



## Our India

By Ryan Sharnbroich | June 30, 2011

In my first entry, I used the phrase "My India" because I recognized the need to conceptualize my own journey as unique from any other, positioned in a distinct set of places and times. This was not just a passage to India, but more so a passage to new domains within the geographic space of the Indian subcontinent, filled with the interactions I engaged in with people whom I connected with, some at a deeply intimate level. This is an intimacy I aim to further develop and foster, through continued communication despite our physical separation as well as future pilgrimages to a place and to friends who have played an invaluable role in my development as a collective and independent being. Since "My India" is really an anthology of countless relationships and exchanges, I have re-framed this concept as "Our India(s)" to account for all of the shared spaces I inhabited and created with the other people who participated in these exchanges with me, all of which are nested within "My India." The existence and persistence of "Our India(s)" relies on mutual participation, and can only grow through developing and fostering a deeply reciprocal sense of context, trustworthiness, accountability, and (comm)unity. I have decided to take excerpts from the blog I produced and nurtured throughout this journey in order to highlight the variety of forms and functions these shared spaces have taken, and ways in which these spaces were able to grow during our brief crossings. I have added questions that have consumed my thoughts after coming home and reflecting on my journey and these spaces that I cherish.



The most intense joint spaces were those I built with the children at Shikshan Gram, collectively and independently. Through continued physical presence and engagement, a very sacred space was able to develop, captivating my body and soul. My capacity for global mobility is an immense privilege, and I struggle with reconciling what this means; what impact am I making by flying in and out of people's lives? What am I accountable for, what do I have to give back? How do I remain accountable to these children?

I have decided to spend the remainder of my time at Shikshan Gram, literally meaning "Village for Natural Learning." This is the hostel and school for orphaned children that I had visited before with some of the other interns that were working here. I originally intended to help with a concrete project related to health in some form, but the staff is pretty consumed in the new construction project, so I have basically just been another person at the hostel to help watch the kids, engage in the natural education processes, enjoy the cheerful and uplifting company of the kids and staff.

My body feels incredibly exhausted, lethargic, slightly ill – but after leaving Shikshan Gram every day, I walk with a renewed sense of joy and energy. I expected my time with the kids to be useful in terms of not requiring a lot of high thinking activity, allowing me the brain energy to reflect on and process the experiences I have had over the past many weeks. However, the kids consistently challenge me intellectually or introduce fascinating ideas to me that cannot escape my captivated thoughts. For example, one of the boys came up to me the other day and showed me his new necklace, he had taken a trip to



Bombay with some of the older boys and purchased it while he was there. I asked what it was called, as he didn't know the English word "necklace" and I was curious what it was called in Marathi. To my surprise, his response was "money." As I carried out a deeper dialogue with him regarding his Bombay adventure and this item he purchased, I found out that he had spent Rs.1,200 (about \$26USD) on it, a relatively large sum of money. This meant that he budgeted the money given to him for his travels, saving fervently to purchase this necklace. But to him the value of the necklace is not purely in its aesthetic beauty – wearing this accessory symbolizes the fact that not only did he save enough money to buy it, but had the money to buy it in the first place. Therefore, more powerful to him than the necklace itself is the symbolic representation of "money" it communicates. This is a totally natural way for him to comprehend the tangible, material world, and he now wears his new possession protectively and proudly. Is there a similar symbolism behind my material possessions, just with a more muddled classification than "money"? This is the beauty of natural learning – you don't need a structured classroom to provide education, as our daily interactions and activities with other human beings and the natural world contain incredible potential for developing and expanding our knowledge. And the lessons at Shikshan Gram are generally brimming with contagious delight, even with numerous unique histories of intense, challenging and devastating trauma, loss and struggle boiling beneath the surface.

Most of the kids love coloring, so I bought some packs of crayons, oil pastels and paper from a shop in Lonavala. I bring them with me every day, and in the afternoon when it is really hot, many of us will gather under the trees on the far side of the yard and draw. It's also really neat to see some of the more reserved kids really express themselves when they are given crayons and paper. When they are done, they all give me their artwork, and insist that I take it with me. I ask them all to sign their work (in Marathi and English) like many great artists do – I plan to put together a book of the drawings they have given me to reference after I come back home.



Many interactions were fleeting, even momentary. The intimacy involved in responding to an invitation to enter a family's home for chai and chat is blatant; however, even the shared space created by a reciprocated gaze on the train contained immense power and energy, and required a deep level of mutual consent, exposure and engagement. In what ways am I accountable to these people, who exposed themselves and their worlds to me? In what ways am I responsible for my participation in the temporary overlapping of our worlds?

I was in Bombay staying with a friend and his family for a weekend, and there was a tragic fire at one of the major slum colonies, suspected by many to be part of a plot by developers to clear the land occupied by the slum. The

mutually-inhabited space my presence violently initiated as I peered at the rubble from the train station forced me to face a deeper connection to these strangers I saw salvaging the remains of their homes: my consumption of goods that circulate in our globalized systems of commodity exchange makes me a direct participant in the structural violence that has led to many of the conditions that cause and sustain immense human suffering. With this realization, how can I ever participate in these systems again? How can I ever not participate?

Looking down at Garib Nagar colony, all I could see was people digging through what remained of the homes that were destroyed and carrying away anything that was salvageable. The government has proposed a financial aid package for legal residents of 1,000 rupees per person (about \$22 USD) with a cap of 5,000 rupees per family. How is someone supposed to restart their entire life with little more (if anything) than the clothes on their back and what many are declaring an insult of a financial aid offering? There is an organization that has vowed to replace any educational materials lost in the flames, but for most of the students, the level of support they give to their family will now be intensified, making the already difficult process of seeking education even more of a challenge. How is a student supposed to balance educational priorities and responsibilities when their family has nowhere to sleep and nothing to eat? Some people have set up tarps and other provisional structures, but many are now left to live on the streets.

The skyline of Bombay is a convergent zone between a sea that cannot be entered safely due to pollution meeting a sea of towers that continues to grow in all directions in order to accommodate a rapidly increasing population. And amidst this sea of skyscrapers and tall buildings are scattered slum colonies, like moss competing for the forest floor. As more and more people fill the confines of the geographic space now called Mumbai, and more and more towers are constructed to increase the volume of a city more expansive and three-dimensional than any I have ever encountered before, what will happen to those who live in the slums, whose homes are devoured by developments they cannot afford to inhabit? Some say the depths of world's remaining natural jungles are the most dangerous, ruthless places on the planet, but I think the urban jungle of Mumbai might be a worthy contender in this ranking.

Not far from this site of complex trauma and extreme destruction is a towering piece of puzzling modern architecture. Constructed by Mukesh Ambani, India's wealthiest citizen and chairman of Reliance Industries (a company which seems to own, run and do everything in India, along with the company Tata), it is actually the world's first billion dollar "home." This mammoth of a single-family residence has 400,000 square feet, 27-stories, a 168-space underground parking lot, and entire rooms to suite nearly any possible human need, dream, or desire. How is it that some people's livelihoods can be boiled down to a 1,000-rupee aid package, while others can somehow gain access to seemingly infinite extravagance? I found it is easy to look up at the massive towers full of flats for Bombay's rich and famous and think, "how can you look down at the slums that surround your lavish dwelling and be content with the your blatant self-indulgence?" But then I was forced to think, what is my position on this arbitrary spectrum/hierarchy, by what scales or values can comparisons be measured or made, by what means can my participation in this complex world be justified? I can't imagine sitting on the 27th story terrace of my home looking down on the scene at Garib Nagar and feeling satisfied with my position in the extreme gradient of socio-economic status confronting my plane of vision. But why don't I feel this same intensity while sitting in the safety and comfort of my living room at home watching similar and often more intense images of human tragedy and destruction on my flat screen HDTV? Or retreating back to the luxurious bungalow I have been living in for over two months in rural Maharashtra, where a similar gradient is only blurred by tall trees, gates and barb-wired fences? At what point does a difference in culturally constructed living standards merge with unequal and unjust access to and exchange of resources and goods?

Throughout all of my critical (self) reflection, the kids at Shikshan Gram consistently ricochet within my thoughts; they have become my muse. Many of them have exposed their vulnerabilities as well as their immense agency in very surprising and inspiring ways. Their experiential insight and strength often handed me my own naiveté, figuratively and literally. How could I ever reciprocate this level of disclosure and wisdom from defenseless innocent beings? In what ways do these children force and challenge me to uncover my own limitations? What does accountability to a child look like, feel like, act like?