilling low-caste occupations such as

butcheries, tanneries, and the like—all while accumulating the industrializing city's debris. The average wage in Dharavi is something around three USD a day—the informal economies and lack of regulation/sanitation/labor laws are reasons why productivity is so cheap, which consequentially incentivizes companies like Gucci to tap into it. And so there's commonly a struggle, and there's commonly uncertainty for inhabitants of Dharavi, and so overcoming this struggle requires a certain crafty, adaptive mindset—which Indians refer to as *Jugaad*. This resilient slum provides goods to the outside world, but is in-turn victim to a fairly high degree of exploitation by macro-forces.

Poverty is big, but somehow civil content remains established, and life in poverty carries on. 80% of the Indian population receives a limited water resource—around 2 hours of running water a day—if piped...otherwise water must be retrieved through traditional wells or communal taps. But in midst of all this, people seem okay. From what I gather, this degree of content-through-constraint is due to religion, respectively. Hinduism advocated reincarnation and karma: one's standing in the next life is governed by one's behavior in this life. So integrity, honesty, selflessness, humility—all these are what is strived for, because it insures a better life next time. But in addition is the idea of Dharma: one's duty. One's Dharma is the function he/she must fulfill, and is often something he/she is born into doing—it's *that* innate. But interestingly enough, it's said that, under all odds—even if no one else believes in you, even if there are other things you are better at—you must follow this Dharma, because that is the function designed for you in the context of all other Dharmas pursued by others. I find this very interesting. When I get back to the states, I'm going to read the "Bhagavad Gita", a Hindu text which, funnily enough, is said to be Einstein's favorite book. It's a Hindu scripture about a war, but is insightful with its allegories. Emerson too said everyone should read it.

But religion is everywhere in India. From the small shrines found along the sidewalks, to the Hindu *Mandirs* located here and there throughout the neighborhoods. I've seen paintings of Vishnu—a member of Hinduism's *Trimurti*—on the walls of restaurants, along with sighting people cleansing ceremoniously in the outdoor baths built over a hundred years ago. From the cows on the street, to

the *Namaste* hand gesture (who's Hindi word translates to "I bow to the divine in you"); from the diets that are adopted, to the role of dharma and karma in the structural functioning of socio-economic activities and positions. Of the various religions found in India, Hinduism is most prevalent, representing more or less 80% of the Indian population. Islam is 13%, along with Christianity (2.9%), Sikhism (1.6%), Buddhism (1.5%), and Jainism (.5%). Out of all the cultural studies that India offers, it is the historiography and functionality of religion—it's roles, it's impacts—that I find most expansive and complicated-to-grasp, being an outside observer.

We flew from Mumbai down to Bangalore. On arrival, we travelled 4 hours via bus to Mysore, a city far smaller than Mumbai (under 1 million inhabitants). The drive allowed me to glimpse into the life of rural India, or at least Southern India (state name: Karnataka): pastures filled with sugarcane and rice flanked the road, and often included dug-up irrigation canals. Sometimes people would be in the fields, but rarely did I see tractors or any heavy equipment. Adjacent to these pastures would be roadside huts, out of which vendors sold either food or hand-carved wooden deities. Beside these huts, you might see a skinny cow moseying around. But every so often, the road would guide us through a small town, where the Stucco houses and food stands became more plentiful, and I assume these food stands came from these farms nearby. Throughout the trip, I saw no highway patrollers: instead, there'd be speed bumps frequently—about every km—to deter drivers from speeding. So while driving through these small towns, we'd slow down for the speed bumps, and, looking out the window, I'd see puzzled locals wondering what a bus of white folks were doing in rural India. Some of these expressions had subtle undertones ranging from compassion to curiosity to annoyance, or so I felt, as the men stared back, standing in the blazing sun; or the women stood, draped shoulder-to-foot in Sarees. But of course, waves and smiles were gestured too. And so, more often than not, we drove off on a good note.

Mysore was interesting. The town was a "princely kingdom" from 1399 to 1947. It's known as the city of palaces. For the two days there, we visited these

palaces and temples, and dealt with the aggressive vendors crowding outside of them! Our hotel was nicer than I anticipated. From the outside, the U-shaped building looked like an Embassy: gates, a driveway, flags, some guards--while the inside seemed like some elegant manor where Colonial Brits might stay during their visit to India. It was built in 1912. Corridors had high ceilings, and were either floored with dark-wood or peacock-painted tiles. The courtyard was maybe 3x the size of our backyard. And for scale, I'd say the place could house eighty people or so. From Bangalore, we flew to Cochin, located in the great state of Kerala. Throughout the stay, we bussed through a lot of terrain, always on the go to see more things, road-tripping every two days or so. Last week, we drove through a mountain range known as the Western Ghats. Despite the dryness, the land seemed super arable, and nearly every inch is apart of some plantation. Coffee, cardamon, and teas are the cash crops. Interestingly enough, most of these plantations we're built by the British during Colonial Rule, and the trend still remains: these teas are grown for export. One of our hotels was actually located on a plantation, so we spent the days touring through the fields, and drinking local coffees and teas.

One of our hotels was actually located on a plantation, so we spent the days touring through the fields, and drinking local coffees and teas. We also learned about how important the monsoon season is to the region—and to all of India in general. Basically, India experiences heavy rainfall from June through September: a period when the country receives a surprising 80% of its annual rainfall. Basins, and groundwater reservoirs are replenished during this period, and entire regions become visibly greener. The monsoon season is therefore highly pertinent to India's social life. Much of India's population (about 60%) is directly involved in the agriculture sector, making them thenceforth highly dependent on the productivity of their farms, and by connection, the monsoon season. Interestingly enough, these heavy periods of rainfall are predicted to grow more and more variant in light of climate change. Meaning, there are areas in India that have begun seeing less rainfall, and others that experience more. Flooding is one problem, which effected Mumbai heavily back in 2005; but lack of rainfall is another, and so there's a ton of research going into monsoon-studies, as well as methods for water management,

both for urban areas (like drainage system), as well as for rural access and irrigation systems. But staying on track: we then tripped it six hours to Thekkady which is a village town, still high in the mountains, on the edge of a massive reserve. Elephants, monkeys, and wild peacocks are seen here and there (monkeys here are as common as squirrels are in Boston). The squirrels here in this region however, are huge—they look like cubs....

The next day we drove to the house boats, which were amazing. They were located in a backwater area, which looks like a swampy, delta-region type-of-place. After boarding around 2pm, we coasted around for 5 hours or so, winding through narrow canal-looking rivers, sometimes as narrow as the width of Mass ave. And we'd pass by bars of land where shanties and huts sat, in front of which we'd see people cleansing themselves and their clothes, or sitting in canoes, floating and fishing with a net draped into the water. The evening on the house-boat was interesting. After we docked, all thirty of us congregated for 30 minutes or so on the biggest house boat, shooting the breeze. That ended when it began to get dark, so we dispersed back onto our own boats. We get back, and our boat's *infested* with insects; flies and spiders, mainly—little salamanders too. The flies weren't house flies, but more like those ant-flies, mainly roaming around on the floor, but there were everywhere, and they were densely together. Many of the other boats had insects too. One boat caught a huge spider, white and brown, with legs long and skinny as pine needles.

The following day, we drove five hours to where we I am now: Kovalam, a coastal town that looks out over the Arabian Sea. The hotel we're in is basically a resort: by far the most elegant place we've stayed. We arrived around 5, and I immediately ran along the coastline. Outside and far from our fancy fortress of a resort are villages where folks rely on biomass for cooking. Wooden shacks with conical roofs of elephant straw is the norm. Along the run, I eventually encountered a bunch of guys playing soccer on the beach. Excited to see a white dude, they asked if I wanted to play, and so I spent the sunset playing barefooted soccer on the beach. These kids were all from nearby villages, and the game seemed to attract a lot of

other inhabitants who wanted to watch. I took off when it began to get dark, since I was 5K or so from the hotel.

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