

New Perspectives
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It had been a long start to the trip, multiple days filled with long delays and airplane chipati. Physically we were worn out by the travel, but the group's enthusiasm had not waned. We were ready to explore India in every way possible, well equipped with our malaria pills and Nikon cameras. Our reading of several articles about India and viewing of the Bollywood film, "The Three Idiots", had prepared me to expect an exciting adventure. However, I was pleasantly surprised by the unexpected *lessons* that India taught me. In only a matter of twelve days, an exciting cultural experience turned into my discovery of a deeper understanding of what it means to be a traveler.

I remember my first day in India more clearly than any of the other days of the trip. Despite the exceptionally sugary cups of Chai tea we had sipped that morning by the dusty roadside in Ahmedabad, we were inexplicably tired thanks to our dear friend, jet lag. I remember thinking that I wanted to capture every single second of the trip.

We had a three-hour bus ride that morning to the rural village of Golana in Gujarat. I, of course, took this opportunity to begin my photographic documentation of the vibrant country around me. I took myriads of pictures of lush green vegetation and women dressed in jewel toned saris carrying baskets filled with magenta and tangerine colored flowers. Everything was so beautiful. I felt lucky just to be able to take such photographs half way around the world, for I knew that I would cherish them forever.

When we reached our destination, we left the bus and began to enter the outskirts of the slum. Almost every one of us had our cameras ready to take pictures of the smiling village children, myself included. Mehesh gave us the Reader's digest version of the story of the villagers. These villagers were Dalits or "untouchables", members of the lowest sector of the Indian caste system. I wasn't nervous or shocked by the poverty. I had traveled to developing nations and worked in poor communities before. I was interested in the history of the village, but I also felt somewhat prepared for our visit, as if I knew what to expect.

Perhaps it was because of my odyssey to take great pictures, but I realized that entered Golana that day with an insensitive visitor's mindset. Our group walked through the dirt paths of the village in our long, flowing skirts taking many pictures of the villagers and their homes, but somehow I began to feel incredibly uncomfortable and foreign.

This place was the Dalits home. A place comprised of families, stories, and love. We were treading upon sacred ground with our keens and chacos. Who were we to waltz into the village only to take pictures? Within a matter of hours, we would be gone, and their lives would continue as they always had before our visit. Who were we to look at them only through the lens of a camera? That didn't seem just. My camera suddenly became not a useful recording device but an obtrusive wall between the villagers around me and myself.

I realized that I was not absorbing everything around me. I was passively snapping photographs to "remember" something that I was not fully experiencing.

I put the lens cap back on and looked at the woman clad in bright Indian fabric. I put my hands at my heart center and bowed my head as I said "Namaste". The woman smiled and reciprocated my gesture of respect.

It was this personal connection that solidified my desire to be fully engaged in every moment of the trip, to soak up every experience like a sponge and not to hide behind my camera. I did return to Cleveland with many pictures; however, after my visit to Golana, I began to see and experience everything with my own eyes as a more aware traveler. Now my photographs and memories in tandem will form the cohesive picture I gained over those twelve days of the life and culture of India.