

## Kinship to India

I recall my mother smiling at, and often striking up conversations with random Indian people that we would encounter at the grocery store or mall. These were strangers, and yet my mom sought them out and formed instantaneous bonds.

I always thought of myself as a broad-minded person, a person who wanted to connect with people regardless of their backgrounds (but not because of it). I did not feel any significant connection to my own Indian background, definitely not enough to automatically consider every Indian I met my friend, as my mom was inclined to do.

Being 23, and committed to spending a year in India, I am just now beginning to understand and appreciate that special bond between Indians that my mother treasured. I realize it is not just sharing a common identity. It is more about the sincere obligation all Indians feel to take care of one another, and make sure that one is at home and comfortable. I see this unique aspect of Indian culture still so prevalent in *gams* (villages), which to me, are the heart of Bharat. I see it in the countless number of women who have taken me in as their daughter. I feel it when I am overwhelmed with the children from my school(s) who want to take me home to meet their family and include me in their lives. I experience it when traveling village to village in crowded jeeps, not always knowing where I am going, but having complete faith that the strangers in the jeep will guide me in the right direction.

I have been in India for three months now, temporarily situated in the cities of Mumbai and Ahmedabad, before settling in my new home for the year - a cluster of 5 villages in the Patan district of Gujarat. I tell the villagers I meet on a daily basis that I am here to do a one-year service project and to learn about Indian culture. I am implementing a pilot project for Gujarat's education ministry. I work with five village high schools with the aim of giving students a more practical understanding of science and of making it more interactive and enjoyable for them.

After a month and a half on the project, observing and doing a bit of teaching myself, I have encountered so many difficulties, often seeing what is implemented in the classrooms to be the exact opposite of what I consider learning. The focus is mostly on exam performance, with students learning how to do well on exams, often without having any understanding of the concepts being taught. I worry that the current school system stifles the students' creativity and denies them an outlet for self-expression.

Despite the problems I see, it is incredibly gratifying to be interacting with kids on a daily basis who are filled with so much love and enthusiasm. I often find the kids showering me with much more attention than I think I deserve. I love sitting during *prarthna* (the morning prayer and general assembly), watching the kids as they sing their prayers together. While the students' mischievous behavior infuriates their teachers, I am amused by the clever antics they employ to make school just a bit more fun. It is my goal to help them realize that learning, too, can be exciting and fun if they approach it with a certain degree of self-confidence, self-initiative and critical analysis.

Aside from gaining insight on the education system here, I have learned much about what defines Indian culture, as exemplified in India's villages. While many homes have TVs, indoor plumbing, and even an occasional mobile phone, people are quite isolated here. They do not pay much heed to the world that exists outside of their community. The villages on the outskirts of Patan are predominantly farming communities; every other day, the students take me to their farms to see the *juar*, *goan*, *rye*, *herandra*, and many other crops they grow. I get fresh milk everyday from the woman across the street who keeps buffaloes. Villagers' entertainment consists of spending hours a day interacting with neighbors, chatting and gossiping away while sitting on their *katlas* in front of their houses. They are quite proud of the sense of community they have here.

I am amazed by the number of sincere connections I have made with people from all walks of life in such a short time. Just last week I had the most amazing conversation with a Jain *sadhvi* who was passing through the village I live in. She shared with me her beliefs and explained to me the significance of every aspect of her ascetic lifestyle, while I shared with her my reasons for being here and the experiences and struggles I was encountering. She anticipated all the mental challenges I was facing, even before I told her. I was captivated by her acute sense of human nature. We are two people of the most contrasting backgrounds, living such different lifestyles, yet meeting in a village in India and being able to form a bond.

Thanks to my experiences in the villages in Patan, I now better understand the kinship my mother feels when she encounters someone of Indian origin in America. Perhaps when she meets someone Indian, she is reminded of the Indian community in her homeland - a place where people truly look out for one another without any expectation whatsoever of anything in return. Sitting on a *khatla* this quiet evening, I smile to myself and think how amazing it is to be a part of this culture. It is a culture that I want to be identified with.

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