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India Final Reflection

As I sit and reflect on the five weeks I spent in Kolkata, India this summer, a flood of memories push their way to the front of my mind. I remember the noisy honks of the crowded streets, the pungent smells that wafted from the carts of the street vendors, but most importantly, I remember the faces and smiles of the many Indian students I met and interacted with during my stay.

During my time at Loreto Sealdah school, I spent several hours each day with the Rainbow Students on the rooftop of the school. The Rainbow Program is the creation of Sr. Cyril, the Loreto nun who is the principal of Loreto Sealdah. The Rainbow children are those children who come from families that are so poor or in such desperate situations that they have nowhere else to go. All the Rainbow students were living in slums or on the pavement before coming to Loreto. During the day, the Rainbows attend school in either the Loreto English-medium school or at the Bengali-medium school down the road. At night, these 280 students return to the rooftop of the Loreto School where they play, do homework, eat dinner, and sleep, three to a blanket. My first instinct was to feel sorry for these girls who are alone and without their parents at such a young age. It didn't take me long to realize that these girls are the lucky ones who have a warm place to sleep at night and plenty of food to eat each day.

In addition to playing with the younger Rainbows, I also spent time each day teaching English and helping Rainbow students with their studies. One of the most rewarding experiences on the trip was when one of the Rainbow girls asked me to help her study her spelling words one

evening. I was so proud when she came bounding up to me the next afternoon to tell me she had received a perfect score on her spelling test that day. She was so proud to tell me, and I realized that she really had no one else to tell. I tried my best to substitute for a proud parent.

Another rewarding moment for me was when the older Rainbow girls asked me to come to their dance competition and cheer for them. I had seen these older girls practicing their routine on the rooftop one night, and upon questioning them, discovered they were entered in a local dance competition. After seeing my interest, Paulina, the main dancer and choreographer, begged me to attend. She told me, "The other dance teams will have parents there to cheer. We will have no one." This broke my heart and I rounded up all my volunteer friends to attend the competition. All in all, there were 14 of us who went to the dance competition to cheer for the Rainbows. Although they did not win, they performed beautifully and I was happy I could be there to support them. One of the major challenges of this trip was leaving behind so many of my new Rainbow friends when I returned to the United States.

Another challenge I faced was understanding the role of women in the Indian culture. Although in many ways India is becoming a modern country, the literacy rate of women is still surprisingly low in many areas of India. India is a male dominated society, and I myself was groped on several occasions while walking down the street. In India, crimes of rape are seldom reported to the police, because it would cast a stigma on a woman and her entire family. In light of these facts, it was rewarding to visit with successful female college students who had graduated from the Rainbow program and the Loreto School and listen to them describe their plans for the future.

After spending several weeks in Kolkata, I began to ask myself, “Why isn’t the Indian government doing more to provide education for children, fight poverty, and clean up their cities?” Through the contacts of my Notre Dame professor, Dr. Tamo Chattopadhyay, I was lucky enough to visit a government official from the State of West Bengal who works in the Department for Rural Development. Prior to meeting with him, I had visited a school located in a railroad community in the Eastern Bypass of Kolkata, a small school in a Muslim slum, a one-room schoolhouse in a small river town, and several other impoverished schools.

The government official and I discussed my observations of the schools I had visited. From our conversation, I realized the underlying issue that undermines the Indian government in most of their projects is the sheer size of the Indian population. With a population over 1.3 billion people, the Indian government is hard-pressed to implement any type of social program in their country. The beauracracy that surrounds the Indian government is a labrynth of procedures and signatures making simple tasks overwhelmingly difficult. The fact that Kolkata does not even have an adequate sewage system is a testament to the vast amount of work that still remains to be completed in this rising country.

After my visit to the government office, I realized that it will take more than just the government to begin to solve India’s problems. It will take dedicated individuals like Sr. Cyril who do not attempt to tackle the masses, but instead work to create small, effective grassroots programs that take hold in the community and spread to outlying areas. Sr. Cyril is a modern-day hero whose actions need to be emulated and repeated, not just in Kolkata, but in other parts of the world as well.

During the five life-changing weeks that I spent in India this past summer, I encountered a number of challenges just existing in daily life. These challenges ranged from the overwhelming heat and humidity in Kolkata to the wandering eyes and hands of the Indian male culture. However, I realize now that the struggle to overcome these and other challenges led to many rewarding experiences. It was the good and the bad moments that together created the rich, unique experience I had in India.