Final Reflection Paper

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Often times, when I discuss my trip to India with others, now that I am back in America, I say that India is a whole other world. While there are still many similarities between America and India, the differences obviously stood out more to me. This did not at all mean that the differences were bad in any way. They were just—well—different. For one thing, Indians are not as private of people. They do not mind staring, because that just means that one is curious, not intrusive. Pictures are not an invasion of privacy to them either. To them, a moment in their life is just being captured. Shop owners will often follow people who seem, to them, interested in their product in order to get that person to eventually buy the item. To the merchants’ credit, sometimes it works. Indians will stand closer to others than in America. Indians are just not very private people compared to Americans. This makes sense that they have less of a sense of privacy than Americans due to the sheer number of people in India compared to the amount of people in the United States and the proximity to each other in which they live. There are more people around to see what you are doing to the point where nothing is secret, and the people have nothing to hide.

The Indian people are more outspoken than Americans as well. Americans are opinionated, but Indians are more open about it. At Jawaharlal Nehru University, massive painted political posters line every wall of the campus. They are not euphemized either. Many are very harsh and dark: including nooses hanging from trees to promote farmer suicide awareness and bleeding women to denounce sexual abuse. Nothing like this happens at Ohio State except when antiabortion protestors come to visit, and Jawaharlal Nehru University is a lot smaller university than Ohio State. Not only are Indians more politically outspoken, but they are also more religiously open. Not only is religious garb proudly worn throughout the country every day, but symbols of religion are on people’s cars, rickshaws, and homes. Religion and politics are almost saved for private conversations in America. We do not often share our personal beliefs with others. This is the fundamental difference between Americans and Indians. Indians are more open to telling anyone and everyone about themselves and what they think than Americans. This coincides with the idea that people in the United States are more private, because they do not want to share as many of their ideas and beliefs with others, as the people of India often will do.

Though Indians are more open than Americans, there are many things that both countries’ people and their countries have in common. Especially in places like the Cyber Hub in Gurgaon, India even looks like America. India is one the “BRICK” countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and [South] Korea) that are currently industrializing. They are creating big strip malls and fancy hotels, many of the establishments there are American or European brands: Holiday Inn, Ibis, Pizza Hut, McDonalds, KFC, Dominos, and even Hard Rock Café to name a few. Many corporate buildings are popping up around that area too. I can attest to seeing Microsoft, IBM, and Samsung corporate buildings near these new strip mall-like places in Gurgaon. It was like this area was purposefully looking like a westernized area.

India also has a distinct wealth gap like there is in America—only even more apparent. There are big beautiful areas in India like Gurgaon that are obviously very well off, and then there are slums. In America, one can often find very run-down poor areas right next to very rich neighborhoods. Both countries have very obvious class recognition. It is very easy to differentiate what economic status someone has because the gaps between the statuses is so large and so clear. One moment passing through India, one may see a millionaire, and the next moment, one might see someone sleeping on the sidewalk because that person has nowhere else to go. India and America are similar in economic structure. It seems that the more westernized an area it is, the wealthier. This can explain the Indian stereotype of all white people being extremely rich.

Indians differ in their dress than Americans, though. Though this may not be a shock, their aesthetics may be. Everywhere on billboards and ads, the dress of the models is very westernized. Women show a lot more skin than they do in public in the media. Advertisements still use the same sort of sex appeal as Americans (except a little more conservative clothing by American standards). Though, what Indians wear out and about is more modest than what is all over the media, the aesthetics are still the same. The striking difference is that Indian models want to look light-skinned whereas American models want to look darker-skinned. This may seem like a major difference between the aesthetics of the two countries, but it is a similarity in disguise. The similarity is that the people of both countries want what most do not have in their own country. Americans, being predominantly white, want darker skin, and the predominantly dark skinned people of India want lighter skin. The idea of beauty is still a very similar concept in America and in India.

The language barrier seemed like it would be a major problem while I was travelling. Overall, communication was not a big issue in India. The common language of people of different dialects and languages in India is English, and English is taught in schools, therefore most of the locals knew English. I would have enjoyed learning more Hindi, though it was not *that* necessary. I only experienced one communication issue while I was in India.

On the last day of the trip, roughly five hours before we were leaving for the airport, my roommate informed me that he was really sick, and he had called the front desk for a doctor. They had instructed him to wait, and they would bring him one to his room. However, by the time I made it to the room, he had waited awhile. He decided to go down to the front desk and ask. Soon after he left, the doorbell rang and the phone started to ring. I chose to answer the door first. The man was holding a power strip, and I had told him that we did not need any, that they must have been mistaken on the room number. I then answered the phone that had called me back for the third time. The woman on the line said, “Hello, sir. The man with your adapter is right outside of your room waiting for you.” That is when I had understood the misunderstanding. “He asked for a *doctor*. Not an *adapter*.” “No, sir. You said ‘adapter.’” “I did not make the call, ma’am.” I replied. “My roommate who really needed medical attention called and asked for a *doc-tor*. He already has an adapter of his own. He is now down at the front desk.” There was a long silence then she said, “Is there anything else I can do for you today?” “No, thank you. Goodbye.”

However, the language barrier actually made it helpful in a way. It helped solve the biggest challenge I experienced in India: getting people to ignore you and not follow you, just because you happen to be a tourist. Most merchants had assumed that anyone who is white speaks English. To them, if you were not Indian, you could not possibly know any Indian languages. Most Indians will presume that all tourists are ignorant to their life and culture. When I had traveled to visit the Ghats in Varanasi, a man took us aside and showed the group of us the sacred cremation ground on the bank of the Ganges River. He explained the whole process of bathing the body in the Ganges one last time, while the oldest male in the family bathes in the Ganges, wears white robes, and gets his head shaved. He is then the one to start the fire. The man told us all of the people who do not get cremated and the reasons why. The whole time he did not realize that we had learned all of this and watched it the day before with our tour guide. He had supposed that we did not know anything about the process and felt that he could educate us and teach us something new. He did not.

This same mentality existed in the minds of the merchants in India. This is why learning a little Hindi went a long way. I learned how to first say no in Hindi. This warded off most beggars and almost all of the people trying to sell me their little trinkets that I had no interest in buying while I was in Delhi. Their surprise at me knowing any Hindi whatsoever would make them stop in their tracks. They made faces back that seemed to me like they had thought, “*Did he hear what I had said about him as he walked up?!”*  This was amusing to me, and it gave me enough time to walk away.

The same assumption existed in Varanasi, but the people in the market were much more persistent. A man followed a person in our group for about a quarter of a mile through the back alleys of the Varanasi market. The whole time, the group member kept telling him, “No, thank you,” “I’m sorry sir, but I really don’t want any postcards,” and “I need to be somewhere now. Bye!” This did not stop the man. It was clear that we needed to get better at this.

I first used an odd skill to my advantage: puppy training. When one teaches a dog to not jump on people, the owners need to show the dog that they are unfazed by what it is doing. The owner needs to show that jumping or biting does not get their attention. I used this skill to be able to ignore shop owners. I looked straight forward, kept walking when someone talked to me, and did not flinch when people came up to me. I acted simply as if they did not exist. I also adopted a hand motion that I saw some people do, especially to cars. I would put up my hand a little and almost make a swatting motion. This may have been offensive—I do not know—but it worked.

All of this still did not always keep people away. I lastly learned how to say “no thank you” in Hindi. I found out that there was a separate phrase for “no thank you” in Hindi, and I learned it from others in the group. This was the final technique I learned to keep pestering street vendors at bay. It worked marvelously. It also was a lot more polite. People realized that it was not my first day in India. It caught them off-guard. This was the most useful way to get merchants to ignore me and let them know that I was not interested in what they had to sell. That was how I solved my biggest challenge in communication while I was in India.

My travels to India were very educational. I learned about many things from language to culture and everything in between. Not only did I just learn something new, I learned something that can be useful in my major. I learned a lot of Hindi. Whether it was from lecture from menus or simply hearing people speak, I was able to deduce many words and phrases in Hindi. I was not just studying out of a book; I was studying from a first-hand experience. I learned useful colloquial terms instead of outdated words. I bore witness to a brand new culture and was able to compare and contrast it with others around it. I was then able to compare it to that of the United States. I studied the language and culture of the area I was in enough to be able to break it down and critically analyze it and my own to find the contrasting core ideals.

With this newfound knowledge of the country of India, more specifically the area around Delhi and Varanasi, it can make me a more valued prospective employee for many businesses. I am currently majoring in Electrical and Computer Engineering and specializing in Electrical Engineering. Many job opportunities are in the information and technology industry. India is a growing information and technology hub. The business is expanding rapidly throughout India. My experience in India can make me a valuable asset to employers. I can be a liaison, representative, or supervisor between America and India. My knowledge of the culture and comfort in the country would make me a better suited candidate for such a job.

My encounter in India not only let me explore and critically analyze the world around me, but it opened my mind to new ideas and new perspectives. It also caused me to seriously examine my own culture. I not only broadened my horizons when I went to India, I focused in on the small details that seem so simple and obvious that are almost always overlooked. It was something that can make me stand out in the job market, especially in the information and technology industry. I have learned and seen so much. There is no doubt that I will remember this trip forever.