

## Cultural Reflection

In embarking on this dialogue, I was extremely excited to experience India's culture. Of all the available dialogues, I chose India because I thought its culture would be the most different from my previous travel experiences, comprising mainly Western Europe and the United States. Though I've enjoyed nearly all of our time here, certain cultural excursions have had the largest impact on me overall and will be more memorable to me as I reflect upon the entire event of the Dialogue itself. Including the Hare Krishna Temple wedding, Dharavi, and the tour of Windermere Estate's plantation, my favorite moments were often the ones that most challenged my preconceived perceptions of Indian lifestyle.

Because India is geographically separated from English-speaking nations, I did not expect to see so many of the people speaking English (despite India's obvious influence from Great Britain). Thus, I was pleasantly surprised when, on our very first day of exploration, some of the locals went out of their way to help us understand the significance of the event we were witnessing, a wedding in the Hare Krishna temple. The atmosphere of the ceremony was unexpectedly inviting—I can't imagine a wedding party in the US (or Europe, for that matter) letting us intrude on their celebration in quite the same way that the Indian couple did. We were woven into the vibrant fabric of the wedding, rather than standing at the back and watching uncomprehendingly. As we looked around the sacred room and wondered just what we were witnessing, some wedding attendees were quick to point out the bride and groom and the significance of their elaborate dress. A bit later, Sancha pointed to the statue of Brahmin in the back, explaining that it was the ninth reincarnation of the Hindu god. The music, dance, and overall joviality of the ceremony, not to mention the splendor of the temple itself, were so beautiful and exciting, but more importantly, unlike anything I had ever experienced before! In

that moment, I felt peaceful, as though I had begun to fulfill my own purpose of immersing myself in a foreign culture.

Perhaps the visit that challenged me the most mentally was the trip to Dharavi. Before we went, I was confused as to why visiting a slum would be educational. I didn't have any idea of what we would be seeing. As I read *Poor Little Rich Slum*, I found my expectations of the slum life to be too flat. After reading *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* last summer, I thought I knew just what to expect from a slum: a slew of depressed people living in a densely overpopulated "neighborhood" of primitive housing. While some of my expectations were met in the dangerous work many of the people we saw were doing, I had not realized that the inhabitants of the slum were also entrepreneurs and innovators. It was too easy to see slum life as hundreds of people picking through garbage, but that is only one facet of the real story. At Dharavi, we got a glimpse of something more—hard workers and camaraderie and maybe even hope. As we walked around, many of us had a sort of moral dilemma. Was it wrong to take pictures of Dharavi's people, as though they were animals in a zoo? For my part, I am still unsure of how I feel regarding the pictures I took, but I have definitely learned not to judge societies as monochromatic entities.

My favorite part of the trip so far has been our stay at Munnar. I loved going to the beach, seeing the city of Mumbai in Powai and Colaba, and visiting the palaces in Mysore, but none quite compares with the simple beauty of the tea plantation we were lucky enough to stay in.