

Comparative Study of Cultures: Socioeconomic Inequality in the U.S. and India

Adrian Forrest

I am by no means an expert in socioeconomic class and how it is represented in different cultures, but it is definitely a topic in which I find much passion and is something that I have kept in mind and observed throughout the India Dialogue. Coming from a low-income (not impoverished) family in the U.S., I've noticed throughout the years the differences between most of my friends and I, recognizing certain privileges that they had that I did not have. During this Dialogue, however, I've come to the realization how different the standards are for low-income families in India in comparison to the United States, and as a low-income individual in the U.S., I definitely have more privileges than a low-income individual in India.

Going to Dharavi was eye opening and life changing. Dharavi, one of India's most recognized slums, was our second excursion in Mumbai. What I expected a slum to look like was for the most part how it really appeared, so I wouldn't say I was shocked by initial observance. Yet, it opened my eyes to how wide the socioeconomic gap in India truly is. A few miles outside of this slum, you can see the much nicer apartments and well-established buildings, including the 33-story building owned by the 5th richest man in India. A few more miles out, you reach Powai, a much more affluent side of Mumbai, encompassed with five-star hotels, well-kept streets, established restaurants, and more. And yet, in the center of this city surrounded by facets of affluence, we see this slum encompassed with run-down buildings, lack of sufficient resources, an absence of luxuries, and diligent families working sun up to sun down just to get by. In the U.S., I assume a somewhat close comparison could be housing projects particularly in inner-city neighborhoods. However, because I have family friends who live in housing projects,

I've experienced them firsthand, and from my comparison, housing projects definitely have much better conditions than slums.

The wide income gap between the elite and the poor is something that was unavoidable to notice throughout this India Dialogue. I've noticed and learned during the trip how the economic and fiscal system in India seems to be structured for the rich to stay rich and it makes it difficult for poor people to come out of poverty. After I visited the slums and seeing numerous homeless and/or disabled people in the streets of Colaba, Varanasi, Kolkata, and New Delhi, I had a conversation with one of my friends on the Dialogue, and we were discussing the possibility of these people to move up out of their current socioeconomic situations, and we came to the sad and unfortunate realization that many of these people may very well be stuck in their conditions for a long time, if not the rest of their lives. I realize that the income gap in the U.S. is much wider, and that the system still makes it hard for low-income and impoverished families in the U.S. to build themselves up—as a low-income student, I've directly noticed this. Yet in India, this disadvantage seemed so much more apparent and observable to me. In the U.S., though I think of socioeconomic injustice and inequality **very** often (as well as witness and undergo it), it's sometimes easy to forget about, but in India, it's something that I found much harder to ignore. Understanding this is what pushes me to do something about socioeconomic inequality, and to find solutions to open up opportunities for those who live without them.