

September, 2006

Volume 6, No. 3

INDIA: IS THE CUP HALF EMPTY OR HALF FULL?

Kathryn Djouallah

Throughout my life I have traveled to different countries for various reasons. I began by running away from my university studies and spending a year in Switzerland. I eventually finished my degree and completed my student teaching in England, where I returned to live for five years. As a thirtieth birthday present to myself, I moved to Italy where I spent three years. When I stopped running, it was to return home to the United States.

Over the last several years I have begun to be educated informally by people from developing countries. They have imparted valuable lessons gained by living in difficult situations that often fostered my personal growth. I spent time studying Italian with people from Ethiopia, Macedonia, Morocco, Algeria Syria, Ukraine, Albania, Ghana, and Brazil. As our language skills improved, our conversations often turned to our personal experiences. Through these conversations I was struck by the spirit that people brought with them to overcome hardships, particularly poverty and separation from their families, in their search for better lives. Upon my return, these conversations have led me to ask over and over again the same question, as I came home to my native United States: "Do poverty and adversity encourage spirituality?"

Last summer I had the privilege to travel to India with a group of teachers to spend a month studying and experiencing the culture, in order to develop lessons to teach to my sixth grade class. This experience inspired me to question my values. In order to process my thoughts I have found it useful to compare the two countries, the kaleidoscope that is India to the melting pot of the United States.



(Click on picture for larger view)

Taj Mahal



Comaradarie between villagers picking shrimp from the fishing nets

I experienced sensory extremes in India. Women and men could be working in filthy conditions, yet the women maintain their regal bearing in their saris and appear as a burst of color and cleanliness. Their cheerfulness was apparent as they went about everyday tasks, such as removing shrimp from fishing nets.

The smell of human and animal waste was sometimes unbearable, yet the turn of my head could bring a sweet aroma of jasmine from the hair of a passing woman or the startling sight of a boy on an elephant.



Boy on elephant outside a Hindu temple in Pondicherry

The cacophony of traffic sounds was offset by sounds of people chanting prayers or being called to pray. People constantly jostled me. This sometimes felt like an annoyance, but at other times brought me a feeling of connectedness with others. There was a sense of calm in the streets in spite of the huge numbers of people and the traffic. In the midst of what appeared to be chaos, people remained peaceful, polite, soft-spoken, pleasant and helpful. Indian men and women lived with a serenity that I envied.

I have also spent time in Algeria, a Muslim country, where I was [similarly I REPLACED THE SECOND 'ALSO' IN THIS SENTENCE] struck by both the poverty and the spirituality of the people. I assumed that the fact that the culture and the religion were one and the same explained the spirituality of the people and its depth in their daily lives. The United States encompasses many religions and yet neither personal nor collective spirituality are parts of our culture. But India also encompasses many religions and nevertheless, spirituality is an important part of their culture.



Hindu temple in Chennai

In India, temples, mosques, and churches are everywhere, tucked in with rows of shops and in markets. The way the religious buildings are intimately interspersed with other buildings serves as a visual reminder of how religion is interwoven into daily life. You can run out for a coconut and leave an offering at the temple that is in the market. The temples, mosques, and churches have a constant stream of visitors, not just when a service is taking place. People have shrines in their homes. You also see shrines on street corners, in restaurants, on the sides of buildings, and in trees on the edge of the sidewalk. Schools have temples and curricula include prayer services, such as the hymn service that begins the day at the Kalachitra Performing Arts School in Chennai.

People's dress denotes religious affiliation as do symbols painted on their foreheads. Rangoli, designs made from rice paste, are drawn each morning in front of doorways as blessings.



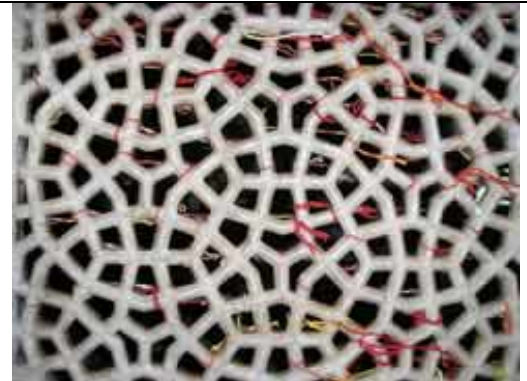
**Examples of rangoli
outside a door**



Selling religious paraphernalia at the market in Pune

Many restaurants serve vegetarian food to accommodate the needs of the Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains. Shops and market stalls are full of religious paraphernalia. Car dashboards usually have some religious symbol and often a string of limes or peppers and mango leaves will adorn the front of the vehicle for spiritual protection. Shop fronts and temples also sport strings of limes, flowers and mango leaves. Swastikas (an ancient Hindu symbol that was later altered by Hitler) grace many temples. Most striking perhaps are the cows, considered sacred, wandering the streets, and given respect by the hoards of people passing around them.

People say prayers and make wishes in the mosques. They tie strings to leave a record their prayers.



Prayer strings from the mosque at Fatehpur Sikri

I find myself comparing and contrasting Indian spirituality with materialism, the dominant focus in

American life. In the U.S. single unit family dwellings, cell phones, TVs, and laptops discourage communication with the general public that is unavoidable in India. A strong sense of community exists in India out of necessity, something that becomes less and less strong in America as our country becomes more and more bipartisan. Little is wasted in India. Anything can be repaired and ragpickers take care of the recycling. In America goods are sold cheaply, not designed for a long life, not repaired, and are disposed of with little thought. Families gathered for a Hindu festival and celebrated by performing religious rituals together. I watched groups of men playing games on the beach in the evening, and swimming in the reservoir at Fatehpur Sikri during a monsoon downpour.



Morning hymn service at the School of the Arts in Chennai

Families gathered at night on Chowpati Beach and I was struck by their playfulness and how they made the most out of what little they had. In contrast, I am struck by Americans always wanting more when we already have so much. Indian values seem to be centered around the present, emphasizing spirituality and family life. American values seem to be centered around amassing ever more material goods, building towards defined, and therefore never-achieved, ultimate goals.

I am fortunate to teach in a Quaker school where, I not only have the freedom to address spiritual and moral issues, but class meetings are a scheduled part of my school week and are an appropriate forum for discussions about religions and personal values. This year the sixth graders prepared a Hindu ceremony that they shared with the rest of the school as part of our weekly whole school Meeting for Worship. This coming year we will study how moving to the United States has affected the cultural life of Indian students.

I still remember the poverty in India. I also remember the lively children in the schools, the thriving arts, the welcome symbols somebody took the time to make out of rice, and the garland of marigolds hung around my neck upon entering a school. I remember the Rajya Sabha, the leader of the upper house of the Indian Parliament, taking time out of his day to meet with us because his sister-in-law was a teacher in New York State.

The spirit of the people has stayed with me and has helped me to appreciate all that I enjoy as a citizen of the United States. It also motivates me to question my daily life, my own values system, and my own spirituality. As I remember the rich spiritual life experienced by Indians, the material advantages of living in the United States seem unimportant. I believe that Indians live with a cup that is half full.

Doris Day said, "Gratitude is wealth. Complaint is poverty." How rich do you choose to be today?

Kathryn Djouallah

United Friends School
1018 W. Broad Street
Quakertown, PA 18951

kdjouallah@hotmail.com

**TERMS OF USE**

The International Journal of Healing and Caring On Line is distributed electronically. You may choose to print your downloaded copy for relaxed reading. Feel free to forward this to others.

The International Journal of Healing and Caring
P.O. Box 76, Bellmawr, NJ 08099
Phone (609) 714-1885 - Fax (609) 714-3553

Email: center@ijhc.org Web Site: <http://www.ijhc.org>

Copyright 2001 IJHC. All rights reserved.