

Initial Reflections Regarding India Travel Seminar: Summer 1998

Professor Jonathan K. Stubbs, Fall 1998



My reflections on India revolve around three themes. The first encompasses the people. The second deals with the challenges. The last focuses on India as a microcosm of the global human condition. In the paragraphs that follow I will briefly consider each of these themes.

Looking back on the experience of being in India, first I think of the many people that we met there. I continue to feel the afterglow of the warm hospitality that we were accorded. Wherever we went, people were unfailingly thoughtful, considerate and attentive to our perceived needs and desires. For example, at the various universities, museums, and other historic sites, those who accompanied us and met us treated us with utmost respect. Of course, cynics would say that in many cases they had a financial interest in "being nice"; however, I sensed a genuineness that exceeded the bounds of any pre-existing formal (contractual) relationship.

Moreover, I had the good fortune to pursue some pre-existing contacts with people in India after I arrived there. Among others, Professor Rajeev Dhavan, Dean Shahid Siddiqi and Dr. Nazli Siddiqi were wonderful hosts to me, and challenging intellectual partners in discussing various issues, including politics, philosophy, and various aspects of human rights.

In addition, Mr. Gupta, Professor Veena Oldenberg and Professor Phillip Oldenberg spoke on diverse aspects of Indian history and politics; and their lectures along with those of other gifted presenters provided a rich intellectual menu for our seminar. Further, I was deeply appreciative of the opportunity to engage in enriching informal dialogues and contacts with individuals like Professor G. Koteswara Prasad of the political science department at the University of Madras.

Nevertheless, there was another side of the people experience in India. That involved my perception of the lives of some of the members of the Indian general public. Of particular interest and concern to me were the living conditions of some Indian children. I can never forget the women who approached our tour bus from time to time holding naked or semi-naked children in their arms and pointing their fingers to the mouths of their children, next pointing to their own mouths indicating that they were hungry, and then extending their hands to us for money. There is perhaps nothing more emotionally wrenching than to see a mother literally begging for crumbs for her child. Having said that, I was also informed by local hosts that sometimes such women are exploited by other individuals (often men) who force the women into this particular activity to collect money, much of which ends up in the pockets of those who are neither hungry nor helpful to the women and their children.

Moreover, I still recall vividly our arriving at a rest stop outside of Delhi and witnessing an Indian lad of nine or ten years old with two large, round baskets about 12 inches high in front of him. As he saw our tour bus, the child sprung into action. He removed the top of one of the baskets, jabbed a flute into it and roused a cobra, urging it to sway to his playing of the flute. This entertainment put into sharp perspective the vocational opportunities of some young Indian children. Notwithstanding child labor laws, and occupational health and safety standards, a nine year old playing with a large cobra is in itself an experience that one can never forget. In addition, after serenading the venomous snake, the youngster then pulled out from the second basket a six or seven foot long python and put it around his neck . . .

Yet a third experience that remains branded on my memory occurred as we were traveling in the countryside somewhere outside of Calcutta or Chennai. There through the window of the

tour bus I saw another child who appeared to be about seven or eight years old standing in the midst of a pool of water in a field. The child seemed to be bathing himself or herself and not too far away in the same pool of water were several cattle and (I think a water buffalo) as well. These animals used the same pool for bathing and other natural animal processes.

The life chances of children bathing in unsanitary conditions, or hungry and naked in the arms of their rail thin mothers, or yet again literally taking their lives into their own hands by entertaining strangers with snakes, seemed pitiful. These were experiences which individually and collectively are unforgettable. Part of me rebels at the absurdity of such privation in the midst of a country that also has other individuals riding in expensive foreign cars, living in large compounds with numerous armed security guards and barbed wire above the walls, and faring sumptuously while so many of their fellow countrypersons appear to be at the verge of death.

This brings me to the second observation involving challenges in the Indian context. India is both huge and complex. It has nearly four times the population of the United States, over a dozen official languages, approximately four hundred million people living below the poverty level, two sometimes wary and combative neighbors (Pakistan and China), a tenacious centuries old caste system, and a strong movement embracing religious fundamentalism and nationalism. Simultaneously, India has a recent political tradition of respect for individual liberties like free speech, multi-party political participation, and general adherence to due process. Further, in the early part of the twenty-first century, India will likely exceed China as the most populous nation in the world.

In this context many questions arise. How will Indian society be able to feed, educate, clothe and furnish adequate health care for an additional several hundred million people in the

next twenty-five years or so? What will happen to the fledgling middle class as much of Asia and perhaps the rest of the world contends with the continuing economic recession? How will India deal with the challenges of rising national pride (chauvinism?) flowing from having a nuclear arsenal to contend with possible external threats? How will India relate to a predominantly Islamic nation with whom it has fought several wars in the last fifty years, particularly in the context of antagonistic religious rhetoric emanating from Hindu nationalists who are becoming a dominant force within Indian politics? Parenthetically, I was surprised to know that many knowledgeable observers are convinced that there are more Muslims in India than there are in Pakistan. The list of challenges confronting India could extend virtually endlessly. In these circumstances, one must ask: can India survive through the twenty-first century?

In some respects the challenges confronting India are strikingly similar to those confronting the global community. The earth has an increasing population with relatively limited natural resources. Like India, the world community confronts the issue of responding to the human needs of approximately one quarter to one third of its population living below the poverty line. Further, the global community has a tremendous diversity of language, cultures, religions, and rising tides of ethnic, religious, and national chauvinism. As in India, a relatively small global elite is able in the economic and political spheres to disproportionately influence policy decisions.

Furthermore, like India, globally a minority of the world's population engages in activities that consume the majority of the world's energy resources (our beloved refrigerators, luxury cars, supersonic planes, and other creature comforts come to mind). For India, and the global community, the question is whether we will be able to creatively and constructively confront these challenges and non-violently resolve our difficulties. The fate of humanity on this planet depends

upon how questions like these are answered.

Finally, in a slightly different vein, travel to India has also influenced my academic and scholarly interests. For example, shortly after returning to the United States from India I had an opportunity to teach a course in international human rights in Cambridge, England. In that class I used videotapes involving the caste system and the condition of women in India to help broaden our collective awareness of how other cultures deal with gender roles, class and caste stratification and religious worldviews. I am also using the videotapes during my human rights class currently being offered during this fall.

Furthermore, in my scholarly endeavors, the trip to India has helped bring home to me the impact of my own personal biography upon the way I analyze human rights concerns. For example, I am more self conscious of how growing up as an African American in the southern United States during the transition from apartheid to desegregation (the 1950's - 1970's), my formal academic training in the United States and abroad, and my academic scholarship affect my interest in India's societal struggles around the issue of skin color and social status. My personal experiences enhance my curiosity about the historical and philosophical bases for such human challenges in India.

In sum, the Indian travel seminar has provided a memorable opportunity for my personal development on a number of levels - intellectual, psychological and social to name a few. I am extremely pleased at having had the opportunity to participate in the faculty travel seminar to India, and thank those who made the opportunity possible.

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