

Innocence in the Slums of India

by Isha Singhal

“They have nothing, and yet they are so happy,” was my cousin, Nikita’s, first comment when she returned from a month of working in the slums of Delhi, India. As she drove through the streets, filled with dusty tents and hundreds of people scurrying around, she noticed how everyone seemed like one big family. All the children gathered outside to play together; the girls skipped around while holding hands, and boys of varying ages played baseball. Anyone and everyone was welcome to join. When Nikita’s driver dropped her off, he went and joined a group of adults in the area as if he had known them his entire life. People live life freely in India, unlike our American schedules in which we often don’t even take the time to communicate with our neighbors. In India, people talk to anyone who crosses their path and do whatever there is to do in the moment.



The neighborhood children crowded around staring at the black fancy device that Nikita held in her hands. “Meri photo leo! Meri photo leo,” meaning, “Take a picture of me! Take a picture of me,” they all happily screamed in unison. Only, when she finally went to photograph them, their smiles would fade into shyness. Their excitement was more of a fascination with the desired technology than anything else. It was the magic behind the lens that captivated all the innocent eyes. How was it that the click of a button could capture their faces? These kids knew nothing about life outside of the slums, so what they had was enough for them, but there was always a curiosity factor when something new was introduced.



One essential aspect of life these kids lacked but cherished more than anything else was their education. They lacked proper school supplies but made full use of paper, pencils and chalkboards. This deficiency wasn't their biggest problem though; it was the curriculum, or lack thereof. At first, Nikita questioned the teaching style of the teacher she assisted during her time there. The teacher would jump directly into the English language with no clear starting point. However, Nikita soon came to realize how difficult the teacher's job must have been because the kids rarely attended class on a regular basis. She worked with a class of twenty or so students, and on average, ten to fifteen attended, with newcomers each day. They also spanned a range of ages, so they all had different experience levels. Therefore, it must have been really tough to have a plan laid out for the entire month when Nikita wasn't working with a consistent group of kids.



While attempting to help the kids that were lagging behind on a daily basis, Nikita also experienced the occasional uncomfortable situation in which she was exposed to the true hardships these young ones endured. A young girl named Deepika stuck by Nikita for days, asking every detail about life in America. After a couple of days, Nikita found out that Deepika wasn't dreaming about clean roads and a real roof over her head, but rather, treatment for her mother. A metal pole had hit her mother in some sort of accident, and now the entire left side of her face and neck are damaged. The doctors were unable to cure her internal bleeding and had done all they could to help. The young girl begged Nikita to ask her own mom if the doctors in America could "fix" her mother. Nikita had no words. How do you respond in a situation in which all you can think about is how this little girl should not have to deal with these kinds of burdens?



The girl in the middle is Deepika (Left); Close up of Deepika (Right)

Usually the kids managed to hide their problems, fears, and sorrows by putting on big smiles and actively participating in games. However, there were the intermittent outbursts of anger. Boys started fighting, using fists instead of words, causing tears and bloody noses. Nikita's language barrier did not help when it came to disciplining the kids. She couldn't think fast enough to yell at them in Hindi, and when she yelled in English, she received blank stares. It wasn't until the teacher arrived that the situation settled down, but she also used her hands instead of words. In India it is completely normal to hit students if they do not behave or fail to pay attention, but Nikita was unable to conform to these ways. For us it is sad to understand that most of these kids were brought up in such a way that they don't realize someone is serious until they slap them.

What exactly is a slum? It's "a heavily populated urban informal settlement characterized by substandard housing and squalor" ("Slum"). Its development has many possible causes, including poverty, high rates of unemployment, economic depression, and natural disasters. In India, about one in six residents lives in an urban slum with unsanitary conditions according to the first complete census of India's vast slum population.

People often portray India's slums the way the media has depicted them. For example, people think of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* or Katherine Boo's novel *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. They both focus on a select few lives and don't grasp every aspect of life in the slums. I'm not sure if anyone can completely understand life in a slum, unless they have experienced it themselves. It wasn't until this year that India had a complete census of its slum residents. The census report recognized 13.8 million households, in other words 64 million people, in the slums across the nation. The census commissioner, C. Chandramouli, defined a slum as a "residential area where dwellings are unfit for human habitation by reasons of dilapidation, overcrowding, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facility." I don't think pop-culture captures that well enough for its audience to understand the hardships one goes through in a slum. Nevertheless, it is true that 70% of slum households had televisions and 64% had cellphones (Davis).

According to the World Bank, in 2010, 32.7% of the total Indian population, meaning about 400 million people, fell below the international poverty line of US \$1.25 per day. At the same time 96.9% of the population, 1,179 million people, lived with less than US \$5.00 a day. This year, data showed that a third of the world's poorest people live in India, and UNICEF's data revealed that one in three malnourished children worldwide are found in India. Fortunately, it has been predicted that the poverty rate will drop significantly over the next couple of years.

By 2015, the World Bank has estimated that 53 million people will still live in poverty and 23.6% of the population will live under US \$1.25 per day. By 2020, this number will hopefully decrease to 20.3% and continue to drop with time. However, even though we are anticipating a drop in poverty, the recession in 2009 added 100 million more Indians into poverty than there were in 2004, so we can never be sure of what the future holds ("Slum").

Endurance. Steve McCurry's photograph, "Afghan Girl", from 1984 shows endurance. It was the cover of the June 1985 issue of National Geographic Magazine; however, it wasn't until 2002 that its subject was identified as Sharbat Gula, an eleven-year-old girl living as a refugee in Pakistan at the time of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan ("Afghan Girl"). The photograph of the little girl on the left is what I like to call the "Indian Girl." It is a picture of innocence whose eyes speak to you about young Anju's life and the culture she has been surrounded by. Both photographs have different intensities that spring from their eyes and take you through their tragic childhoods. They each provoke the viewer to ask questions about these human beings who have so much life left to live. How is there fear, strength, and exhaustion in their eyes all at once? What does the future hold for these girls?



Anju



Afghan Girl

My biggest question has been, what is being done to reduce poverty in India? Since the 1950's, the Indian government has made "planning schemes" to help the poor become self-sufficient in food production. They have tried to supply them with the basic necessities, especially food at reasonable prices because the poor spend approximately 80% of their income on food. Despite these efforts, about 55% of children in India still suffer from malnutrition. The schemes have not been very successful because the rate of poverty reduction is nowhere near the rate of population growth.

Population growth is just one of the causes for poverty in India. Services and industry continually grow while the agricultural growth rate has dropped from 4.8% to 2%. Approximately 60% of the Indian population relies on agriculture, but the surplus of labor in agriculture has resulted in many jobless people ("Slum").

How many generations of these innocent faces will go through this?



Works Cited

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