

## Culture Assignment

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I looked at Raj and told him, "The streets are paved with gold." He looked back at me with wide-eyed wonder.

I met Raj on the second day in Mumbai as our group was playing cricket in the streets with the slum dwellers and a few well-off kids. Raj belonged to the latter group, distinguished by his new, bright clothing and well-kept hair that somehow always came back to the same place after a sea breeze. We talked for a little while, exchanged phone numbers, and then the conversation turned to America and how it compared to India. He asked me a few basic questions ("I'm from Minnesota." - "Where is that?") before he asked two questions that left me thinking long after we left Mumbai.

"What is the America like?"

I stammered over my words, before answering jokingly, "Where I'm from, the streets are paved with gold." Raj stared in awe before calling his other friend over quickly repeating what I had said, not realizing that I was joking. He conversed with his friend before turning to me and asking excitedly, "Are you rich?"

Caught off guard, I hesitated, shrugged, and nodded. At this point, the rest of the group was about to head back to the Fariyas, so we quickly said goodbye and I hurried back to join up with Tavish. That final question struck a chord within me about our differing perceptions of wealth depending on where we live. Am I rich from an American perspective? From an Indian perspective? From a global perspective? Each of these would have a different answer. In

America, I am very poor compared to many of my classmates. Fittingly, after we came back to the hotel from visiting Dharavi, I spent most of my free time emailing and filling out forms for food stamps once I get back to the U.S. My father is unemployed, but the social safety net keeps my family afloat, something that would never happen here. I would like to pretend that I came to Northeastern because it had the best opportunities for me and the co-op program, but in reality I only came here because it was the cheapest option. This is also the case for this trip. I was only able to do this Dialogue because it essentially cost me next to nothing.

This is why I struggled with this question. All my life, whenever someone asked about my family's demographic, I would reply "Lower-class white Midwestern", always slightly embarrassed to tell people that my family was one of those reviled for being 'moochers' and 'lazy leeches' that lived from welfare check to welfare check. As I stared back at Raj, he would not see a family struggling to get by. Compared to him and the rest of India, I would likely be upper-middle class, a distinction that seems out of reach for me in America. I assumed he meant from this perspective, and I was very conscious of the fact that I am very lucky to be born in a developed country to a family that recognized the importance of going to school and doing well, allowing me to get a scholarship to college. After this internal identity struggle, I simply nodded.

After this experience, my conversation with Raj replayed in my head as I listened to the lecture at the Indian Institute of Management on the huge income disparity and opportunity gap in India between the rich and poor, a gap that was surprisingly *smaller* than the income disparity in America per World Bank Gini coefficient. However, this gap is hard to comprehend in pure human numbers when applied to 1.2 billion people. The professor intrigued me when he argued that the government is largely focused on helping out disadvantaged farmers instead of huge multinational corporations. I thought back to my own experience campaigning for poverty

alleviation funds through my high school, and receiving the curt response that we already put "your kind through school, so don't expect anything else".

We have talked extensively during the war games and guest lectures about the transfer of 'best practices' from the U.S to India. However, I think from my conversation with Raj and my own experience with wealth in the U.S, it is high time we considered a transfer of respect of disadvantaged populations from India to America, allowing for a more constructive approach that Professor Mukherjee outlined in his 'Bottom of the pyramid' business approach by treating the poor as an opportunity for both the business to profit and for the people to get life-changing services, instead of dismissing them as economic deadweight like we currently do in the U.S. I believe that with more businesses adopting this business model, India could mitigate or even prevent the 'demographic disaster' that the Professor alluded to in his lecture.