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Cultural Reflection
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Throughout the application process and pre travel time to India, most people I talked to about traveling to India could not understand why I would choose to travel to this part of the world. I did not have full moral support from my family to travel to this country which concerned me. My mom went to one of my well traveled elementary school teachers who confirmed that she had no idea why I was traveling to India. This country was not on her list of places to visit, ever. Everyone I talked to had their own opinions of India from how dirty the country is, to how many people I would see starving on the side of the road from starvation. I have traveled to Costa Rica and the Bahamas before which are both third world countries, so I thought I had an idea of what I was getting myself into. Nonetheless I was incredibly nervous to travel to India with all of the perceptions people had been putting in my head when they haven't even traveled to this country. Faster than I ever thought, it was May sixth and I was on my way to a country I knew nothing about.

Stepping off the plane in Mumbai was absolutely terrifying at first. There was a military presence in the airport which I am not used to. The military presence in general did not make me nervous, the fact that the presence was needed is what concerned me. Coming from a small island, the sheer number of people was overwhelming, also. There are so many stereotypes and misconceptions we have formed about different religions and eastern cultures as the United States. I had no idea what any of these people were thinking as they stared at our bus full of white people. I was very upset with myself the first night we were here for actually feeling afraid of stereotypes I had developed in my head previous to this study abroad experience. There are many things that are done differently in this country, but there is a method to the assumed madness.

The first day in Mumbai, we had a culture lesson with a nice woman by the name of Mala. Having this talk helped me to thrive in the cultural aspects of this dialogue. Mala pointed out a

few things that I could be able to pick out in a crowd after her lesson. The first and most important is how accepting the Indian people are. There are millions of people living in the city of Mumbai, yet they all get along and there is very little violence. This is due to both the acceptance of the caste system and religions. The most widely practiced religion is Hinduism. In Hindu, there is one God that takes on many forms, as if there were multiple Gods. Because the multiplicity of Gods worshipped, it is not uncommon to find someone who practices Hindu in a Mosque. This was a surprise to me because I was always under the assumption each religion had their place to practice and there wasn't much sharing in that respect. The caste system remains in place in India as well and is closely tied to forms of religion and beliefs of reincarnation. People are receptive of the caste they are born into and they make the best of it. Even during our visit to Dharavi, everyone seemed happy where they were even though they had no idea what chemicals they were breathing in, or touching and that their living conditions were poor. They were just going about their daily work and appeared incredibly happy. Most Indian people believe what they did in their previous life resulted in the caste they are currently born into. It's a peaceful belief system.

Another misguided cultural difference explained to us was arranged marriages. When one mentions arranged marriages to people in the United States, most people scoff at the idea and think it's ridiculous. After it was explained to me, arranged marriages shed a very different light. When two people are introduced for an arranged marriage, they go on three to five dates to decide if marriage will work out. If there are no moves after five dates or so, the woman will be encouraged to try seeing another man. Most of the time the two people are introduced based on family friendship. We were also shown, however, that some people are introduced via newspaper advertisements. Yes, there is a classifieds page for bride and groom seekers. The concept is very similar to online dating, except in the local newspaper. These advertisements didn't say things like "enjoys volleyball and long walks on the beach". They demonstrated things along the lines of your height, religion, education, career, etc. There are still love marriages in India, but they

are not as common. After listening to the explanation of arranged marriages I think they sound alright. Unlike the common misconception, there seems to be an opportunity to be able to say no if it's someone you really don't want to marry.

After learning briefly about the variety of customs and how values and beliefs affect the actions of people, it was time to put our new knowledge to the test. We all went out to explore the streets of Mumbai. At first glance, the streets appear dirty, chaotic, dangerous, disorganized, but at closer look they morph into a well synchronized chaos. There are no two story malls, and only a few westernized store fronts such as a Nike or Adidas. Most places are one room with a garage door at the store front. There are racks of clothing, jewelry, watches, shoes etc. lining the streets giving only a narrow tunnel way for people to walk through. Walking down the street, you need to be able to find the perfect balance between taking everything in and tunnel vision.

Upon further reflection throughout the week, the most overwhelming part of walking around the city was the fact that every sense was being used all of the time. Your eyes would be trying to look at all of the colors, shops, people, dogs, cats, the uneven sidewalk and the group you are with. Your ears would be ringing from all of the people trying to have you purchase something, or the car drivers honking their horns (in a helpful manor). Your nose would be on overload from every street food vendor you passed, the smell of garbage, the smell of burning garbage, the smell of millions of people living in one city. The smell would be so strong to the point of tasting it a few times. And on top of tasting the strongest odors, the entire Indian cuisine is completely new to me. The addition of many spices and cilantro and lack of red meat has made this an entire new experience. Even the sense of touch was at work as people would touch you with whatever they wanted you to buy or tug at your shirt for change or a sip of water. In Boston, I mostly exercise my sight and hearing senses; sometimes smell. To use all of the senses for a prolonged period of time in one place is challenging.

India seems to be a first world country stuck in a third world body. From all of the visits we had to the IITs and walking around the cities, you can see that technologically, the Indian

people know a lot and education is becoming more important to them. As far as cleanliness and infrastructure, the majority of places are definitely third world. Originally when I was coming to India, I knew it was a third world country and I had the mindset that “I am going to see a lot of things that need to be fixed”. Now that I have spent some time here, I see a few things that need to be fixed. There is an obvious lack of proper solid waste management for starters. But my mindset now has shifted to observing the things that are working, and taking into the consideration the history of eastern cultures, religion, number of people, climate etc. to see these things work. One way Indian people have adapted to their population and lack of transportation infrastructure during rush hour is by developing a lunch delivery system. There is no room for people alone on the transit system in the morning, let alone their lunches as well. To combat this problem for those who can't afford to eat out everyday, wives will cook homemade meals to be delivered by a special system unique to Mumbai. It is the most efficient lunch delivery system that many graduate research projects have been based off of. We were able to make a visit to the central hub where all of the lunches were being organized for delivery. This is just one example of how adaptations have been made to accommodate factors unique to India.

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to study in India, and to learn a culture that is incredibly under appreciated. I am looking forward to returning to the U.S. to clarify some of the misconceptions people I know had about India's culture, beliefs and people. I think everyone on this dialogue realized and expressed during group discussions that we have a lot to learn from the Indian culture. The best lesson to be learned which one person described during a reflection session, “Acknowledge what [you] have and try to make the best of it. It's a more productive way of living”.