



My India

By Ryan Sharnbroich | March 28, 2011

I have come to believe that everyone not only experiences India in a different way, but that India has a different set of things to offer everyone that comes in contact with its magnificent, challenging, evolving, and enigmatic condition. Therefore, I discuss India as an experience rather than merely a subcontinent, and specify “my India” because this India is distinct in many ways from the India experienced by others, and is therefore the only India I can authentically represent. My India is more diverse, vibrant, complex, and alive than any other place I have ever inhabited, encountered, discovered, or investigated in my entire life. Being here has really forced me to neutralize my self-conceptions and external judgments. The co-existence of the seemingly infinite ways of life here, including my own, cannot be compared or measured on any scale that is even remotely relevant to any of my previous frames of reference. Many people here have discussed with me the difference between our individual and collective lives, and the vitality of them both. With each new intimate relationship I form here, my ability to recognize the powerful presence of my own individual perspective and in turn conceptualize the complex collective systems I live in have been valuably enhanced. I think the best way for me to explain my personal development over the past month is to showcase the most influential relationships I have formed since living here in this beautifully complex and challenging place, which have all constructed and humanized my India in very unique and integral ways.



I spent my first two weeks of placement on a mobile clinic van run by Dr. Santosh at the Malavli Medical Center, based in the village town where I have been living. He spends six days a week traveling to remote villages in the region to provide medical care and support to villagers who would otherwise have extreme difficulty getting to stationary clinics and hospitals. While many of the diagnoses require very simple treatments, such as an injection or short term dose of drugs, many of the diseases and conditions he treats could and likely would lead to much greater and potentially life threatening issues without his compassionate intervention and support. Even though I cannot understand Marathi beyond the basic greetings I have learned, it is obvious upon witnessing the dialogues he has with his patients that his role is much more than just that of a doctor to so many people; he is also a loyal counselor, mentor, and friend. The dedication he has to this “social work” is beyond inspiring to me, especially after learning more about his personal history of fervent devotion despite intensive struggle and loss. We have developed a very open and close friendship, and I feel comfortable asking him anything frankly and directly concerning health and social issues and realities in India, his professional practice, his personal life, or anything else that sparks my interest or curiosity. I feel no need to withhold or filter any of my comments or inquiries, and he responds to me in the same manner and expresses gratitude for our candid discussions. I have never had a teacher with so much enthusiasm and willingness to spend hours upon hours discussing such a wide variety of topics one-on-one with me. The level of connection and frank honesty I have exchanged with him in such a short period of time has provided me with such an

invaluable and rarely duplicated form of education. I appreciate his wisdom and intellect, and his willingness to be frank, thorough, and logical in sharing with me. His random educational excursions and tangents have been some of the most constructive detours I have ever taken. After spending my first weeks in India with Dr. Santosh, I told our director I would like to spend my last weeks with him as well. My emergence into India was facilitated greatly by his words of wisdom and guidance, which I think can have a similar role in terms of preparing for my eventual re-emergence back home. Accompanying his educational and intellectual side is a gentle and quirky sense of humor, as evidenced by this picture taken during one of our lunch breaks on the van. The pose was one of his creative ideas, and I think this image really humanizes this relationship I am so grateful for.

I have always been drawn to working with children, so it came as no surprise to me how much I enjoyed visiting one of the orphanages near our small village town Malavli where some of the other interns have been working. All of the children at this orphanage were once street kids; the owners of the orphanage, who were once orphaned street kids themselves, worked to build relationships with the kids in their self-reliant environment on the street, and then gave them the option to live here if they so choose. The children stay until they are 18, and decisions regarding their education are up to them as well. While some children choose to attend government schools, others stay at the orphanage for a more informal method of education called "natural learning" where the children basically learn through playing and engaging in activities, mainly outdoors, that may not always appear educational but play key roles in their constructive development. The orphanage has three teachers, and a psychologist who visits frequently and regularly. Those who do not want to attend school are given



the option to receive vocational training in various skills. The children are so full of energy and joy; just being on the grounds of the orphanage forces me to smile and laugh. The kids love taking pictures, so I give them my camera to pass around whenever I arrive. I get it back later with about 400+ new pictures each time, and many of these children have been able to capture some amazing moments. One of the kids who have particularly captivated my attention is a young boy named Shekar. I don't know his particular story, and we can barely communicate verbally as he speaks very little English and I am only starting to learn Marathi, but we have formed this bond that I find very amusing and endearing. Whenever I've come to the orphanage, he comes over to me and sticks with me for most of the time I am there. Even if he is not right next to me, he is always looking over at me and makes a funny facial expression when I acknowledge that I recognize his glance. When dealing with young kids there is always a high level of non-verbal communication, and I generally feel like I can get inside of their heads and predict their next move, but I have never encountered a young child who seems to have the ability to get inside my head like Shekar does and predict my next moves better than I could. I may just be projecting, but regardless these perceived exchanges with Shekar, among many other determining factors, have motivated me to want to work with the orphanage on a project to re-develop their medical record system and provide educational materials regarding prevention of sickness and disease through basic hygienic behaviors, which I should be able to accomplish before returning home. I am thrilled to be able to go back to the orphanage for an extended period of time, and I am excited to see Shekar again. I struggle with the idea of forming a relationship with a young child knowing I will be making an inevitable departure relatively soon, especially considering I do not know the consequences of limited episodic visits from volunteers and interns for these vulnerable children. However, I cannot avoid the fact that being amongst these kids and experiencing the strong desire to do something to support them and help to better ensure their health and success brings me great

satisfaction. I think this human connection and passion I am feeling may prove to be an indication that confronting issues faced by children in vulnerable positions and places may play a major role in my eventual academic and career pathways.

I have been living and traveling with Nickie Hodges, another intern from IE3 working with the same organization as me here in India. I feel extremely fortunate to have her as a comrade. We quickly became friends, as it was mutually quite obvious upon our initial dialogues that we possess virtually parallel interests and values. I have never felt as comfortable and fearless in absolute honesty and openness with an individual I have known for such a short period of time. What may be even more significant is that we are very compatible travel partners, a discovery that is difficult to come by. Having similar levels of curiosity, energy capacity, and thresholds of risk and comfort makes traveling so much more enjoyable, manageable, and satisfying.



Discussions about our joint experiences often offer incredible insight to elements of things we have seen or done that I had not recognized, as well as a medium for developing and articulating my own thoughts on these same things. We both come from the Pacific Northwest, and although the individual histories that have defined who we are overlap in certain ways, they also vary incredibly. This strange fusion of familiar with distinctive but relatable or understandable has not only helped locate myself in this new and intense environment, but has played a key role in interpreting the connections between my life at home and my new life here, which I will also have to re-navigate upon my return. This image of us was captured during our first weekend in rural Maharashtra at Karla Caves, an ancient Buddhist structure within visual distance of our “home.” After being followed and dragged around by a few middle-aged Indian brothers for over an hour, we were introduced to their family of 20+ people, I was gifted a scarf and hat, and Nickie was handed an infant for a photograph. This is a prime example of one of the random encounters that we have laughed and bonded over. There is never a dull

moment in India, and it has been nice to have someone to share this exciting and often bizarre experience with. Unfortunately, Nickie received grievous news that her father had died in a tragic accident while re-constructing a hiking trail in Oregon, resulting in her immediate and premature departure from India. Although I miss having a close friend and travel partner, I have learned so much from observing the way she has navigated the intense experiences we collectively have confronted and even more so those she independently has been faced with while being



here. I have appreciated her open ears, open mind, and open heart, and look forward to more joint experiences and discussions of our independent journeys over the remaining portion of our times in this life.

Dr. Vijay Sutrave, another doctor who allowed me to observe and learn from his practice, invited me to attend his nephew's wedding in Kumbhar Pimpalgaon, a very remote village in central Maharashtra about a ten-hour bus ride from where I am staying. The ceremony itself was beautiful and enjoyable beyond description. However, what proved to be even more valuable, and may very likely be the most impactful experience of this journey, were the following few days, as the Sutrave family invited me to stay with them in their home town of Parli-Vajinath, about four hours from the village where the ceremony was held. Not only was it refreshing to get outside of the gated barb-wired bungalow community I have spent most of my nights in since being here, but being accepted into this family's private space was exceptionally humbling and allowed me the rights to participate and interact within their family structure in a way that was educational in an incredibly unique and special way. Despite varying degrees of language barriers, I was able to build intimate connections with individuals within the family and construct a deeper understanding of their intricate histories and dynamics, which was unexpected and inspiring. I was also introduced to their community of friends and extended family, and was welcomed into a group of male friends about my age who generously and eagerly spent the majority of these mind-boggling days touring my around their home town. At first I felt more like the foreign trophy being paraded through the streets via motorcycle, but after receiving the opportunity get to know each other on a deeper level, it felt more like we were simply enjoying each other's company like I would with any close friends back at home. By they end of my stay, the elders of the family said I was officially inducted into the Sutrave family, and this portrait was taken at the extravagant wedding reception the night of my departure. Since I was considered an honorary member of the family, I was given the important and exhausting responsibility of greeting all of the 200+ guests and making sure everyone was comfortable, entertained, and well fed, and learned how to carry out these tasks using Marathi. The family owns a fabric and clothing shop, and they gifted me a traditional Indian outfit, which I wore at the event. I am still overwhelmed by the immense compassion, hospitality, and acceptance this entire family showed me during my stay with them. The strong connection I built with the Sutrave family as a whole, as well as with various individuals within the family and community, made my departure more emotionally conflicting than I expected. I will continue to maintain communication with many of the friends I made, and fully expect to return to their home and loving company again, hopefully for many extended periods of time, and potentially once more before I return home.