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Adjusting, abroad and back home

Researching Myself in Kolkata: Introspection and Education on a Little Known Subject

Even before studying abroad this summer in India, I would have ventured to call myself an aspiring researcher. For as long as I can remember, I have constantly asked why and how, causes and consequences, reasons and remedies. Yet the strange thing about many researchers is that despite all our questions and curiosity, we often miss the subject right in front of us. Blame preoccupation or absentmindedness, call it a defense-mechanism, but regardless of the excuse, those of us who are busy observing everything around us generally forget to investigate ourselves.

During my past three years at Michigan State University, I have devoted myself blindly to studying what most would consider abstract tragedies--rampant underdevelopment, mass onslaughts of sexual assault, genocides and gendercides. Prior to my trip, I hoped to work at a non-governmental organization, conducting research on human rights abuses during conflict in Africa. Although my research was certainly impassioned by these issues, at no point had I ever directly confronted myself with the question of '*why me?*'--why did I focus on poverty, on war, on this type of work at all? Why was I, a first-generation American woman, drawn to a field of research that had never directly impacted my life? Why did I feel so committed to *these* causes, considering all the possibilities I could have floated towards instead?

Compared to the problems I cared about, '*why me?*' never seemed that important, let alone worth deliberately spending time to understand. It wasn't until

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this past summer that I stumbled on anything close to answers, after traveling nine weeks by myself in India, the birthplace of both my mother and father.

To be honest, before my trip, the relationship between me and India had been tenuous, if not completely estranged. I had visited only twice before--once at the cranky age of four, and once when I was an angst thirteen. This past trip was intended to be a needed soul-searching, family-reuniting adventure to ground me to my parents' culture, which I was scared I'd grown apart from.

Little did I expect that I would make one of my most valuable realizations about myself in just a few hours after my arrival in Kolkata. Even now, in recollection, I am shocked that I fell into such a deep culture shock that first day--I wasn't a stranger to travel, not even India. But when I stepped off the plane, almost every disparaging adjective about 'developing countries' seemed to be immediately true about where we had landed. It felt filthy. Slow. Seedy. Inefficient. Unsafe. Ugly. After being on the only flight to come in at 5 AM and waiting 90 minutes for my baggage in a dingy and dirty terminal alone, I found solace in seeing my mother's sister, whom I call Boni *mashi*, and her husband, Hari Uncle, for the first time in eight years.

But this temporary happiness was meant to be broken. As we stepped outside the airport and waited for a taxi, I caught eye contact with a dusty street girl, begging, "*Didi* (older sister in Bengali), please, *didi*..." For some strange reason, I found I couldn't look away. This girl was not the first face of poverty that I'd ever encountered--I'd been to India before, I'd seen and worked with the poor and homeless in Jamaica and Puerto Rico. Yet something was disturbingly different about the brown

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eyes boring into me at that moment. In discomfort, I mirrored my aunt, who was impervious to the beggar while she chatted cheerily, and I peeled myself away from the girl who couldn't be more than nine.

When I climbed into the car, I was surprised by the repulsion I felt gnawing at me. As our taxi darted in front of, between, and almost through rickshaws, pedestrians, and other cars, I couldn't shake my disgust as I saw dilapidated buildings and palpably poor people. Indians blackened from the sun-blistering labor with toothy smiles seemed to be everywhere in the outskirts of Kolkata, hobbling on the sides of the roads while we zipped by. I searched my brain for these memories of Calcutta--was there really this much poverty eight years ago? Didn't everyone tell me that India was much more modern now? Why did it hurt to see these conditions and these people? Wasn't I the eternal humanitarian? Was this my India? Why could I barely bear to look at it?

Strangely enough, I now think my first reactions were rooted not in rejection, but rather, connection to what I was seeing. Although I have seen and worked with poor people before, there was something disturbingly painful about seeing the suffering of so many people that looked like me. Simply by living in the United States, I never realized how much I had become detached to the specific poverty of my own people. I may have heard regurgitated 'some Indians live on less than a dollar a day'-statistics, but because of my own American middle-class college student identity, I never personally processed or felt it. Because I was someone desperately trying to connect to India, no matter what it was, I saw myself in that streetgirl. However obvious it sounds, when confronted with what felt like seas of poor Indians, I had to

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recognize that while I was lucky enough to avoid poverty because of my parents' sacrifices, I had no idea how much of my own family and race had not been so fortunate. The only fair comparison of my experience that I can think of for an outsider is to cast your own reflection in poverty and multiply it by millions--to assume it would be humanizing is a euphemism, as if you'd want to reach out and hug them all. A normal person, probably like me, would want to run like hell away from such a place, terrified of their roots and background.

Although my initial reactions were emotionally upsetting, I also know that shock helped me open up to India and the experiences I later had during those nine weeks. My suspicions were confirmed as I met more of my aunts, uncles and cousins for the first time--the subjects I had mysteriously become attracted to while living in the United States, unaware of my past, actually anchor down my family tree. Until this past summer, I didn't know that my family had lost considerable wealth and land during the Bangladeshi war. I didn't know my parents grew up in a tumultuous economy with recessions interrupted by depressions for decades. I didn't know how many family members had died because of violence and death in these conditions. It is clear to me that the 'abstract tragedies' I used to study are bizarrely real and connected to me; they flow through my genetic code.

While this knowledge might depress someone else, I feel oddly affirmed in my career choice, which I had already determined would be set to remedy these types of problems even before I knew of their personal significance. As Boni *Mashi* told me my first night, "India is a place of so much good and so much bad. It's up to you to decide

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what you want to keep.” So right next to the beautiful, happy memories I made during my two-month stay, which I assure you I had many of, I want to keep the fewer, but more painful, epiphanies on my family’s past, which secured my future direction in human rights research. By learning about my roots in my parents’ homeland, I found a deeper connection to not just my career, but also my causes, which were probably there all along, unarticulated. This year as I prepare for graduation, I still aim to work at a non-governmental organization that will let me conduct research--maybe in Africa, but perhaps even South Asia now. More important than knowing the location of those I want to help, I know ‘*why me*’--why I should help--which in reality is a more valuable breakthrough than anything else I might later discover as a researcher.