BOMBAY CENTRAL:
A JOURNEY INTO INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Thesis

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Scholarly Essay

Introduction

India has conjured many images in the minds of American audiences throughout the twentieth and twenty first century. The subcontinent was consistently portrayed as hot, polluted and mired in devastating poverty in major motion pictures produced from 1930 to 2000 (Ramasubramanian 252, 256). The 1960’s brought increased media attention on Indian spiritual practices due to the Beatles’ relationship with Indian religious leader Maharishi Mahesh (Iwamura 259). By the mid 2000’s, India became synonymous with outsourcing to readers of American newspapers, magazines and websites (Chakravartty 39).

There is plenty of discussion in mainstream media about India’s massive population under age 25 (approximately 600 million) and its potential to introduce radical changes into Indian society the same way the Baby Boomers did in the United States in the 1960’s and the children of the Cultural Revolution have done in China over the past 30 years (Mustafi). But there is scant mention on the front covers of newsstands and the home pages of news websites about the subtle cultural changes slowly trickling through Indian society. Few articles targeted at Western audiences focus on the simmering sexual tension amongst love struck youth in the historically socially conservative country, the hearty appetite for cheesy American sitcoms or young Indians’ obsession with European professional soccer leagues.

My knowledge of India was similar to that of most Western media audiences prior to my first trip to the country in December 2011. My impressions were based on
what I had seen in *Slum Dog Millionaire* and tales of family friends who traveled there on business trips warning about the country’s ubiquitous filth. After two weeks traveling with over 300 Indians between ages 18-25 on an ageing, overcrowded Indian Railways train, I went from knowing little about the country to becoming one of its biggest cheerleaders. I was wowed by the passion, intellect, and curiosity of my new Indian friends. The country’s dozens of languages, ethnic groups and vast geography fascinated me so much that six months after I first visited I returned to study abroad in Bombay (officially known as Mumbai) at a business college.

Throughout my time in Bombay, I kept a journal and a blog to keep in touch with my family and reflect on my experience. I wrote frequently about a professor who only showed up to class in faded jeans, an un-tucked button down shirt, and flip flops when school policy mandated all students wear business casual attire to all school functions, and lambasted the inability of my school to efficiently schedule classes. I expected the stories I shared on my blog and journal would get buried in the troves of data floating through the internet or lay forgotten on a cluttered, dusty bookshelf. I never imagined they would become the subject of my thesis. But after discussing my experiences with my family, I became convinced that writing a memoir about my study abroad experience would be the ideal way to synthesize and reflect all the information I had accumulated about Indian culture, history and social trends.

When I began the writing process, Dr. Hugh Martin, my tutor at the time, encouraged me to write about my experience as an exchange student instead of a traditional travel log. He said that Western audiences already knew about India’s filth
and corruption. But education in India and the social dynamics in Indian schools were topics that were rarely touched by Western reporters and writers. My goal with my creative project was to write a memoir that gave audiences a glimpse of Indian life that rarely makes the Western news cycle. I wanted to show readers that outside the country’s intense poverty there exists a swath of the population, granted a very small slither of the nation’s one billion plus people, that is fanatical about the Batman movie franchise, dreaming of prestigious Ivy League degrees and also battling with their parents over their love lives and financial futures. I wanted to demonstrate that Indian students face the same social, academic and family conflicts as their peers in the United States.

The final product *Bombay Central: A Journey Into Indian Higher Education* is a five-chapter travel log/memoir. Each chapter focuses on a different theme such as Indian immigration to the West or life in an Indian dormitory.

During the writing process several issues cropped up that prompted further explanation in a formal academic paper. As I used pseudonyms and altered personal details about my friends, I wrestled with protecting their privacy and navigating the boundaries of conflict of interest, two topics at the forefront of journalism ethics. I also found that in order for my memoir to deliver a more clear and coherent message, I needed to have a strong understanding of travel literature, New Journalism and creative nonfiction, three modes of storytelling whose individual styles and ethical codes had a great impact on my personal creative process.
I label my memoir a piece of travel writing, but in truth it is a blend of the three mediums. Like British and American travel writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I traveled to a foreign land hoping for self-discovery, a sense of freedom and greater cross-cultural understanding. I managed to achieve the same sense of independence and comfort in my adopted home as my literary forbearers but also inadvertently slipped in at times what critics might view as an ethnocentric attitude, a consistent problem particularly found in the travel writings of prominent post World War II travel authors.

Tom Wolfe’s New Journalism, a genre that is merely a rebranding of a form of writing that has been popular throughout literary history, provided me the creative freedom to write free of traditional journalism’s shackles of objectivity, fairness and balance. The genre’s sometimes unconventional reporting methods sanctioned my immersion reporting as an acceptable and highly honorable form of information gathering crucial to portraying an accurate glimpse of characters.

With regard to writing style, I relied heavily on the techniques of creative nonfiction. My ultimate goal was for my memoir to read like the quality creative nonfiction pieces that line bestseller lists, which noted creative nonfiction author Lee Gutkind (qtd in Williams 350) describes as a “true stories that read like fiction.” The ethical guidelines of the genre outlined by Gutkind and noted creative nonfiction writer Philip Gerard were instrumental in my formulation of the ethical code that governed my memoir.
I was able to finally unite these three closely related genres in the ethics and reflection sections. All the genres share a staunch commitment to the truth and the protection of sources. Yet each maintains its own unique ethical approach that was crucial in enriching my broader understanding of journalism and nonfiction ethics.

The most stimulating part of this endeavor was the reflection and critique section. I realized in this section that my work had many of the flaws, such as the portrayal of a foreign culture as the “other” and exotic, that literary critics abhor. The space to reflect gave me the time and opportunity to realize that my reactions were not rooted in an inherent belief of the superiority of Western culture or racial prejudice. Rather these feelings were a product of the “othering” that my Indian classmates, teachers, security guards, cab drivers and random citizens did to me.

I named my thesis after one of Bombay’s busiest train stations, Bombay Central. The station is a hub on the city’s suburban rail line and the departure point for long distance trains headed deep into to the major population centers of the country’s western and central states. In the following sections, like a train departing from Bombay Central for the country’s heartland, I plan to take readers on a voyage that examines the core conflicts at the heart of travel writing, New Journalism, and creative nonfiction. By the end of the journey, the strengths and weaknesses of each genre will be enumerated and the major ethical conflicts defined and explained. My hope is that readers will learn how to become savvier critics of travel writing, New Journalism and creative nonfiction and more cognizant of the pitfalls that plague nonfiction. Ultimately, my goal is for readers to have a more nuanced and broad understanding of
India and its culture, history and challenges and replicate that respect for their international peers they meet in the future.

**Travel Writing**

Before the rise of the printing press and media organizations, travelers and travel writers were the primary sources of information and news (Leed 105). The ancient Greeks viewed travel writing as the ideal way to gain new knowledge (Leed 58). By the Enlightenment, travel gained new stature in the scholarly community as a way to foster observational and analytical skills (Leed 60). Travelers were no longer expected to merely observe and report; they were now expected to compare, analyze and contextualize their experiences and observations from a scientific perspective (Leed 60).

The European Grand Tour emerged as the perfect training ground for budding travelers to apply the Enlightenment’s new scientific outlook toward travel writing (Leed 185). The Tour was a central part of the European travel experience from the beginning of the seventeenth century until about 1830 (Chard 11). The Grand Tour was viewed as a culmination of a student’s education and usually included stops to leading learning centers such as Paris and Bologna (Leed 185).

The popularity of the Grand Tour transformed travel writing and literature. The idea of “rational travel” dominated the travel logs of students and teachers participating in Grand Tours. Grounded in the “reductive-compositive” method of French academic Peter Ramus, rational travel required travelers to describe items first as a whole and gradually divide items into smaller units for further description and
Weinstein 10

analysis. After the initial description, the items would be compiled into a larger table. Ideally, travelers using the “rational travel” method would use two notebooks. The first to list place names, nearby rivers, mountains and topographical landmarks. The second would serve as a diary to record memorable events and experiences (Leed 186). The attitudes of locals, as well as local traditions of dress, language, cuisine and culture were also to be included as part of the rational travel dialogue. These detailed descriptions and lists of facts were meant to demonstrate the veracity of the genre (Leed 105).

Enlightenment era travel writers eschewed flowing prose and complex plot structures for simple writing style (Leed 189). Writers were not encouraged to inject their opinion and were expected to admit the limits of their knowledge. The ideal travel writer of the period was one who “prefer[ed] simplicity to complexity, enumeration to generality, lists to composite views, and quantitative to qualitative descriptions” (Leed 189).

Writers of the Romantic period rejected the Enlightenment’s methodical approach to travel writing and inserted elements of epic poetry, novels, history, and myths into travel narratives (Thompson 5). To Romantic travel writers, travel was viewed as an ideal opportunity to explore new places and as “medicine for the troubled mind” (Gilroy 2).

The idea of travel as “medicine for the troubled mind” is seen throughout Romantic travel writing in several countries. The French Romantics used travel writing to frolic throughout Europe, North America and Asia and as a test of
perseverance (Block 1, Thompson 9). Goethe’s *Italienische Reise*, a work that would start a long fascination with Italy by German and Italian writers, is a blend of novella and autobiography (Remak 22). Romantic British travel logs were a cross section of commentary about class, identity, ethnicity and gender (Gilroy 3).

The emphasis on observation and accuracy in seventeenth century travel narratives was introduced to rid the genre of its reputation as a haven for tall tales (Leed 188). Western society’s inherent distrust of travelers and travel writers can be traced to antiquity (Clark 1).

Suspicion toward travelers stretched into the medieval era. Hosts believed that most formulated new identities when they arrived at their destination. The tendency to be wary of travelers was a result of the difficulty of verifying travelers’ stories. The expectation that travelers would lie and embellish provided them with the space to tell fantastical stories. Since travelers were anomalies, it was expected that their stories would be filled with outrageous details of the outside world. Roving minstrels, actors, bards and mountebanks were assumed to never tell the truth (Leed 106).

The inherent doubt of travel writers’ is rooted in the travelers desire to misrepresent his or herself upon arrival at a new destination (Leed 105). The traveler’s identity is born out of the stereotypes made by hosts and the personality shifts, and disguises travelers adopt (Leed 264).

Eighteenth century Scottish traveler James Boswell epitomizes the fluidity of the traveler’s identity. In his travels through Europe, Boswell was known for adapting various identities. He was a British spy in Corsica, a philosopher in Geneva and a
Corsican bandit at the lavish London parties he attended upon his return to the United Kingdom (Leed 265). In his diaries, Boswell (qtd in Leed 268) admits that “Wherever I come I find myself loved… Is it possible for me not to be flattered when in a day or two I can make strangers of all kinds regard me? Sure I am this could not be done without external merit, as to my internal worth, I am not always certain.”

Despite their dedication to factual accuracy, 17th and 18th century travel writers knew that most audiences were inclined to dismiss their work as baseless because of the escapades of travelers like Boswell (Leed 105). Eighteenth century British travel writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote that she and her peers grappled with critic’s inherent distrust of their works. She said (Montagu qtd in Leed 107) that

“if we say nothing but what has been said before us, we are dull, and we have observed nothing. If we tell anything new, we are laughed at as fabulous and romantic, not allowing either for the difference of ranks which affords difference of company, or mere curiosity, or the change of customs that happens every twenty years in every country…”

The insistence of Montagu and her colleagues that their form of writing be seen as legitimate gave credence to the idea of travel as a vehicle for information gathering and rise to the modern nonfiction genre (Leed 107).

The nineteenth and twentieth century marked a major transition for travel narratives. Thirst for travel narratives exploded in the United States, as writers boarded European bound steamships hungry for adventure and stories that would translate into best sellers at home (Melton 17). Writers viewed the foreign environment as the ideal setting to define American identity (Melton 18). American
travel narratives, like Grand Tour travel logs, were known for their didactic nature (Melton 25). Data, local legends and historical contexts were common elements of travel narratives (Melton 32). It was common for authors to embellish and exaggerate because of the “genre’s unremitting demand that writers dare not err on the side of cautious understatement as they bring the world to readers” (Melton 37).

While American travel writing was transformed by European travel, nineteenth century European travel narratives evolved with the dawn of colonialism. European travel writers ventured to the outposts of empire in Africa and Asia. These texts contained the hallmarks of the imperial British psyche: resilience, asceticism, collectivism and a strong belief in the Imperial mission (Clark 10). These narratives “reinforced prevailing narratives that the world was ripe to conquer” (Holland & Huggan 4).

Travel writing regained popularity in the British literary world after World War I (Fussell 15). Disillusioned with England, droves of British writers left the United Kingdom to wander through Europe and record their travels (Fussell 11). The commercial success and critical acclaim for these works inspired a new generation of travel writers after World War II, highlighted by Paul Theroux and V.S. Naipaul, to chronicle their forays into foreign lands (Holland & Huggan 6).

In his seminal study on travel literature of the 1920’s and 1930’s, Paul Fussell defines the modern travel book as “sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative- unlike that in a novel or a romance-claims
literal validity by constant reference to actuality” (Fussell 203). Holland and Huggan (14) state that travel narratives seek “to convert a mishmash of impressions into a coherent narrative.” This narrative is often autobiographical in tone and primarily concerned with following the writer’s personal evolution (Holland & Huggan 14).

Hayden White (qtd in Holland & Huggan 10) views travel narratives as “fictions of factual representation” whose factual authority stems from their referrals to genuine events and places. But these events and places are portrayed to an audience through a highly personalized filter, presenting a warped representation to audiences (Holland & Huggan 10).

The fluid nature of travel writing has made it difficult for scholars to classify. It is too dependent on rhetoric to be considered a piece of history, geography or anthropology scholarship, yet too event driven to merit entry into the literary canon (Clark 2).

Ambiguous and vague, twentieth century travel narratives are notorious for revealing scant information about the narratives topic or the authors. This leads Holland and Huggan (XI) to call the facts included in twentieth century travel writing “screens for cannily structured fictions” and claim that the personal insights of travel writing may serve as covers to hide questionable motivations (Holland & Huggan XI).

Twentieth century travel writers brought their own unique prejudices to their travel chronicles, just like their predecessors had when writing about their experiences on the Grand Tour or roving through Europe during the Victorian Era. Scholars view post World War II travel writing as a bastion for transmitting male, middle class,
Caucasian and heterosexual worldviews (Holland & Huggan VIII). Like Boswell, modern travel writers frequently shift between various roles (Holland & Huggan 16). By frequently shifting roles from prankster to traveler, to teacher post-War travel writers grant themselves an array of privileges. The writer can seamlessly shift from the perspective of a temporary insider to ignorant foreigner (Holland & Huggan 7).

Usually richer than the foreign citizen he interacts with, Fussell (210) calls travel writers of the 1920’s “plutocrat[s] pro tem and the sort of plutocrat the natives don’t mind having around.” The cultural values of travel writers, regardless of their time period, tend to dominate and overshadow the beliefs of the culture they are writing about (Clark 5).

The travel memoir falls under the broader classification of travel books. The memoir is defined as a discontinuous narrative centered around multiple subjects (Holland & Huggan 14). The sense of discontinuity and upheaval is heightened in the travel memoir by the physical displacement and writer’s heightened sense of alienation. This view implies that the purpose of the travel memoir is for the author to reevaluate his or her position in the domestic and foreign culture and prompt an examination of the role of one’s home culture in global discourse (Holland & Huggan 15).

The tendency of travel writers throughout history to misrepresent themselves and view the people they encounter as ripe for conquer has led to the genre being plagued by a multitude of recurring problems. The most recurrent issue is travel writer’s tendency to embellish their experiences in order to impress readers (Chard 2).
“The desire to impress is so dominant [in travel narratives],” anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1) writes, “that is impossible for the reader to assess the value of the evidence put before him.” Failing to present a foreign world as radically different makes the writer’s work vulnerable to disappointment from critics (Chard 2). Chard (3) writes that this paradox leads many travel writers to “impose on the foreign a demand that it should in some way proclaim itself as different from the familiar.” Travel writers use hyperbole, italicized foreign words and themes of otherness to make their works seem more exotic and legitimate to their audiences (Chard 4). The intrinsic conflicts travel writers face lead to travel literature fomenting myths, fantasies and as a medium for authors to communicate their internal desires and dreams (Chard 9). Holland and Huggan (11) state that many of the truths travel writers supposedly seek in their narratives are beliefs long held by the authors.

Because travel narratives are intended for the native audience of the reader, and the experiences of the writer are difficult to confirm, they are subject to a higher degree of distrust (Clark 1).

All travel writing, ranging from glowing portraits of citizens in war torn countries to Victorian odes to imperialism, are forms of interference. Interference can be detrimental, such as narratives that encourage unsustainable tourism, as well as positive. Travel writers can positively interfere by encouraging debate and discussion on cultural differences (Holland & Huggan IX).

The scientific roots of travel writing, which at one time were used to prove the intellectual weight of the genre, are now threatening to damage the genre’s literary
reputation. Holland and Huggan (11) argue that travel writers’ use of ethnography has tainted their works as pseudo-scientific ethnographies. Travel writers, like anthropologists, write for their home audiences, not the people they are observing, and serve as the primary interpreters of an exotic culture. The use of emotional appeals and autobiographical story lines has cheapened the usage of travel writer’s ethnographic methods (Holland & Huggan 11).

To avoid these traps of travel writing, aspiring travel writers should aim to include context in all of their work (Hemley 110). They should also aim to see their travel books as ways to spur curiosity about foreign worlds and measure how shifts in cultural attitudes (Holland & Huggan XIII). Clark (5) defines successful travel writing as narrative that uncovers and contextualizes fact and challenges the sanctity of the beliefs of one’s home culture.

The evolution of travel writing, the challenges and flaws of contemporary travel narratives will be crucial as I evaluate other forms of journalism in the following sections. I will use the above discussion to reflect on my experience collecting information and traveling in India as well as constructing my travel memoir.

**New Journalism and Immersion Writing**

New Journalism gained fame with the publication of Tom Wolfe’s *New Journalism* in 1973. It expanded the rhetorical boundaries by placing authors at the center of the narrative, embraced odd punctuation, reimagined traditional storytelling modes and delved into the thoughts of characters (Boynton xii). Wolfe (29) and his colleagues such as Gay Talese, Jimmy Breslin, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion were
using journalism to explore the “richest terrain of the novel: namely, society, the social
tableau, manners and morals, the whole business of ‘the way we live now’…” that
novelists of the era had seemingly little interest in exploring.”

Four literary devices lay at the heart of New Journalism: scene construction,
dialogue, third person perspective and observance of everyday details (Wolfe 32).
These techniques were rooted in the works of Dickens, Gogol and gave magazine and
newspaper articles the immediacy, emotion, and immersive quality usually associated
with novels (Wolfe 31).

New Journalists made it in vogue for reporters to spend extended periods of
time with subjects (Wolfe 31). Dialogue became a tool to profile character
development and traits. Interviewing subjects about their emotions and including their
third perspective was an innovation of New Journalism. The New Journalist’s
obsession with documenting the type of food preferred by subject, the name of a pet,
or a subject’s fashion sense was meant to spur readers to think about their own
paradoxes, flaws, fantasies and “the thousand and one small humiliations and the
status coups of everyday life” (Wolfe 32).

Journalist and Journalism professor Jon Franklin (26) writes that the type of
reporting he and Wolfe were known for “wasn’t exactly new”. Wolfe writes that the
reporting done by New Journalists was historically the domain of autobiographers,
eighteenth and nineteenth century travel writers and novelists. Journalists and
nonfiction writers were afraid to wade into that style of reporting because of cultural
norms that mandated that nonfiction was primarily a genre devoted to teaching and
dispensing moral lessons. The New Journalists renounced this paradigm and prized writing mechanics and clarity over the moral tenor their works merited (Wolfe 50).

In his history of New Journalism, Wolfe repeatedly mentions Boswell as one of the historical patriarchs of the genre. Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad*, Anton Chekhov’s *A Journey to Sakhalin*, in addition to the George Orwell’s *Down and Out In Paris and London*, comprise the genetic makeup of Wolfe’s New Journalism (Wolfe 45). The works of Ernest Hemingway, John Hersey, Truman Capote shaped the genre throughout the 1940s. In the 1950s, *The New Yorker* became the cultural springboard for the finest New Journalism of the period.

Like Wolfe, Franklin (23) points to Capote as one of the twentieth century molders of New Journalism. He argues that *In Cold Blood* encouraged writers of the 1960s to traverse the “foggy frontier between journalism and literature” (Franklin 24) and that the book resuscitated the floundering short story genre. Though Franklin (27) states the genre straddles the “foggy frontier” he stresses that New Journalism and nonfiction-short-story are grounded in truth and interviewing and reporting, journalism linchpins.

The public fascination and commercial success of New Journalists continued into the late twentieth century with the rise of what journalist Robert Boynton (xi) coined “The New New Journalists.” While Wolfe and his peers were known for their literary flare, their progeny have made their mark through inventive reporting techniques (Boynton xii). New New Journalist Ted Conover has been a prison guard, hobo, cab driver and illegally crossed the United States-Mexico border as part of the
reporting for his various books. Others such as Richard Ben Cramer and Eric Schlosser spent years reporting their respective books.

Wolfe’s obsession with uncovering one’s social status drove his reporting and fueled his interest in noting on trivial things like a character’s clothes (Boynton xiv). Wolfe’s obsession with class status causes him to ignore issues such as race and poverty, themes that lie at the heart of many New New Journalism works (Boynton xv).

Boynton contends that the New New Journalists view their journalism as a way to kick start social change and spur major societal discussions (Boynton xiv). The works of New New Journalists Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*), Conover (*Newjack, Rolling Nowhere, Coyotes*) and other journalists Boynton profiles in *The New New Journalism* write about topics such as poverty, illegal immigration, prison reform and the fast food industry.

To Wolfe (52), reporting is “one of the most exhilarating trips… in the world” and an experience akin to putting “your whole central nervous system on red alert.” The reporting style of the New New Journalists stems from muckraker Lincoln Steffens and late nineteenth century journalist Stephen Crane (Boynton xxvii). The two used fictional techniques extensively in their articles about New York City’s slums and gave equal weight to the traditional journalism ideals of empathy, subjectivity, honesty, as well as literary style (Boynton xxiv). The guiding dogma of the generation of journalists following Wolfe, Boynton (xxvii) writes is
“a conviction that by immersing themselves deeply into their subjects’ lives….they can - much as Crane did before them - bridge the gap between their subjective perspective and the reality they are observing, that they can render reality in a way that is both accurate and aesthetically pleasing.”

Immersion writing is a popular subgenre of creative nonfiction. The form has a long history with Henry David Thoreau being one of the earliest authors to use this genre and authors George Plimpton and John McPhee are some of the modern masters. Ideally immersion writers should try to blend in as much as possible with the community they are writing about. If it is impossible for readers to totally blend into their adopted communities, then they should maintain as low a profile as possible (creativenonfiction.org).

Because immersion writers spend such substantial amounts of time immersed, they face the anthropologist’s dilemma of “going native.” Lee Gutkind, the godfather of creative nonfiction, warns immersive to ignore the temptation to become activity members of the community they are writing about. He warns (qtd in creativenonfiction.org) that “if you are helping the people you are observing on a regular basis, then you are not writing. If you are perceived as part of the team, then you are not perceived as a writer, a misconception that may lead to misunderstandings down the line.”

Writer Robin Hemley (8) uses the term immersion writing to classify “any kind of memoir, travel narrative, or journalistic piece in which the narrative is as much forward-looking as backward, and in which the writer is a part of the story being told.”
Travel writing, immersive journalism and immersive memoirs fall under the umbrella of his immersion writing category (Hemley 9).

Hemley differentiates immersion writers based on the goals of their writing. He states immersion journalists are primarily concerned with investigating the broader world and include themselves as characters as a tool to aid in their exploration. Immersion memoirists use the outside world as a microscope to investigate their personal lives (Hemley 11).

What distinguishes immersion memoir from immersion journalism, Hemley argues, is the role of the first person narrator. If the crux of a story is an investigation of personal matters, then the work should be viewed as an immersion memoir (Hemley 48). But if the narrator views itself is a “stand-in, a convenient body double…for the reader” (Hemley 48) then the work tilts toward immersion journalism.

The most pertinent classifications in terms of this study are what Hemley deems the infiltration and the quest. An analysis of these two sub-genres will aid in the discussion and classification of my work later in this study.

In immersion memoir, infiltrators fall into two camps: spies and insiders (Hemley 34). Spies illicitly enter the community under false identities hoping to take the information back to the outside world. Insiders are transparent about their identities and might even develop a rapport with people in the community they have entered.

The methods of New Journalism, New New Journalism and immersion journalism share many similarities with the work of ethnographers and anthropologists
(Bird 302). New New Journalists and immersion journalists, like anthropologists, have “penetrated the logic and customs of an exotic group and comprehended the world in the group’s own terms” (Shroder qtd in Bird 302).

Anthropologists strive to make sure that their ethnographic research is holistic and meticulous. They aim to interview dozens of sources, ranging from power brokers to middling figures (Bird 304). Ethnographers aim to frame discussions as informal conversations that provide further insight into the informant’s worldview interactions and not as interviews (Bird 302). To better understand their subjects and the culture they are observing, ethnographers interact with informants several times and in a variety of environments (Bird 303). Anthropologists, unfettered by obligations to a consumer audience or expectations of objectivity, expect their personal opinions to tinge their work to an extent (Bird 305).

In reporting *What It Takes: The Way to the White House*, Cramer used ethnographic methods to give his book about the 1988 presidential campaign an extra dimension of depth and complexity. He showed up to interviews without prepared questions or even a notebook, and spent extensive time in candidates’ hometowns and spoke to their friends and relatives that were traditionally outside the media fray (Cramer 40). Like the anthropologist, Cramer used multiple interviews to get a stronger grasp of his subject (Cramer 48).

Schlosser takes a similar anthropological approach as Cramer. When Schlosser (353) first meets an interview subject he “often just show[s] up without a pad or tape recorder” so he can learn the basics of his subject’s story.
One problem New Journalists that anthropologists continually struggle with is over identification with their informants (Bird 306). This relationship is complicated by the American Anthropological Association’s ethics code that explicitly states anthropologists primary responsibility is to their informants (Bird 307).

The New Journalists and the New New Journalists do not share the same level of loyalty to their informants as anthropologists. Schlosser will contact sources repeatedly to make sure he has gotten correct quotes and other facts but he does not avoid potentially upsetting his sources and confronting them (Schlosser 354).

I will return to the techniques of New Journalism, New New Journalism and ethnography in the discussion section.

**Creative Nonfiction**

Lee Gutkind, the founder of the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, describes the genre as “…true stories that read like fiction” (Gutkind qtd in Williams 350). The term emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s and became formally established when Gutkind established *Creative Nonfiction* in 1993. Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson inspired Gutkind’s early work, but he realized that in order to gain respect from his peers in academia he needed to distance himself from New Journalism (Williams 351).

Gutkind (qtd in Williams 360) explained that creative nonfiction “…came out of new journalism but, like I said, I wanted to get rid of the “j” word. I thought ‘literary journalism’ was pompous. I wasn’t crazy about “creative nonfiction,” but it was the best of a series of bad choices, and the word “creative” appealed…It was the word “creative” that did the trick, I think, to get the people in the literary world who were not nonfiction writers to buy into it and use it as another thing they could do.”
The use of the word “creative” is meant to characterize the author’s thought process and should not be viewed as a synonym for fiction (Gutkind 7). “Creative” refers to the imagination, analytical skills and descriptions the author uses in the piece.

Creative nonfiction encompasses a broad field of writing ranging from academic journal articles to poetry and personal memoirs (Gutkind 6). Gutkind (55) envisions creative nonfiction as a pendulum swinging between two poles: public and private. Private pieces are centered on the author’s personal life (Gutkind 56).

Memoirs and autobiography fall under Gutkind’s classification of private creative nonfiction. The autobiography focuses the entirety of an individual’s life while the memoir focuses on a specific, finite period (Gutkind 58).

Public creative nonfiction focuses on general ideas that dominate the public sphere (Gutkind 61). Unlike personal creative nonfiction, these stories, such as profiling the plight of pediatric oncology nurses to the shifting political tides in Burma, can be told anyone. The best creative nonfiction blends the personal and public elements into a coherent, compelling narrative (Gutkind 63).

Gerard (5) characterizes creative nonfiction as a concerted effort “to rein in our impulse to lie.” His assessment stems from his belief that facts are subverted, intentionally and unintentionally, whenever writers put their pen to paper (Gerard 4).

Creative nonfiction is characterized by the following five traits (Gerard 7):

1. Apparent and deeper subject
2. Freedom from time sensitivity of journalism
3. Narrative storytelling
4. Reflection

5. Detailed attention to writing mechanics

What separates creative nonfiction from journalism is the presence of the apparent and deeper subject. Like journalism stories, creative nonfiction narratives are centered around a subject that is obvious to readers. However, the aim of creative nonfiction stories is to draw readers into engaging with the deeper subject (Gerard 8). Gerard (7) uses the example of Steinbeck’s *The Log From The Sea of Cortez* to illustrate an apparent and deeper subject. The apparent subject of *Sea of Cortez* is a sea voyage in the Gulf of California. But the deeper subject is a reflection on the creative process.

Creative nonfiction is excused from timeliness because it is assumed that the author will find a way to make the deeper subject relevant and engaging. The timeliness requirement for creative nonfiction is relaxed because it is believed that the passion of the writer will carry the narrative and make it compelling and interesting (Gerard 8).

The rhetorical devices of creative nonfiction are the same ones used in New Journalism. Plot, character and dialogue, are crucial elements of the narrative (Gerard 9). Wolfe’s favorite rhetorical implement, the scene, is venerated in creative nonfiction. The fourth element of creative nonfiction is that it contains element of reflection. Gerard states that most creative nonfiction writers write about subjects they intimately know. The topics of creative nonfiction pieces are subjects that authors have “brooded about …asked questions about all his life…” (Gerard 10). It is common
in creative nonfiction for authors to invoke historical lessons and include anecdotes from their personal lives. These elements make creative nonfiction the product of a “more profound ‘research’ of a lifetime” (Gerard 10).

The final element of creative nonfiction, like travel writing and New Journalism, is that it expands the traditional boundaries of journalism. Creative nonfiction writers strive for their writing to be artistic and have an element of lyricism and rhythm (Gerard 11). This class of writers aims for the same type of writing that the travel writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth century craved: concise and impactful.

Now that I have defined and discussed the three major modes of nonfiction writing, I will turn my attention to the ethical underpinnings of the respective genres. A discussion of ethics will help later as I evaluate the ethical conflicts I encountered and my approach to these challenges.

**Ethics and Approaches to Conflicts in Nonfiction Writing**

Though travel writing, New Journalism and Creative Nonfiction all have origins in journalism, the three disciplines all take distinct approaches toward journalism ethics.

A form of applied ethics, journalism ethics uses the framework of ethics to scrutinize media practices, goals, and aims of news outlets at both the “micro” and “macro” levels (Ward 43). Truth telling and promise keeping have the same high stature in journalism ethics that they do in the field of general ethics (Ward 44). Questions surrounding accuracy, verification of reporting, deception, privacy,
confidentiality of sources and independence from sources and advertisers are the major ethical quandaries journalists face today (Ward 45).

Conflict of interest is one of the most challenging ethical problems journalists confront. Black, Steele and Barney (qtd in Wasserman 253) state that journalistic conflicts of interest “occur when individuals face competing loyalties to a source or their own self-interest, or to their organization’s economic needs as opposed to the information needs of the public.” Conflicts of interest can be classified into the following categories: those that result from the institutional and vocational methods of journalism and those that have explicit effects on the information delivered to the public (Wasserman 257).

Wasserman (253) argues that it is impossible for journalists to avoid conflicts of interest because they produce their work in a context of “overlapping layers of loyalty and obligation- personal, professional and institutional.” Each of these competing interests shape the journalist’s world view and reporting in both positive and negative ways (Wasserman 253). Conflict of interest’s omniscient presence makes it an unavoidable feature of journalism and highlights the reality that the truth presented in journalism is at best “a negotiated approximation” (Wasserman 254).

The journalism community has dedicated significant scholarship and discussion around conflict of interest because of its effect on the journalist’s judgment. Reporters might include different facts, report from a different angle because of the outside influence. Eventually, conflicts of interest will subtly adjust attention, cognition, and lurch the outside influence to the top of the journalist’s agenda.
Weinstein (Wasserman 250). Wasserman (251) warns that this approach to conflict of interest, while helpful, may lead to an unneeded psychological inquiry into a reporter’s motives instead of figuring out how to eliminate the conflict.

Wasserman offers two primary ways to eliminate conflict of interest. Journalists can either end the relationships that put them in the compromising situations or alert their readers about their potential conflicts of interest (Wasserman 258).

Privacy, like conflict of interest, is another inescapable matter in journalism ethics. Some information journalists report is publicly available and not private information. Tax returns, medical records and credit card statements are examples of information that are considered private (Gauthier 216). Privacy is an essential part of development because it fosters formation of self-identity and moral values (Gauthier 217). The process of attaining privacy teaches individuals that they have sole ownership over their body, thoughts and that they can be exclusive in granting access to their thoughts and body (Gauthier 216). The purpose of privacy Reiman (qtd in Gauthier 217) states is that it “…protects the individual’s interest in becoming, being and remaining a person.”

The desire to allot sources privacy clashes with journalist’s goal of obtaining information (Gauthier 217). Journalists require certain information to supply readers with important details for elections, consumer purchases or safety. Gauthier (217) classifies this as information journalists “need to know”. But other information that surfaces in newspapers and articles, such as the favorite food of the president or the
embarrassing childhood stories of celebrities, is information that journalists and the public “want to know” (Gauthier 217).

When journalists reveal private information of citizens who otherwise would not be in the public sphere they must meet higher criteria than required for politicians, celebrities and sports figures. Initially, journalists should start with the assumption that the privacy of citizens should not be compromised. Privacy of private citizens can only be broken when journalists have demonstrated that benefits of the invasion of privacy outweigh the potential harm to the citizen and the news organization. This is often difficult to prove (Gauthier 227).

Privacy of individuals can be broken when private individuals approach news organizations and allow them to publish personal information and photographs (Gauthier 227). Individuals should be treated with the utmost respect for their voluntary abdication of their privacy.

Journalism ethics is unique amongst the ethical subfields because of journalism’s fluid definition and the various contexts in which it is practiced. This prompts some to believe that the deception used in investigative reporting is legitimate and even necessary (Ward 43). Answers to ethical journalism questions are dependent on the practitioner’s personal ethical codes, different scenarios and are open to various interpretations (Ward 44).

Accuracy, transparency and deception dominate the ethical discourse in the creative nonfiction community. Though these writers pride themselves on being freed
from the shackles of journalism, they share the same journalistic fervor for accurate reporting.

These communities are emphatic that the goal of creative nonfiction and travel writing is to render narratives that are as loyal to the truth as work that would appear in a newspaper or magazine. “You don’t make it up” Gerard (202) emphatically states about creative nonfiction. Creative nonfiction authors are not expected to be objective or balanced, but strict adherence to the facts is non-negotiable (Gutkind 20).

As Ward predicts the creative nonfiction community does change its ethical stance when it comes to certain situations. Gerard (123) allows writing dialogue from memory and using what he terms “habitual dialogue”, as long as writers are clear with their readers that they are doing this practice. If readers decide to include fictional devices such as recreated dialogue they first must evaluate their relationship with the reader in that particular passage and the consequences for falsely giving that information. Inventing scenes, composite characters and morphing facts are cardinal sins of creative nonfiction (Gerard 202). Gutkind (186) acknowledges that creative nonfiction writers take creative liberty when describing scenes and dialogue. He does not deride the practice, but instead calls it an integral part of creative nonfiction. However, he stresses that authors should report and confirm as many of the details as possible.

Ultimately, individual creative nonfiction authors’ formulate their own ethical code. Gutkind (42) permits writers to compress events or include remembered dialogue if it will enrich the narrative because “you are, after all, a writer.” If writers
choose to bend compress events or recreate dialogue they still must vigorously fact check or not intentionally harm the characters in their story (Gutkind 42).

In *New Journalism*, Wolfe does not discuss journalism ethics in the traditional sense. He is interested in attaining a larger interpretative truth. Wolfe believed that by including historical anecdotes and detailed descriptions he gave his readers a more holistic interpretation (Kallan).

The New New Journalists ethics are rooted in traditional journalism ethics. Regarding truth Conover (28) echoes the traditional journalistic definition of truth and the creative nonfiction stance toward truth when he states “either something happened or it didn’t.”

Like Creative Nonfiction writers, New New Journalists make ethical judgments based on their particular situation, as predicted by Ward. This is most apparent in the discussion of pseudonyms. Michael Lewis, author of *Moneyball* and *The Big Short*, never changes names because of his fear that changing names will lead to shuffling other details (Lewis 262). Jon Krakauer (169), author of *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air*, uses pseudonyms when he feels that disclosing a character’s name will negatively interfere with their life.

Conover, the immersion journalist extraordinaire, takes a similar stance to drawing the line between participant observer as Gutkind. He (Conover 19) writes that “what keeps me from going all the way and losing the observer is the knowledge and expectation that I will eventually go home.”
The ethical approaches of Journalism and New Journalism were the major ethical forces behind my work. Their influences will be further discussed in the Reflections and Critique section.

**Reflections and Critique**

Before I started writing my piece, I was repeatedly asked how I would classify it. Would I call it a memoir, immersion journalism, creative nonfiction or travel writing? What journalism rules would I bend? These questions followed me from initial discussions of the project until deep in the editing stages.

I view my work as a piece of creative nonfiction and travel journalism. Though I was embedded in a different culture and society the way many of Boynton’s (xi) so-called “New New Journalists” are, I was not in India with the explicit purpose of reporting and writing. The idea to formally document my experiences, though I did keep a journal and a blog, occurred days before I left the country.

Like travel writing, my piece is highly autobiographical. In the tradition of the nineteenth century American travel book and rational travel (Melton 25, Leed 186), I provide readers with detailed scene descriptions and background information about Indian history and culture. Throughout the writing and editing process, I have striven to adhere to Gutkind’s (qtd in Williams 350) maxim on the nature of creative nonfiction: “true stories that read like fiction.”

To protect the privacy of my characters, I did change names and other personal details. I chose to do this because none of my friends, teachers or advisors knew I would be writing about them. My decision to use pseudonyms came down to the
respect and gratitude I have for my Indian friends. Additionally, as both a journalist and a creative nonfiction writer, I felt obligated to honor journalism’s ethical responsibility to avoid causing harm (Ward 163). I did not want my writing to affect the professional prospects of my friends or potentially cause friction between them and their families.

Though I gave pseudonyms and altered personal details, I still did invade the privacy of my friends. During the writing process and editing sessions with my advisors, I repeatedly struggled to determine what information to include that, as Gauthier (217) states, readers might “want to know.” Technically, readers did not “need to know” about the small parties my friend at his family’s apartment or another friend’s outright disinterest toward business school. I included these anecdotes because I believed they represented segments of Indian society, in some cases majority attitudes in others minority beliefs that readers needed to know and would not learn about any other way.

Writing about my friends was the ultimate embodiment of the “overlapping layers of loyalty and obligation…” (Wasserman 253) journalists face. As Wasserman predicted, the conflict of interest between respecting my friends and my desire to write a captivating and interesting narrative did force me to reevaluate how presented certain situations, and what facts I chose to include. I tried to make sure that when I was critical of my friends, I did not heap on excessive criticism.

Wasserman (258) offers two primary solutions to handling conflicts of interest: elimination of relationships and disclosure. I did disclose in the introduction that I
have changed names and other personal details. Though recommending disclosure, he also criticizes it as a halfhearted measure because it does not specifically indicate how conflict of interest shaped the narrative nor demonstrate how the writer’s judgment was affected. A remedy he approves of is discussion among writers and editors about potential conflicts of interest. I did use this method to discuss my conflicts of interest.

One of the biggest problems I encountered was dialogue. I never had a tape recorder or took notes. The quotes I included were said in natural conversation. I have reconnected with characters in order to corroborate the quotes and storylines I included in my piece.

When I began the project I did not intend to fact check my story with characters based on the false impression that writers of creative nonfiction and immersion journalism solely relied on their memories while writing. After researching the history and ethics of creative nonfiction and New Journalism, I adopted the view of Eric Schlosser that writers should have contract with their readers to deliver a narrative based on true events, regardless of the reporting method (Conover 28).

Literary scholars have criticized travel writing for parroting imperial outlooks and portraying foreign societies as “others” and rudimentary (Holland & Huggan 4). In her analysis of contemporary study abroad guide books, Doerr (259) finds that they paradoxically portray host societies as “less civilized”, yet still celebrate cultural differences and exchange.

Doerr, Holland and Huggan would contend that I am guilty of perpetuating a colonial world view in my criticisms of Indian culture and the school at which I
studied. Fussell (210) would label me a roving plutocrat. And to a degree, Doerr, Fussell and other critics of travel writing and the culture of travel are correct. I do lament the presence of hierarchy in Indian society and do describe elements of Indian culture that critics might interpret as an attempt to flaunt refined Western values. I include these elements not to ridicule Indian culture or promote my own beliefs, but rather to contextualize and clarify my own understanding of what is, after six months of intense immersion, a culture I still do not fully understand.

In their analysis of travel literature Doerr and Fussell fail to analyze the behavior of a crucial group: the citizens of the culture that the writers are writing about. Scholars fail to acknowledge that natives of foreign countries also frequently make attempts to “other” travelers. The “primitive” and “uncivilized” cultures vigorously defended by Fussell, Doerr, Holland and Huggan view elements of “civilized” Western culture as ludicrous and uncivilized. I encountered, and mention in my memoir, several occasions where this example of “othering” happens.

I was frequently “othered” by classmates, teachers, staff members at my college and by other Indians in both positive and negative instances. The security guard at my dormitory complex would only ask the foreigners to buy him soda and a bag of chips when we walked in. Taxi drivers would routinely attempt to charge me double or triple the actual fare. My classmates would forget to tell me about group project meetings or speak in Hindi during large group gatherings. When travelers and cultural outsiders are frequently being labeled outsiders, whether intentionally or not,
it is preposterous not to expect that an element of alienation and superiority will appear in their writing.

One of Doerr’s chief complaints about study abroad guidebooks is that they accentuate the host country’s otherness and fail to recognize that host countries are integrated into global networks (Doerr 264). As I stated above, I intentionally discuss India’s differences as a way to gain a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the culture. However, I go to great lengths through inclusion of historical background and contemporary anecdotes to explain how India is closely intertwined to global affairs and the impact of Indian citizens in business, medicine and culture.

As a result of host countries’ supposedly being portrayed as cut off from the greater world, Doerr (264) argues that countries appear as “societ[es] trapped in the past” and “behind the times.” Doerr is right to level this charge at Western based authors. But in many non traditional study abroad destinations that Doerr focuses on, many citizens do feel as if their home country and culture is behind the times. Travel writers and journalists should not be ridiculed for sharing a sentiment that is bubbling up in many countries, including India.

I formulated my ethical standards based on what I believed would provide readers and the characters portrayed with the most accurate portrayal of India. Although some may view work as just another piece of colonialist travel writing, I strove to craft a piece that discussed the many layers and conflicts in Indian society.

Historically, one of the primary reasons for travel was educational. The European Grand Tour, popular from the Enlightenment era to the mid-Romantic
period and included stops to the learning centers of Paris and Bologna, was seen as the perfect way to culminate the first phase of a student’s educational career. My experience in India, and the whole institution of study abroad, is the twenty first century’s answer to the Grand Tour.

But unlike the Grand Tour the bulk of my learning abroad did not take place in formal institutions or under the tutelage of a teacher. I learned the most about India through conversations with strangers I met on trains, chatty rickshaw drivers and by observing my friends interact with their family in their homes.

Historian Eric Leed (15) writes that “travel is a primary source of the ‘new’ in history.” Traveling is the way people learn about new foods, traditions, see new sights and experience a new identity— the stranger (Leed 15). Ancient civilizations saw travel as a prime opportunity for travelers to test how they handled pain and how they performed in an unfamiliar environment without the aid of their traditional support systems (Leed 6). The difficulties of travel Leed (8) says makes the traveler “impoverished and reduced to its essentials, allowing one to see what those essentials are.”

My experience at my host university was the epitome of travel as the primary source of new. I was exposed to different pedagogical styles, educational philosophies and approach toward higher education. At first many of the new things I experienced at this school seemed ludicrous. The idea of busboys bringing tea to professors during lectures and an inconsistent scheduling system were ridiculous when I first encountered the practice. But as I spent more time immersed in the school and learned
more about Indian culture, their novelty and foreignness wore off. I did what every new arrival to a foreign place ultimately does when they truly “arrive” in a new place. I identified these aspects as uniquely Indian and incorporated them into my broader perception of life in India.

For the first time in my life, I was undoubtedly the stranger in every way possible. In certain instances I felt I had what Leed (89) dubs “the power of the stranger.” In ancient Hawaii, Russia, Greece and African kingdoms strangers were often invited to form ruling clans (Leed 89). My status as an outsider made my friends believe that I might have a chance at initiating certain changes in the school. They believed that the administration might listen to a foreigner’s demands.

As an exchange student, I also fulfilled the classic traveler’s role as an authority on the outside world. I was the authority who could answer questions about the United States and attitudes outside of the subcontinent. For many of my classmates, I was the first Jewish person they had ever met and one of the first foreigners they spent a substantial time around. I often challenged their beliefs and asked them questions that made them explain their ideas.

There were moments during my experience where I felt “impoverished and reduced to…. essentials” (Leed 8). The sights, sounds, and intensity of India have the ability to make even the most stoic crumble, quiver and fearful. But these experiences ultimately made me more grateful for the privileged life I have. Simple things, like the privacy of my own room or quickly getting a new student identity card, I no longer
take for granted after having little privacy at times in India and witnessing India’s legendary inefficient bureaucracies.

Like the students of the European Grand Tour, I spent months of my life immersed in a center of great learning, in my case Mumbai, South Asia’s financial and entertainment hub. My immersion forced me to confront a host of issues I had never dealt with before. How do you show respect and courtesy when others are constantly disrespecting you because of your skin color and nationality? How does one acclimate to a learning style radically different than their own? How much adaptation of local culture becomes an attempt at being, as one friend put, “overly Indian?” These questions were things I thought about on a daily basis and also were reflected in the writing process. They raised the same problems as matters of conflict of interest, privacy and going native. My experience in India was the first opportunity to deal with problems that will surely occur at other stages in my life. My experiences proved and reemphasized to me Leed’s (15) belief that “travel is a primary source of new.”

Conclusion

I arrived in India with no intention of ever formally writing about my personal experiences. I reported about the country’s Jewish community for a magazine I had previously written in for in the United States, but never anticipated formally publishing my personal impressions about the country.

But the continued insistence of my family that I write about my experience in India prompted my professional project. Through talking with my family, friends and professors I learned that many people were ignorant about daily life in India and
curious to learn more about the culture and the direction of one of the world’s most the rapidly changing nations. Their previous knowledge of India was largely restricted to poverty, outsourcing and snake charmers. My interest in further reflecting upon my experiences resulted in a five chapter travel log/memoir about my experiences studying abroad at a business college in Bombay. Through tales about power hungry dormitory directors and disgruntled MBA students eager to ditch boardroom meetings for comedy club gigs I hope to alter, however slightly, the perception Western audiences have of India.

Deciding to write about my experience after I left the country created an array of issues. How would I categorize my work? Was it a piece of journalism, travel writing or a memoir? What would my ethical standards be? To answer these questions, I turned to the scholarship of historians, literary experts and media ethicists to answer these questions in an analytical and scholarly manner.

I reevaluated my experience after reflecting and critiquing my work. I did not imagine the difficulty I had portraying my friends in an unflattering manner. It was at first unsettling when I realized that the ethnocentrism about in critical reviews of well known travel writers had seeped its way into my professional project as well.

I was able to write *Bombay Central* because of the extensive learning that took place between my Indian friends and me. Each of my friends taught me something new about Indian culture. Bhushan was my expert on Bombay’s Sindhi population and the city’s comedy scene and Dinesh gave me a glimpse into life as an Indian expat in the Middle East. To my Indian friends, I was the expert on everything America. I
answered questions on everything to the 2012 presidential election, American race relations to American Judaism. Our friendships made it impossible for us to view each other’s respective nation and culture the same way as we previously had.

After reading my professional project I hope readers come away with a new perspective on India and its culture. I hope that readers realize that India, its culture and its citizens, like every other country and culture throughout the world, is at times enchanting and at others utterly frustrating. I hope readers understand that the India they meet in the pages of *Bombay Central* will be involved in the change in the country, but in reality are outlier of the country’s population. Many of the characters in my professional project, which come from upper middle class and wealthy backgrounds, have more in common with me and the other Western readers who will read about them than a majority of India’s population. My professional project ideally will not be the end of readers’ interest in learning more about India. Rather, it will serve as an introduction to one of the world’s most complex and inspiring nations.
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**Professional Project**

**Introduction**

The city of Bombay has been a central part of my experience in India. It was the city I landed in when I first traveled to the country in December 2011, the first city Indian city I adored and the place I spent three months studying as an exchange student from July 2012-October 2012.

I ended up studying in Bombay, India’s financial capital, because of a trip I took to India in December 2011. I spent two weeks traveling on a train around the country with 300 Indian youths. For two weeks I shared a train compartment the size of a custodian’s closet with five other Indians college students and young professionals. Every minute I was learning something new about the country’s history, language and culture. The people I met on the train challenged my preconceptions about India and Asia and also forced me to reevaluate my own views about the United States.

Eager to see the country’s tourist spots and reconnect with the friends I met on the train journey, I decided to go back to India six months after my initial journey, this time to study at the Ambedelkar Institute of Management Science, a graduate business college in Bombay, through an American study abroad program.

Since I had previously been to India, I expected that I would automatically fall back into the rhythms of life in India. But I quickly discovered this trip would be different. I would not constantly have my Indian friends by my side to negotiate cab fares or converse in Hindi or another Indian language for me. I would have to navigate India alone.
I never found a dull moment as I piloted my way through Ambedelakar. I realized how little dull moments I had when kept talking about my experience with my brother and Mom until they finally said, “You need to write your thesis about this experience.”

The following pages are an account of my experiences at Ambedelakar. I have changed every character’s name, out of respect to my friends, teachers and Ambedelakar administrators who were so gracious with their time and went to great pains to ensure I was always comfortable at school. I should also note that Ambedelakar is also a pseudonym for the actual name of the school I studied at. Much of the dialogue that appears was written from memory. Quotes may not appear exactly as characters said them, but the meaning and intent of their quotes was never altered and changed.

My most memorable experiences in India have come on trains. It was on Indian Railways where I discovered my passion and interest in the country and where I met aspiring civil servants and chemical magnates. The country’s train system is a point of pride its citizens take immense pride in and one of the country’s many unique elements.

Given my love of India’s trains I decided to name this work after Bombay Central, one of the city’s main train stations. Bombay Central is a hub on both Bombay’s metropolitan train line and the country’s interstate train system. It is where many journeys into the Indian interior begin. Like the actual Bombay Central station, I hope reading this memoir is the beginning of a journey for readers. A journey that
encourages them to learn more about India and South Asia and realize how influential India, Indians and Indian culture have been in the history of South and Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and North America. Ultimately, I hope that this peek into the life of aspiring MBA students over the next five chapters, shows readers that in addition to the country’s poverty and corruption, there exists a generation of passionate, hungry and creative individuals who will be instrumental in India’s continuing renaissance.
Chapter 1: All Roads to Lead to an MBA

It was the biggest test of Bhushan’s business school career. Like all Ambedelakar students he spent the past week diligently preparing. He stayed up late scouring the Internet for study tips. He brushed up material he knew he would ace and drilled himself in areas he needed to improve. Like any good student, he had butterflies in his stomach.

“Good evening, good evening and welcome to the Friday Bash” Bhushan’s voice boomed through the microphone. He then launched into a short monologue before introducing the night’s first performer.

A chatterbox who always made students laugh at his snarky comments, Bhushan was a natural choice to MC the Friday Bash, a monthly talent show. His introduction had gone smoothly but he was still nervous. He still had to wait at least 30 minutes before he could take his test—delivering his standup comedy routine.

Everyone knew Bhushan wanted to be a standup comic. It was all he talked about. Some teachers even knew about Bhushan’s aspirations. Bhushan worked at a major international bank’s Bombay office for two years as an investment analyst. He started performing standup at the beginning of his second year with the company at small open-mic nights in hip enclaves in Bombay’s trendy Western suburbs.

For his debut in front of his peers Bhushan would rely on his bread and butter joke about Dadar Station. Dadar Station is one of Bombay’s busiest train terminals. It is a hub for two of the city’s three local train lines and is the departure point for many
long distance trains. About 2.5 million people pass through the station during peak hours.¹

“In Buddhism they say there are two stages in life. Before you achieve nirvana and after you have achieved nirvana. In Bombay there are two stages in life. Before you have been to Dadar Station and after you have been to Dadar,” he said to a chuckling audience.

The crowd enjoyed Bhushan’s signature joke. Many of the students passed through Dadar on their way to and from school.

What started as a hobby quickly became Bhushan’s life’s work. After school he eschewed homework for watching the latest episodes of Conan O’Brien and devoutly followed Louis C.K. He began to closely analyze everyday mundane tasks, like his 20-minute train ride he took to and from school, for material for his comedy act.

By the time Bhushan started business school, he had begun to build a reputation in Bombay’s stand up community. By the end of the second trimester, he had earned a gig at the Comedy Store, the city’s premier stand-up club. For an aspiring stand up, business school seemed like an odd career choice.

* * *

Arun tried graduate school once before. He enrolled in a Masters program in Computer Science at a prestigious American university in the Midwest shortly after he graduated with a Bachelors degree in Computer Science. Arun never liked coding, but the decision to attend graduate school was not his. It was his father’s. His father
insisted that Arun earn a graduate degree. Though he had no interest in studying Computer Science at a higher level, Arun arrived in the United States to start his graduate program in fall 2008.

In the United States, it became even more apparent to Arun that he was not passionate about coding. He found his class assignments (one example: writing computer programs for robots) interesting, but not fulfilling.

The most gratifying moments of his American graduate school career were in the library. Instead of going to class, Arun spent most of his time hunkered down in the stacks, leafing through random books.

“I read everything. I was particularly interested in philosophy and psychology.”

But after a year in the program, Arun knew it was time to leave. He didn’t care that he was walking away from one of the finest Computer Science departments in the world. He didn’t care that he was trading in a comfortable rental house he shared with other Indian graduate students and that he would eventually wind up in a cramped triple dormitory room intended for two people. America and graduate school were nice, but India was home.

After his stint in America, Arun eventually wound up in Pune, a city of about three million people three hours from Bombay, working for a financial services firm. Pune and his new job were a perfect fit for Arun. He went to college there and had always enjoyed crunching numbers. He enjoyed talking with clients and walking them through their financial questions and issues. After work, Arun tutored a high school
student in math and science. Teaching and explaining things were Arun’s real passions.

Shortly before he left Pune Arun started filling out the paperwork to create a website that offered financial advice. He named his company after the American financial giant Black Rock, because he admired their success and strategy.

At 26, Arun seemed destined for success. He held a good job, had passions outside of work, a solid network of friends and was in the process of launching his own company. But he was missing one thing— an MBA.

* * *

“Dude you have to come out to Kandivali one weekend. We’ll smoke and watch Black Dynamite.” Dinesh started every school week by insisting I go to his family’s apartment the following weekend.

Most Saturday nights Dinesh would head out to his family’s apartment in the suburbs north of Bombay, to drink beer, watch TV and smoke cigarettes with his best friend Ratan. Dinesh’s parents lived in the Middle East where his father was a financial manager at an oil company and his sister was studying for her MBA in another city in India, leaving Dinesh free reign over the family apartment. The apartment was where Dinesh enjoyed some of his fondest memories in Bombay. He lived there alone while he studied for the business school entrance exam and it soon became he and Ratan’s favorite hangout spot. Dinesh originally enrolled in a business school outside Pune, but left after a week once he found out he was accepted at
Ambedelakar. One perk of Ambedelakar was that he could retreat to the apartment on the weekends.

Dinesh ended up at Ambedelakar because he wanted to open his own business— or at least that’s what he thought when he began business school. After graduating with a degree in mechanical engineering, he worked at an outsourcing job for a major international investment banking company in a major tech hub in southern India. He did research and prepared Power Point presentations for investment bankers in England. The work was boring, but life wasn’t bad. He enjoyed living on his own for the first time and dated a girl in his office.

But after two years Dinesh got tired of the job. His relationship with his girlfriend fizzled. Ready for a change, he quit his job and headed to Bombay. He knew he wanted to start his own business but wasn’t sure where to start. After a few months of hanging out in Bombay, he took the business school entrance exam and was accepted to several schools. He had no idea what he wanted to do with his life and wasn’t sure if he even really wanted to be an entrepreneur. But he had to do something other than stay in his family’s apartment.

* * *

Manoj was a rebel. He decided early on in high school that he would not take the entrance exam required for admission to the Indian Institutes of Technology, the country’s most elite and prestigious technological institutes. He thought that most IITians ended up “disgruntled engineers” and did not aspire to become a cranky, stressed out student.
More importantly Manoj had a faint interest in engineering (most Indian undergraduates wind up studying some sort of engineering discipline). His academic interests were environmental economics and geography. He yearned for an education that emphasized argumentation and developing strong opinions, things he came to realize were not emphasized in India’s higher educational system.

“When I met people in India who came back from the United States they spoke about how the US valued choice. And how in the United States, people valued choice. You had to figure out why you were doing a certain major. There was no thought about why you were studying what you were studying India. The end result was to get a good job,” he explained months later when we were both back in the United States.

“In a place like the USA people appreciated everything, and recognized that talents might lie in other things besides academics like extracurricular activities. It just seemed that much more open. The opportunity to have more of choice attracted me to a liberal arts degree.”

Inspired by his romantic vision of American higher education and with the blessing of his parents, he set his sights on one of America’s elite universities on the West Coast and a handful of other American universities. After a thin envelope arrived from his top choice instead of an oversized manila envelope, he wound up at a major state university outside Washington, D.C. It was his backup option.

His first semester was a struggle. He was shy and relied on bad study habits he used in India. But American life and the rhythms of American college life started to make sense after he spent winter break with cousins in Chicago. His uncle untaught
him his bad study habits from India. He learned the importance of spreading studying out over a period of days and began reading magazines like *The Atlantic*.

By the time I met Manoj during Winter Break of his sophomore year on a train trip in India, everything was starting to click for him. The next semester he interned at the Israeli Embassy. He used his extra pocket money to attend Capitol Hill policy luncheons, conferences or to meet up with Indian friends at different American campuses.

When we reunited in India the following summer, Manoj came with even more impressive achievements. He was graduating a year early, was in the process of creating a nonprofit that matched American students with internships in India and was selected as a columnist for his school’s student newspaper. He hoped to land an internship during the semester with a major bank to boost his chances of landing with a high powered management consulting firm.

But Manoj had another idea for what to do after graduation if consulting didn’t work out.

“I’m going to take the GMAT. I want to go to business school. I don’t know why I just feel its something I should do.”

* * *

The Indian craze for the MBA began in the 1980s. To avoid the intense competition of undergraduate engineering courses, parents advised their children to study business as undergraduates and then get their MBAs. The logic was that the students with both undergraduate and graduate business degrees would be attractive
hires to companies in dire need of competent managers. The demand for skilled managers skyrocketed when multinationals poured into the country after economic reforms in the early 1990s, giving the degree even more value.¹

Management education was first introduced in India in 1961 when the government established the Indian Institute of Management-Calcutta. Three more IIM’s were established in Ahmedabad (1961), Bangalore (1973) and Lucknow (1984). The IIMs were established to meet a growing need for quality corporate managers.² The country had a steady supply of technical talent but did not have any institutions to provide these engineers with skills to become successful corporate managers. The government, with help from Harvard Business School, the Ford Foundation, MIT’s Sloan School of Management, and a handful of Indian industrialists partnered to launch IIM Calcutta and IIM Ahmedabad.

Today there are a total of 13 IIM’s and about 3,900 registered business schools.³ The IIMs, the Indian School of Business in Hyderabad (the brainchild of former McKinsey & Co. CEO Rajat Gupta, who is originally from India), and a handful of other institutes are internationally respected and have partnerships with prestigious business schools like the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business and the London School of Economics.

Ambedelakar Institute of Management Science, the school where I was classmates with Bhsuhan, Arun and Dinesh was not considered an elite business school. It was just on the cusp of being in the same category as the IIMs and ISB, and
was considered one of the country’s better MBA buys. It had a 10 year old, eight-
storey building with two libraries, a computer lab, a rock wall, game room, small
exercise room (a small room equipped with a bench press, a stack of free weights and
a run down treadmill). It was 30 minutes from Bombay’s business district. The faculty
had years of experience working for top Indian companies in sales, marketing,
accounting, finance and IT. Many faculty members were also successful
entrepreneurs. During recruiting season, representatives from Citi Bank and Turner
Networks came looking for students to serve in their sales divisions and investment
banking practices. If they got good grades and interviewed well, Arun, Bhushan and
Dinesh would have no problems getting jobs when they graduated.

Thousands of business schools sprouted across the country over the past
decade, as private entrepreneurs and universities looking for cash cows opened new
MBA programs while the economy exploded. In 1990, there were about 12,000
students spread across 130 business schools. By 2004, the number of business schools
climbed to 1,200 and enrollment surged to 75,000. In 2011, the number of business
schools grew to more than 3,900. At the peak of the Indian business school boom,
there were more than 360,000 slots for MBA students across the country.

The Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), the organization that
administers the GMAT, reported in its Jobs Trend Outlook Report for India 2012, that
68 percent of Indian business school graduates had undergraduates degree in
engineering and that 82 percent of business school students were male. Most graduates
aim to enter consulting, tech or finance after earning their degrees.
Many of the business schools that popped up during the boom years were sketchy operations. Poor faculty, lackluster facilities and second tier students led to many MBA graduates struggling to find jobs. When graduates did find jobs, they were often at lower salaries than they anticipated. Enrollment mushroomed because administrators believed India’s economy would continue to grow nine to ten percent a year. The global economic collapse muddied their predictions and thwarted the job prospects for the ballooning number of freshly minted MBAs.\textsuperscript{6} (The GMAC paints a slightly rosier picture for Indian MBA graduates in its report. They reported that Indian MBA graduates saw their salaries spike by 213 percent increase and that 90 percent of business school graduates had job offers when surveyed by the GMAC.)

The number of takers of the CAT, the admission test used by most Indian business schools, dropped from 275,000 in 2008 to 205,000 in 2010. The decline in prospective students has led 65 business schools mostly located in poor, rural areas to close down. Additionally, enrollment figures are down 65 percent across India.\textsuperscript{7}

The gloomy outlook for MBA graduates did not deter Arun, Bhushan and Dinesh from enrolling at Ambedelakar or Manoj from thinking about business school in India. Or more accurately, the clumsy job market for MBAs in India did not bother their parents. Ultimately their parents had the final say on their decisions to attend Ambedelakar.

Ambedelakar’s high ranking and the presence of top companies at career fairs meant nothing to Bhushan. It was not his decision to go to business school. Bhushan hated his banking job. His family had a successful textile manufacturing company, but
he had no interest in joining the company after finishing his MBA. He briefly worked for the company after he finished his undergraduate degree, but quickly determined it wasn’t the right fit.

“For someone like me with a formal education, it’s too crazy,” Bhushan explained when I asked why he did not want to work in the family business.

Bhushan had no desire to reenter the corporate world. He wanted to dedicate himself full time to comedy. But his brothers insisted he apply to business school. Since Bhusan’s father died, his brothers became the heads of his family. His mother struggled with mental illness when he was younger and he never felt close to her. Though he did not have a close relationship with his brothers, he didn’t have much choice but to listen to them since they were now running his family. They thought business school would be the perfect opportunity for him to sharpen his skills and find new inspiration.

Bhushan viewed his business school career a bit differently than his family.

“I don’t care about school,” Bhushan would often say, when I asked him about an assignment or whether he was studying for a test. “I’m viewing this as an opportunity to really focus on my comedy career. I’m hoping by the time this is over I will be established as a comedian.”

The flexibility and low responsibility of student life left Bhushan with more time to focus on writing new sets and perfecting his performance techniques. Plus, events like the Friday Bash and the school’s annual first year student party, gave Bhushan prime opportunities to perform in front of new audiences.
After Arun left graduate school in the United States, his father still insisted that he get a graduate degree in something. Arun disagreed with his parents about a lot. Shortly after business school began, they began discussing with him the prospect of marriage. Arun was not interested in getting married and did not want to have an arranged marriage after watching his parents’ rocky marriage throughout his life. He also initially disagreed about business school. But out of obligation and respect to his parents, he agreed to leave his life in Pune and go back to school.

Arun did not find Ambedelakar’s classes particularly useful. He knew most of the first trimester material from his previous job. But the experience of being in a new school, a new city and interacting with new people was life changing for Arun.

For most of his life, Arun described himself as quiet and shy. He tended to stay to himself and was reluctant to branch out socially. It was hard for me to picture Arun as quiet and shy. He was elected to the Student Government to head the Job Placement committee. Students flocked to him for accounting advice before exams and jokingly called him “Arun Sir” a title usually reserved for teachers. Arun was adamant that Ambedelakar helped him break out of his social shell.

“Before I used to never lead things. I was much quieter. I was uncomfortable talking to girls.”

When he arrived at Ambedelakar, Arun intended to pursue marketing, to learn how to successfully promote his business. But he quickly realized his interest was
operations. Before he could even take a course in operations, Arun found an operations internship at a factory near our school.

Though he involuntarily ended up at Ambedelakar, business school was turning out to be better than Arun thought.

* * *

All Dinesh knew when he started Ambedelakar was that he wanted to open a business. He sometimes talked about opening a hotel in his family’s native state in Southern India that had a restaurant with food so spicy, it would send guests running to the bathroom. By the end of the first trimester, his entrepreneurial focus shifted to cold storage. Dinesh knew that much of India’s fresh produce spoiled during transit due to poor supply chains and was eager to cash in on a solution.

Dinesh alternated between loving, loathing and having no interest in Ambedelakar. He loved his entrepreneurship class and the professor who taught it. He hated having to go to school everyday. He was infamous for showing up late and sleeping in instead of going to class. While the other students in my dorm, frantically prepared resumes to submit to the résumé databank for summer internships, Dinesh went to bed. Dinesh and I spoke several times about whether he should drop out of Ambedelakar. Sometimes, he sounded serious about the idea. But knowing that his father was laboring away in the Middle East paying for his education kept him in school.
Manoj wanted to mingle in elite circles. It’s what drove him to apply to the same elite university on the West Coast twice (he applied and got rejected as a transfer student during his freshmen year of college), read The Atlantic and New Yorker, and hunt for jobs at ritzy consulting firms. He even wrote a column defending elitism for his campus newspaper. Manoj’s quest for elitism even applied to his business school search. He hoped to land at a top five or top ten business school in the United States after working in the country for a few years. If he ended up going to business school in India it would only be at IIM-Ahmedabad and IIM-Bangalore, India’s most prestigious business schools.

Manoj was interested in an MBA for three primary reasons. The first reason was that an MBA would provide him with technical knowledge and general knowledge needed to work for an investment bank, a field he was interested in pursuing down the road.

The second reason arose from his sense of insecurity with his degree in environmental economics. A niche field around the globe and even in developed markets like the United States, Manoj thought his bachelor’s degree alone would be meaningless if he tried to get employment in India without it. He felt an MBA would provide an extra degree of credibility in the long term.

“If I went back to India and told someone I had a degree in environmental economics they would have no idea what is,” he explained to me over the phone a few months after our summer meeting.
His final reason came back to his interest in earning a place in the country’s most elite and well connected circles.

“You will get the same knowledge whether you are at Harvard, Maryland or Auburn University. It’s superficial to an extent,” he explained. “The top schools attract the top people. You want to be with the top people. The brand is important. Your classmates at a top five school versus a top twenty five would be very different.”

Elite fever was not restricted to Manoj. It was alive and well all over the country. It was visible everywhere in Indian society. Everywhere you looked, from the sides of buses in Bombay, to billboards in small rural towns in the heart of India’s grain belt, were advertisements for IIT exam prep classes and graduate courses in computer science and business. Everyone was offering, or plotting a pathway toward elite status.

In an effort to stimulate small business activity, the Indian government and many universities began aggressively promoting entrepreneurship as an activity of the elite. In their quest to join this esteemed class, many Indian students started their own companies, making themselves CEOs, CFOS and COOs. Adding to the MBA frenzy was the fact that many top executives of Indian corporations and the heads of the Indian branches of multinationals like Coca-Cola and PepsiCo have MBAs from elite schools like IIM-Ahmedabad or universities in the United States.

To Manoj an MBA was a key to enter the world of the elite that he wanted to enter. To Arun’s father and Bhushan’s brothers, the MBA was a way to make their family members earn a bit more respect, a salary increase and if they ever needed it,
would ensure them entrance and respect in elite circles. For Dinesh, getting an MBA was a way to buy time while he figured out what he actually wanted in life.

But when they all sat down and thought about their actual reasons for getting an MBA, Bhushan, Arun, Dinesh and Manoj all realized something. The MBA would mean nothing in their pursuit of their dreams of becoming stand up comics, politicians or finding a steady girl friend. What would ultimately matter is how much they really wanted their respective goals.
Chapter 2: Dorm Daze

“Gabriel, can I borrow your jacket?”

There was a splash of confidence in Ranbir’s voice. He usually ambled into my room, staring at the ground mumbling a question about his homework or complaining about he missed Delhi. But there was a mischievous flare to his smile this night. He seemed to be perpetually smiling. He looked directly at my roommate John and I when he spoke. He quickly paced around our room, rifling through my closet in search of a sport coat. I had never seen someone so excited minutes before they were going to be hazed.

Ranbir needed the blazer for “ragging.” Ragging was a hazing ceremony that all the juniors, first year students, in the Ambedelakar hostel were expected to participate in. The second year students, the seniors, organized the activities. It happened in some form at most campuses across India. Many of my friends had gone through a ragging ceremony as undergraduates. At Ambedelakar ragging was viewed as a way to bring the first and second year students closer together, a quasi icebreaker activity.

I had a murky understanding of the specifics of the ceremony. I only knew that the ragging ceremony had destroyed my plan to visit a park in the outer suburbs with my floor mates the following day and that the required dress code was a blazer and some form of shorts. People paraded into my room wearing everything from soccer shorts to boxers. I was also unsure whether me, my American roommate John and Anders, the exchange student from Denmark, were expected to participate.
The headquarters/green room/red carpet area for pre-ragging festivities was across the hall from my room in Sanjay’s room. Juniors from various floors floated in to smoke cigarettes, grab a quick beer, talk about what to expect and most importantly, to take pictures. Lots of pictures.

Sanjay pretended like he was in a GQ photo shoot. He smirked at the camera as if he were Frank Sinatra, adjusting his blazer, searching for a perfect fit. Moments later, Sanjay was joined by Vivek, Ranbir and Raj. Sanjay and Raj knelt on the floor facing each other, flexing their muscles to strike a pose that looked like a cross of a Tim Tebow touchdown celebration and a dramatic traditional Indian dance pose. Ranbir stood behind Sanjay, pointing his finger at the camera, while Vivek stood behind everyone in the center of the frame, his hands dangling in front of his thighs and turquoise boxers.

The action gradually shifted from Sanjay’s room to the ragging room after about an hour. The ragging room was the perfect microcosm of India. Hot, overcrowded, hierarchical and full of excitement, fear, rage and love. The seniors sat on beds and chairs near the entrance to the room, smoking cigarettes and calmly sipping bottles of Kingfisher Strong beer. The juniors were crowded at the back of the room. Their heads down, hands locked together in front of their groins.

Two seniors sitting in the center of the bed ran the ceremony. From their perch, they looked out onto the sweaty cluster of juniors. One was thin, had a neatly trimmed mustache and wore trendy glasses. The other looked like a mobster on a day off. His paunchy frame and chubby bearded face belonged more in the finely tailored suits
than in the t-shirt and athletic shorts he wore that night. I had never seen either of them previously.

Raj was the first of my friends to step into the ragging gauntlet. The leader with the mustache asked him in Hindi to say the name of the school he attended. Raj replied that he attended Ambedelakar. The leader asked him to say it louder and say Ambedelakar’s entire name.

Raj yelled back in Hindi “I attend the Uddhav Rajputana Trust’s Ambedelakar Institute of Management Science!”

Raj’s response wasn’t loud enough for the leaders. So they made him yell it again. And again. He finally stopped when his voice reached what the man seniors deemed an appropriate decibel level.

It was then Ranbir’s turn.

“What’s your name?” the leaders asked Ranbir.

“My name is Ranbir Ahuja.”

“What is it?”

“Ranbir Ahuja!” he said in a noticeably louder tone.

“Where did you go to college?”

“In Bangalore! I studied electronics engineering!”

The ragging went on until the early morning. By the time the seniors called Sanjay’s spindly legs “chicken legs” I had already been asleep for a few hours.

Everyone thought ragging was done after that night. A few nights later, the seniors corralled the juniors again for another ragging session. Sanjay complained how
awful the seniors treated the juniors during ragging. He liked moaning about ragging but he knew that it would be one of strongest memories from his MBA experience. He ultimately tolerated the ceremony because he knew that after the ceremony his seniors would treat him with as their equal. He knew that ragging is what made the bond between the residents of Ambedelakar Hostel Building No.75 unique.

* * *

Aside from ragging, hostel life in Ambedelakar was very similar to American dorm life. Someone was always wandering through the halls, watching a movie on their laptop or beginning an assignment at 2 a.m. that was due the following morning. When dinnertime came around, everyone moved to one room, to eat, socialize and watch an episode of Friends or Hindi TV. Floor mates quickly became best friends. Hostelites would socialize together at school and go to movies, restaurants and even vacation together. The night before accounting exams people from all floors of the hostel gathered around Arun to hear his explanations of income statements and balance sheets. At least once a week, a group of guys were huddled in a room working on a Power Point until three in the morning.

To some students, the hostel memories would be the defining memories of their MBA experience. A framed thank you note to the hostel director from Ambedelakar students that lived in the hostel in the early 2000s hung on a wall next to the entrance of the building.

Anders, John and I did not have much trouble fitting in to hostel culture. We each found our own niche and group of friends. Anders became an RA-like figure. An
avid chef, he taught people how to cook and went shopping for ingredients with his friends who lived on the ground floor. He came up with a list of maintenance problems and had the hostel management team fix them. Anders enjoyed talking about Denmark and challenged hostelites about their religious and political beliefs.

John was the most popular foreigner in the building. Most nights John could be found in Sanjay’s room, smoking cigarettes on the porch and explaining the merits of Ron Paul, Milton Friedman and free markets. When Sanjay brought out his guitar, John would freestyle, rapping about everything from India to his Midwestern pride. John’s rap skills led to a rap performance on Ambedelakar’s student radio show. People would frequently enter our room asking “Where is John?, “Is John Here?”.

I enjoyed spending time with the other guys on our floor but felt most comfortable in Building No.73 where Dinesh lived. I enjoyed hanging out with Dinesh, his roommate Michael and Dinesh’s friend Mangesh. They were always up to go for a walk, catch a movie or talk.

There were two social norms we all had trouble adjusting to — our hostel mates’ view of privacy and ownership. People would regularly come into our rooms without knocking. Sometimes it would be to simply say hello. Other times they would walk in, put a beer in our refrigerator and then ask for permission to store the beer in our room as they were leaving the room. Doors were for the most part kept shut, but there was the implicit understanding that it was ok if someone entered unannounced.

To prevent these spontaneous entrances, John immediately locked our door when he entered our room. Anders always kept his door shut.
Ranbir and his roommate Krishna’s room was the epitome of how privacy was understood in the hostel. It was not unusual to walk into their room and see Arun sitting at Krishna’s desk using Krishna’s computer. Next to Arun would be Pradip, who lived a floor below, sleeping in Krishna’s bed. At the same time, Ranbir would be using a Spanish Dictionary app on another friend’s cell phone to work on his Spanish homework.

Similar situations were the norm across the hall in Vivek and Divya’s room. Vivek would be asleep, his blanket covering his face, while friends from different floors sat on the floor, eating their dinner or working on a class project. Divya would be on his computer, scrolling through Facebook updates oblivious to the activity happening in his room.

Krishna and Ranbir’s lax attitude about privacy in their room stemmed from the Indian attitude towards space and property. In India it is rare for one person to stake sole proprietorship of an item.

The joint family has traditionally been the dominant family lifestyle in India. Children were raised with their cousins, and tended to by parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents. Though many people in the hostel had not been raised in joint family environments, the ethos of communal ownership and inclusion was still a major part of their worldview.

The communal attitude dictated that the other hostelites closely watch over John, Anders, and me. They happily spoke for us in Hindi when we required a Hindi
speaker, explained class assignments and made sure we were happy, well fed and rested.

But they never managed to understand the dynamic between John and me. They assumed we had the same communal ethos guided our relationship. When John was out late, several people would ask me about John’s whereabouts. When I was away they would pepper John with the same questions. Though John and I were in communally minded India, we were still individually minded Americans. We both cared for each other’s welfare but expressed it in a different way than the other hostelites.

* * *

Ninety five percent of hostel residents had work experience and many lived by themselves before returning to school. But from the way the hostel was set up, at least from a Western perspective, it was hard to tell.

A 10-foot brick wall shielded the Ambedelakar dorms from the streets of our neighborhood in Bombay’s Sion Koliwada neighborhood. Whenever we left the hostel we had to write our initials in a beefy ledger. If we didn’t, we ran the risk of upsetting the security guards who patrolled the entrance 24 hours a day.

“Wait, wait,” one security would say as I would walked out onto the street. He would hold up the ledger and signal for me to come back and write the time when I had signed out.

The security precautions became even stricter at night. Officially, all hostel residents were to return to the hostel by 11:30 p.m. every night. The gates to the main
entrances and the entrances to the individual buildings were padlocked shut. The security guards had the right to not let students who returned after the curfew time back into the hostel. If students were planning on staying out beyond 11:30, they were technically supposed to write a letter to the director of the hostel, requesting permission.

The security regulations were a major shock for me, John and Anders. Anders was 26 and a veteran of the Danish military. John had never lived in a dorm. The transition from complete freedom to being closely monitored was an adjustment.

John commented how our building felt like a “prison” one night when he went downstairs to make a midnight run for Sprite only to find that the padlock had been placed on the entrance to the building. Anders sparred with Himani, the main adviser to international students and the other international student advisor Indira about what he viewed as ridiculous regulations.

The most difficult part of our transition into the hostel was the rector, R.D. He started his term as rector when I moved into the hostel. R.D. followed a rector who was beloved by hostelites for her lax policies and maternal nature but was seen as too soft by the Ambedelakar administration. The previous year at the hostel, residents blasted their music at all hours of the day without fear of punishment, partied every night, and openly drank and smoked in their rooms. But the previous rector’s reign of bliss was doomed when a resident punched a security guard.

R.D. represented a complete cultural shift. Fit, good looking and youthful, R.D. could have easily blended in a corporate boardroom or movie set. He saw it as
his mission to stringently enforce Ambedelakar’s hostel policies. The security guards feared R.D. Some refused to make any major decisions without consulting him, even if it meant calling him in the middle of the night.

Occasionally, R.D. would walk through the hostel to get a pulse of his residents. Whenever word got out that R.D. was making a round everyone would frantically clean their rooms. Cigarettes were immediately blown out. Beer bottles were thrown into plastic bags and taken to a nearby dumpster.

On the first of R.D.’s walks he stopped at my room on a Saturday night.

“Hello can I come in?” he asked.

“Sure yes,” not knowing that the man asking to look around my room was R.D. I had heard much about the most well known figure in the hostel my first few weeks in India, but had not yet met him.

I had haphazardly cleaned my room in anticipation of R.D.’s visit. My bed was made but clothes were still splattered across my bedcover.

“You know you should really clean up your bed. Would you want your parents to see your room like this?” R.D. asked me.

“I’ve been busy. I’ll clean it up later.”

R.D. then left the room.

“Who the hell does he think he is?” I asked myself while putting away my laundry.
I eventually made peace with R.D. and his authority. After speaking with some of the other hostelites, I learned that they viewed many of the hostel policies, which John, Anders and I saw as invasive and overburdening as safety measures.

More importantly, I learned an important Indian concept. Break the rules and don’t feel bad about breaking them. Many times in India it is expected, if not required to break the rules. Drivers regularly run red lights, no one bats an eye if you push your way ahead in a line, and corruption scandals regularly dominate newspaper headlines. Gradually I started returning to the hostel whenever I wanted, unafraid of waking the security guards from their late night doze. I never wrote to R.D. asking for permission to go out on the weekends.

* * *

The other hostelites did not mind R.D.’s strict rules because they were not from Bombay. Exhausted by their assignments and in class up to seven days a week, they had little time to go to bars or aimlessly wander a new neighborhood of the city. Most were content spending a Friday or Saturday night in their rooms watching a pirated movie or TV show. But the mood began to change a month before John and I moved out of the hostel.

Sanjay came into our room with a cold, empty stare around midnight. It wasn’t odd for him to come over at this time. He and John often stayed up listening to music in his room late into the night.

“John,” he quietly said. “Come to my room.”
Sanjay’s sober face and timid tone were departures from his usually chipper attitude. John came back to the room a few moments later and quickly put his shoes on.

“Sanjay’s uncle is really sick. I’m going to the hospital with him,” he said.

“Do you know when you’ll be back?” I asked.

“No.”

“I hope everything is all right. Good luck.”

The next morning John returned to our room. Everything managed to be all right with Sanjay’s family. But the troubles for Sanjay were just beginning.

Before Sanjay and John left the hostel, the security guard insisted they speak with R.D. Sanjay and John insisted to the security guard that they had to leave immediately. But the security guard, loyal to R.D. would not let them leave before speaking with R.D. R.D. interrogated Sanjay about why he had to go to the hospital. He asked why it was necessary that John accompanied Sanjay and offered to replace John as Sanjay’s moral support companion. Sanjay bristled at R.D.’s suggestions further delaying his departure to the hospital. After 20 minutes of conversation, R.D. finally allowed them to go to the hospital.

The following day at school, Sanjay and John each had a meeting with the president of Ambedelakar and R.D. during which R.D. accused John of talking back to him the previous night. Sanjay was berated for trying to leave the hostel so late at night. He was not helped by the fact that he had a reputation amongst R.D. and other administrators as a troublemaker. He was in danger of being kicked out of the hostel.
After the meetings with R.D. and the president of Ambedelakar Sanjay stopped singing Coldplay songs and Indian pop classics on his guitar during John’s nightly visit. They sat in the room, listening to music from Sanjay’s computer, as they spoke about the meetings and Sanjay’s future.

* * *

There was one major thing missing from my dorm at Ambedelakar that could be found in most other American dorms—women. Female Ambedelakar students that wanted to live in university provided hostels lived in a hostel around the corner from the school. Women, including female Ambedelakar students, were strictly prohibited from entering our dormitory campus.

When I brought my family to visit the hostel shortly before I left India, the security guards refused to let my Mom and sister enter. They were only allowed to enter after I had Himani, one of the international student advisors, speak to the security guards on the phone and explain how my mom and sister made a special trip to India and really wanted to see life in an Indian dormitory.

The roots of the strict separation between men and women in Indian society lie in the tradition of purdah. Purdah is the practice of separating women from the public by screens and other barriers and having them completely cover their bodies in public. It is unclear how long purdah has been practiced in India, some scholars say the practice stretches back to the early 13th century while common knowledge asserts the practice began with the Mughal Invasion in 1526.¹
Though women were never physically present, their presence was always felt. Every night people took refuge in the hallways, sitting down at an abandoned desk, staring out the window and listening to their mothers’ inquiries about their health and academics. A few minutes later you would spot someone pacing down the hallway sorting out relationship problems with his girlfriend or hear someone Skyping with their better half.

Though I never went to the girl’s hostel, what I heard about it from one of the German exchange students who lived there and the international student advisors made it sound similar to the boy’s hostel. Many of the girls were not from Bombay and disinterested in exploring the city. A small cadre of girls regularly met up to smoke cigarettes and exchange gossip.

The administrators of the two hostels never made any efforts to create unity between the residents of the university’s housing properties. Our comrades in the girls hostel were only a 10 minute drive away, but might as well have lived in another section of the city.

* * *

Sanjay continued to meet with R.D. and the president the next few days. By the end of the week, he was cleaning out his room.

Boys from all floors went in to send Sanjay off as he picked up loose papers and smoked his final cigarettes in his room. Sanjay had looked forward to hostel life. It was the first time in his life he had ever been away from home. For the first time he had space. Space from his parents. Space from his girlfriend.
And he had thrived with the separation. His room was the epicenter of hostel activity, it was the twenty first century equivalent to a salon for young Indian men living in university housing. It was where hostelites gathered to debate matters of public policy, dance to pop music and get drunk.

It pained Sanjay that his late night discussion with R.D. quickly morphed from a simple request to go be with a loved one during an emergency into a battle over who had the final authority over his personal decisions: R.D. or Sanjay.

R.D. saw Sanjay as someone he could make an example of. If other hostelites dared flaunt R.D.’s power they would face similar fates as Sanjay. Though they had worked, lived alone and would soon be married off R.D. and the president of Ambedelakar wanted to make it clear that administrators had the final word on hostel affairs.

The affaire d’Sanjay seemed to go out against everything Ambedelakar strived and promoted. On fliers and posters scattered throughout the school, they encouraged their students to be innovators and take risks. The pictures of Thomas Edison, Steve Jobs and Isaac Newton were meant to get students to think creatively. The alliances with universities in Sweden, Canada, the United States, Australia and Denmark were meant to expose students to new cultures. They trusted students to spend semesters in Denmark and happily sent them off to internships in Malaysia. But when it came to trusting students to make smart decisions in Bombay or the hostel, Ambedelakar still stuck to the traditional Indian notion that the elderly and authority figures knew best.

The material their faculty taught about independent thinking and decision making was
necessary to the success of students as corporate managers and entrepreneurs. They wanted their students to apply their skills immediately. But allowing them to implement these skills in the hostel by granting them more freedom? That was a concept that would have to wait.
Chapter 3: A Tale of Two Gurus

The flirting in Hindi stopped when Professor Ram Sabawala walked into the classroom shortly after noon, 40 minutes after our class was scheduled to start. No one seemed to mind. My friend Himanshu would explain to me months later, Sabawala Sir was merely following what he called “Indian Stretchable Time”, a form of Indian Standard Time.

I didn’t mind that Sabawala Sir showed up late the first week. It was the first week of class and the school administration was in the midst of an organizational monsoon finalizing class rosters, curriculums, schedules and housing. There must have been a mix up that caused Sabawala Sir’s initial tardiness. Plus, I was interested in the topic of Sabawala’s class, managerial economics. Himani told me that Sabawala was one of the school’s most well respected professors. That vote of confidence made me more patient and willing to put up with tardiness that first day of class.

Good morning class,” Sabawala Sir said in his crisp and proper Indian English.

Good morning sir,” everyone replied back, as we settled into our seats after standing to greet Sabawala Sir’s arrival.

Sabawala Sir began the class by telling us about himself. After graduating with a masters degree in economics in the 1960s, he chose career in academia instead of banking. He went on to become the dean of several prominent business colleges in Bombay and served as the director of a nonprofit affiliated with one of India’s leading industrial conglomerates. In the twilight of his career, Sabawala Sir had landed at the
Ambedelakar where he was a high-ranking administrator and also taught courses in economics.

It was easy to see how Sabawala Sir had gained the respect of corporate titans and doting students during that first class. He had a disarming smile permanently glued to his face and a strong command of economic theory. Sabawala Sir wove the seemingly unrelated tales of the decline of the Japanese automotive industry in the 1990s, Adam Smith’s invisible hand theory and India’s colonization into a coherent narrative related to managerial economics.

“India used to be the richest country in the world with lots of natural resources. But the British destroyed the country. They used the country for extractive purposes,” he said. At the end of the class, he made the class repeat this and other concepts.

“What did the British do to India?” Sabawala Sir asked the class.

“They used the country for exploitative purposes,” fifty voices thundered back.

I walked out of class that afternoon impressed with Sabawala. Not many people were able to speak from memory for nearly three straight hours about economics from memory. He had also managed to make economics, what I found to be a usually dry subject, interesting. The man could teach, I thought to myself as I walked home from school.

Sabawala Sir showed up about 30 minutes late again the following week. He did the same week after. He even showed up 30 minutes late to our mid-term.

Sabawala’s tardiness puzzled me. Every week our class schedule said that his class was scheduled for Saturday mornings at 11:30 a.m. I showed up on Saturdays
hopeful that that day would be the day Sabawala arrived on time. Each week I left about a half hour after class was supposed to end because class had started after a lengthy delay waiting for Sabawala to show up.

What made Sabawala’s late arrivals even more confusing was the way other faculty members treated students who arrived at class a few minutes late. Before I started classes at Ambedelakar, my advisers stressed that I be on time for all of my classes because teachers were known from barring tardy students, even those who were five minutes late, from attending classes. This policy was rooted in the high esteem Indian culture placed on teachers and the professional atmosphere Ambedelakar strove to cultivate. The school did not want its freshly minted MBA’s showing up late to meetings once they started jobs at Citi Bank, Tata Consultancy Services or Philips. I learned early on that professors were not afraid to enforce this rule when John was not allowed to attend his marketing and human resources classes because he arrived a few minutes late.

One of the most stringent enforcers of Ambedelakar’s late policy was my international business professor, Rahul Sir. Rahul Sir had no problem kicking students out for being late, even though he himself often arrived late and regularly answered his cell phone during student presentations and in the middle of lecturing. When a student arrived at 3:06 for a 3:00 class, Rahul Sir would not even let him think about attending the lecture.

“Get out see you next week,” he said, before the student even had an opportunity to sit down.
Rahul Sir did the same thing a few weeks earlier when another student arrived a few minutes on a day when monsoon rains delayed Bombay’s traffic and local train systems. Train delays during were common during monsoon season and the student pleaded with Rahul Sir to let him attend the class. But Rahul Sir, an import-export consultant adored by students for his profanity laced tirades and his shoulder length ponytail, did not care.

“Don’t give me the excuse about the Central Line being delayed. Get out.”

***

Rahul Sir was one of the most popular professors at Ambedelakar. He was a successful entrepreneur and turned to academics as a hobby and side job.

What made Rahul Sir intriguing to students was his contrarian attitude. He wore beat up Wranglers and flip-flops to class even though the school strictly enforced its business casual dress code on students (especially the foreign students). In every lecture he would always make a jab at the practicality of an MBA despite the school’s internal PR touting the value of the degree.

Students appreciated Rahul Sir’s mocking humor and dry wit. Everyone always laughed at his jokes and over prepared for his lectures hoping to impress him.

Though his class was officially about International Business, we spent little time substantially discussing import and export strategies or corporate governance structures. His class felt more like a prolonged bar chat with a wise, well traveled backpacker. Part of the lure of attending his class was knowing there was a possibility you would hear a crazy story about Rahul Sir chewing *khat*, a hallucinogenic drug.
popular in the Middle East, on a business trip to the Middle East and that he would find a way to tie it back to the case study we were discussing in class that day. He enjoyed regaling the class with stories from his encounters with the Russian mafia and his days living in Germany just as much as explaining the difference a commercial letter of credit and a discrepancy letter of credit.

Whereas Sabawala seemed remote and isolated from students, Rahul Sir enjoyed classroom interaction. He knew his students viewed him as a role model and mentor and often plunged into debate and discussion with students. During breaks students would always go up to him eager to discuss general business strategies, the case study or learn more about import and export regulations. Whenever a group presented a case study, Rahul Sir always gave long, detailed and usually helpful critiques.

On the surface, Rahul Sir was the perfect embodiment of a new, rising and powerful India. He spoke perfect English, traveled the world for both pleasure and business, started a successful company and chose to settle in India after living abroad. At many points during our course, Rahul Sir launched into long soliloquies about his love of India’s languages, religion and culture. Despite Rahul Sir’s projection of himself as the representation of a new wave in India he had trouble letting an old habit disappear into the murky waters of the nearby Arabian Sea — his lack of respect for students.
In a culture that demanded pupils treat their teachers with respect, which pupils did without any questioning, Sabawala did not even seem to consider showing his students a modicum level of respect. He never apologized for his tardiness or seemed to realize he was late. By showing up 70 minutes late to class, his actions told me that he did not care that students had traveled an hour by train from distant suburbs to attend his lecture, quit their jobs and in some cases moved across the country to earn an MBA. In my mind, his actions were a way of him telling the students, ”I DO NOT CARE ABOUT YOU. I DO NOT CARE ABOUT WASTING YOUR TIME. I AM THE TEACHER AND WHAT I SAY GOES.”

I tolerated Sabawala Sir’s lateness the first few weeks of the semester. I used the time we spent waiting for him to show up to get to know my classmates. I learned about tourist spots I should visit, why they had left their jobs at automotive companies, consultancies or put off entering the family business to get an MBA. But as the semester drew to a close, I could no longer tolerate Sabawala Sir showing up late to class.

The tipping point came on a day when Sabawala Sir showed up at 12:42 p.m. for our class. That day everyone resorted to their usual time past times for waiting for Sabawala Sir. My friend Dinesh read news updates on his phone. Our class president Hardik played games on his tablet. The more rambunctious students organized impromptu photo shoots at the front of the classroom, coralling students together and
clicking away shots on their cell phones. They even haggled me to join them at the front of the room.

While my classmates held a photo shoot, I plotted revolution.

“Why are you guys not angry? Why do you guys not care this guy consistently comes late? You are basically telling this guy, that it is ok that he is wasting your time by coming late,” I explained to Nikita, Amir and Bhushan, who were also fed up with waiting. “We need to start a revolution. I am willing to fail this class in order to get my point across.”

Nikita was intrigued with my rant. Nikita had studied at an elite American university in the lab of a world-renowned neuroscientist as an exchange student and was annoyed with Sabawala. In the United States, she called her adviser by his first name and was treated as an equal by her peers in the lab. She had been back in India for over a year, but her memories of the United States and its egalitarian atmosphere were still fresh.

Bhushan snickered during my speech. He too was not enamored with Sabawala.

“I think it’s funny how angry you get,” he said. “I encourage you to go ahead and try and change things. The reason we are not angry and do not care is because we know that even if we do try and do something nothing will change.”

I took up Bhushan’s challenge the following week when Sabawala Sir was 45 minutes late. After 30 minutes of waiting, I left the classroom and went to Himani’s office. I previously complained to her about Sabawala. When I walked into her office
she knew exactly why I was there. To calm me down, she agreed to come and wait
with me outside the classroom until Sabawala arrived. When Sabawala walked past
Himani and I at 12:15, Himani told me to come to her office after the class.

“Write an angry letter to Shreya [the primary adviser to American international
students] and copy me. I will then forward it to Jyoti Ma’am [the head of international
student exchange programs],” Himani told me after class.

A few days after I wrote the letter to Himani and Shreya, Himani pulled me
aside before I left school into the glass paneled waiting rooms in Ambdelekar’s
atrium. She had spoken with Jyoti Ma’am and found out why Sabawala Sir had
consistently been late.

“Is everything alright with Sabawala Sir besides him showing up late?” Himani
asked.

“Yes. He is a fine teacher and knows the material,” I said.

“Jyoti Ma’am just wanted to know if there was something wrong with his
teaching. Then we will need to have a serious discussion with him.”

“No his teaching is fine. It’s just his lateness. So did you find out why he is
late?”

“Sabawala Sir and his wife live alone. His wife has trouble moving around and
Sabawala has to take care of her, making it more difficult for him to move around,”
Himani explained.
“That’s not an excuse for him being late. If he knows he will be late why does he not just tell the ADC [the school’s scheduling coordinators] to move his class to a later time.”

Himani had no response.

* * *

It was hard to tell whether Rahul Sir was being serious the first time he skied over the border of political correctness. It’s not everyday that you hear a teacher tell a student he should consider committing suicide.

“That presentation was terrible,” he started. “You guys completely missed the point.”

He was berating a group that presented a case study that the class had read for our meeting that day. I agreed with Rahul Sir’s assessment that the presentation was stale and had failed to take a serious look at the major issues of the case study.

Whenever a group presented a case study, he was particularly harsh on the group members that did a bulk of the speaking for the group. Today was no different.

“You,” he said motioning at the group’s leader. “I feel sorry for you. I have no idea who will hire you. Maybe ICICI Bank will hire you. But they’re a shit company. If I were you I might consider killing myself.”

The student he was talking continued to stare straight at Rahul Sir. He remained up front with his group for the remainder of the presentation.

No one questioned Rahul Sir about his suggestion. Perhaps out of fear or maybe no one wanted to further upset the clearly irritated and cranky professor. Two
minutes after Rahul Sir finished his critique, class continued as if nothing out of the ordinary happened.

A month passed before Rahul Sir’s next abusive episode. There were spurts of what lurked ahead in between. A few class sessions after his suicide suggestion, a student came in with an attendance sheet from the main office. He asked Rahul Sir to sign it.

“Who is this fuck?” Rahul Sir rhetorically asked the class when the student left the room.

An engineer by training, Rahul Sir had a knack for detail. Before the presentation was scheduled to start that day he counted the number of names on the title slide of the presentation. He squinted from a chair in the back of the room, straining to be sure that the number of names matched the number of bodies standing next to the computer, anxiously waiting to present.

“Excuse me?” he asked the group. “Why are there four names on the title slide but five people presenting?”

“I just back from an internship on the fourth and returned to school a few days ago. By the time I joined this group they had already finished working on the project,” said a petite girl in a soft-spoken tone.

“So why are you up with the group if you didn’t do any of the work? How come you didn’t ask how you could help out with the project?” Rahul Sir’s voice rose several decibels.

“I don’t know sir.”
“Look madam, I hate people like you. You’re a prostitute of education. I take education damn seriously,” he said.

The girl stood still as Rahul Sir’s continued.

“Don’t give me the excuse that ‘I came on the fourth sir.’ Get out my class. You don’t know what the fuck is happening.”

He took a breath before completing his rant.

“I came on the fourth, I am God’s gospel,” he said in a mocking tone. “Get out my class.”

The girl walked back to her seat. Tears gathered in her eyes as she sat down. Her once bright, cheery face had the look of a defeated salesman. She sat quietly in her seat the rest of the period.

Rahul Sir now directed his ire at the girl’s group mates.

“What are you four up to? You don’t want to help her,” he asked. “Shouldn’t you tell her that this guy is a bit cranky? What should I do with this girl? I don’t know. I should not even listen you.”

He slapped his hands in disgust.

Rahul Sir allowed the presentation to continue. He gave his usual critique of “good job, but you still missed the point” and lectured the rest of the period as if nothing had happened.

* * *

I learned the real reason why no action had been taken against Sabawala Sir in Shreya’s office a few days later. Shreya, one of the advisers to American exchange
students, told me that she and Himani were afraid to confront the administrators about Sabawala’s tardiness, for fear that he would retaliate against me by giving me a poor grade, regardless of my performance on exams in his class. After that conversation with Shreya, I quietly ended my crusade to hold Sabawala Sir to the same standards Ambedelakar students were expected to uphold. Bhushan was right. My fury, letter writing and impassioned pleas to my classmates went for nothing. But I still didn’t understand why my classmates, most of whom arrived at Ambedelakar after working and living independently for a few years, could accept that the administration allowed Sabawala to regularly show up and Rahul Sir to verbally abuse them while they were expected to strictly adhere to Ambedelakar’s? Why weren’t my classmates interested in emulating American and European students from the 1960s, and to an extent students today, who protested and campaigned until they secured more freedoms and rights for students to let the administration know they would not tolerate the actions of Sabawala and Rahul Sir?

* * *

“Growing up my teachers were like gods to me,” my old Hindi teacher Priyanka, a doctoral student from India in her 30s, told me shortly after I returned from India. “I’m still uncomfortable calling my professors by their first names.”

Priyanka’s divine respect for teachers was rooted in the Sanskrit word for teacher, guru. Journalist Shoba Narayan wrote in an article for Beliefnet that gurus are more than teachers. They help their students break away from the ignorance clouding their thinking and are integral to students’ self-actualization.¹
This high level of respect toward teachers was deeply embedded in Ambedelakar’s DNA. Students addressed professors as “Sir” or “Ma’am”, like they had at every level of their educational careers, instead of “professor” or “doctor”. During lunch breaks students crammed into the school’s simple cafeteria, where hordes of students gathered to chow on *samosas* and *idlis*, while teachers sipped chai on padded chairs in a wood paneled and air-conditioned faculty lounge a floor above. If teachers needed chai, coffee or water during the middle of their lectures, they could phone the cafeteria and a cafeteria worker in a white button down shirt, pressed khakis and sandals would arrive at their classroom a few minutes later with a bottle of water or a thermos of chai on a plastic tray.

The immense respect shown toward teachers springs from the esteemed position the elderly have in Indian culture. Elders are revered for having immense knowledge and wisdom. Before people say hello to their elders, they bend down and touch their elder’s feet, the ultimate sign of respect in India. Even as adults, children and grandchildren consult the elderly when they need advice. The respect Indian culture places on the elderly also applies in the classroom, where students show teachers the same level of respect they would show their parents and grandparents.

It baffled me that Ambedelakar’s students could be major believers in entrepreneurship as a way to empower India’s masses and spur economic equality yet not care that Sabawala did not value their time and Rahul Sir addressed them as if they were chattel.
To an outside observer, especially those from more individualist oriented cultures, Ambedakar students seemed crazy for not demanding more respect from administrators and professors like Sabawala and Rahul Sir. To administrators, Ambedelakar students’ behavior was normal. They were following rules and cultural norms like they had when they were undergraduates and in primary school. To the eye of an economist, Ambedelakar’s students’ acceptance of seemingly disenfranchised state was the result of attending a school, and living in a country, in the midst of enormous institutional transitions.

In his book *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* economist Douglass C. North defines institutions as man made laws that mold human interaction. Institutions are present in every facet of society, from burial rituals to parliamentary procedure. A main function of institutions is to provide structure, reduce uncertainty and limit choices for individuals. Institutions range from formal ones like the Constitution to informal ones such as common law. In order for institutions to experience radical change, they must first endure a series of small, gradual changes. Even when institutions make radical changes through formal means, the remnants of the institution’s previous rules will live on through informal means.

Ambedelakar, and Indian higher education as a whole, are the perfect embodiment of institutions in transition. Minute changes, such as Ambedelakar and other Indian universities encouragement of entrepreneurship, represents a major shift in the way Indian higher education is viewed by the government, university administrators and students. For most of its existence in India, universities were seen
solely as places of learning. The view that universities should be leaders in research and incubators of enterprise has only recently surfaced in Indian public dialogue.

As Indian higher education has eagerly embraced its role as a leader in public dialogue and as an engine of innovation, informal constraints live on. Ambedelakar was afraid to confront Sabawala Sir and Rahul Sir, because even the school’s top administrators presumably did not want to risk disrespecting revered faculty members.

Ambedelakar is hardly the only prestigious university still hounded by informal constraints. Three of the countries most prestigious technological universities, the Indian Institute of Technology-Delhi, the Indian Institute of Technology-Bombay, and the Indian Institute of Technology-Madras, prohibit their students from using the internet after 1 a.m. The belief that students do not know how to properly manage their time, and the deeper belief that it is the university’s moral responsibility to monitor students’ free time, is what drove administrators to implement the policy.²

North explains radical institutional changes, such as changing the legal voting age to 18, as the result of a three-step process. First there must be a change in prices related to infrastructure, technology and the cost of information. The changes in these prices drive one of the actors, or both groups involved, to renegotiate their governing contract. Usually, a higher set of rules governs the existing contract between these two groups. Before the existing contract is amended, the higher set of rules must first be altered. Only after the overarching contract has been renegotiated, can institutions fully embrace and implement the desired change.
A classic example of changes in relative price leading to broader institutional change is the voting age in the United States. The price change that spurred debate about voting was the lowering of the draft age from 21 to 18 during World War II. This price change, increasing the number of eligible soldiers without increasing the number of eligible voters, angered conscripts and led Georgia legislators to lower the voting age to 18 for state and local elections in 1943, 28 years before the 26th amendment made 18 the voting age in federal elections. The Vietnam War, and the continued conscription of disenfranchised soldiers, led citizens to pressure the government to renegotiate the higher contract between the two parties, the United States Constitution, and resulted in the 26th amendment.

The price changes that spurred changes in voting laws, fueled student protests on college campuses over civil rights, free speech and the Vietnam War. These protests ultimately led to greater student freedom and more respect from faculty and administrators.

Changes to informal constraints follow a similar path as broader institutional changes. As prices and tastes change, norms fade in and out, new norms emerge, or are simply ignored. Informal constraints last longer because cultural habits continue to exist even when formal changes have implemented.

Indian students in higher education have not yet experienced a moment that has significantly changed the prices of interacting, information or capital. India has not had a Vietnam War era moment for its students that have both changed relative prices and its subsequent effects. Ambedelakar students were not infuriated about
Sabawala’s tardiness or Rahul’s abrasive remarks, because no historical precedent existed that informed them they had a right to be angry or upset.

The constraints limiting students to a submissive role in the presence of elders are slowly changing as young Indians plow through Ayn Rand novels and gain confidence challenging their teachers and authority on contentious issues. The slow demise of informal constraints is why universities encourage their students to build businesses, but feel the need to monitor their internet activity.

* * *

Like a good veteran backpacker, Rahul Sir used final session to dispense advice to his disciples. His final words of wisdom showed that Rahul Sir was very aware of the institutional change slowly occurring throughout the country and the growing pains associated with institutional change.

“My advices if you want to settle here [Bombay]- run away,” he said. The state government of Maharashtra was ineffective and making the state economically uncompetitive he explained.

He warned the girls in the class that they will continue to face tougher expectations than their male counterparts.

“If a guy comes back at 4 in the morning, his parents will ask questions. His father might even be proud of him. But if a girl comes back that late people will say things,” he said.

In economic terms, Rahul Sir was saying that the levers pulling the prices changes in infrastructure, information cost and technology needed for institutional
change were working slowly to jostle change in government institutions and social norms. And they were working even slower to usher changes in the way teachers like Rahul Sir and Sabawala Sir treated their students.
Chapter 4: Fast Times at Ambedelakar High

“Guys! Guys listen up.”

Punit had the thankless task of being the class president. It was his responsibility to make sure all the first year Business Design students knew about major school events and purvey the class’s opinions to the school’s administration. Today his task was to determine how the class would celebrate classmates’ birthdays.

“Guys, please be quiet!” he said one final time, desperate for the side conversations to stop and the hungry scavengers to stick around before hunting for cafeteria food.

“Thank you. We wanted to talk about how we want to celebrate birthdays. First, we are requesting that everyone give 300 rupees (about 7 dollars) so we can buy cake and celebrate everyone’s birthdays. The second thing we have to decide is how will we celebrate everyone’s birthday. Will we celebrate all birthdays for the month at one time or will we celebrate birthdays as they happen during the month?”

“The birthday celebration should be at the end of the month, so that way we make sure everyone’s birthday is celebrated and that celebrating the birthdays doesn’t get old after a while,” explained Pooja, one of the most respected and well liked girls in the class.

The banter continued for the next 15 minutes. Students offered their insight and analysis on the issue as if they were mediators solving diplomatic issues with Pakistan. The discussion finally fizzled out after everyone had tired of raising their voices and cutting each other off.
“It’s been settled,” Punit said. His trademark dimples were gradually overtaking the tense expression that had gripped his face over the past ten minutes.

“We’ll celebrate birthdays at the end of the month.”

* * *

Like most things the first year Business Design students encountered during their maiden trimester at Ambedelakar, the great birthday debate was long, chaotic and last minute. By the time of the debate we had been in school for two months and were finally starting to get a sense of how the school operated.

Students in Ambedelakar’s MBA programs all followed a similar curriculum. In the first trimester, the basics of finance and management were introduced. Students took introductory courses in accounting, marketing, economics and statistics.

The Business Design batch had a set schedule of five core classes. Thinking Tools for Innovators was on Mondays from 3-6, followed by Individuals in Organizations on Tuesdays from 9-12 and Managerial Economics on Wednesdays from 3-6. The week finished up with Principles of Marketing on Thursdays from 10-1 and Financial Accounting on Fridays from 10-1. The week came to a close on Saturdays on when we had another session of Managerial Economics. A Marketing Research class and the Global Leadership Course, a project management course, were added to the curriculum midway through the semester. Yoga session was usually thrown in at least one morning a week.

That was the schedule in theory. When John and I scheduled our classes Himani warned us that though each class had a fixed time, course times were routinely
cancelled, moved to different times, entirely different days and even different classrooms.

“It is very important that you check Ambedelakar Online [the school’s online scheduling portal] every night to see what the course schedule is,” Himani emphasized in one of our early meetings with her. “The course schedule changes all the time and you need to be aware of the changes.”

I can’t remember one week when John, Anders and I did not have one change to our daily schedule. The week of our Accounting midterm, Tuesday’s Individuals in Organization class was replaced with two three-hour Accounting Review sessions, one in the morning, the other after lunch. Earlier in the term, I had to miss a Saturday morning International Business class (normally scheduled for Mondays from 3-7) that I took with the second year Business Design students, because that week Accounting had been bumped from its usual Friday slot to Saturday morning from 9-12.

There was logic behind Ambedelakar’s scheduling system. Many professors ran their own companies in addition to teaching. The flexible system was needed to ensure that professors could meet their teaching and other business obligations.

I lost most of my faith in Ambedelakar’s scheduling system the Saturday morning of my scheduled Managerial Economics midterm. A bolted padlock and dark room greeted me when I arrived at the listed testing room. There was no note from a teacher or administrator. No students from my class were roaming around. I sprinted up to the computer lab, hastily rechecked Ambedelakar Online to see that I had went to the correct room and then sprinted back down the stairs. I tugged at the bolted door
and pounded on the door’s glass window. Frustrated and annoyed I went down to Himani’s office eager for an answer for this latest scheduling snafu.

“Gabriel, is everything alright?” she asked. Himani could sense I was upset. I was breathing loudly, a thin layer of sweat had formed on my forehead. The cab driver who had taken me to school dropped me off a block away from the school because he had no idea where the building was. I ran the half block from where he dropped me off to school, then to the classroom, the computer lab and finally Himani’s office like I the final hundred meters of my high school cross country races.

“I went to the room where my midterm is scheduled and no one is there. What’s going on?”

“Did you check Ambedelakar online last night?”

“Yes and I did five minutes ago. There is no one in the room.”

“Calm down Gabriel. Let me make a call.”

Himani grabbed her phone and spoke to Amar the Spark, the class liaison to the faculty, of the Junior Business Design Batch.

“Amar told me the class has been cancelled for student council elections. He said an email went out to the class about this.”

“I’m not on the email list and no one that lives in the hostel told me about it either.”

“I’m sorry Gabriel.”

“This type of thing shouldn’t happen,” I said frustrated that I had spent the previous evening studying for an exam that was trumped for student council elections.
“Gabriel, what can I tell you this is India. Ambedelakar is one of the better schools. It’s even worse at some other schools.”

* * *

Ambedelakar desperately wanted to be taken seriously as a cultivator of entrepreneurial and managerial talent. It’s why they invested in bringing in faculty members from foreign universities and closely followed their rank in Business School Listings. But the combination of youthful students, disorganization and immaturity made it feel at times more like a high school or middle school.

I got the same feeling walking into Managerial Economics on Saturday mornings that I had years before when I walked into Mrs. Goldstein’s 8th grade Hebrew Bible class at the Jewish Day School I attended. I was not particularly interested in either economics or the Bible and I knew that there was a good chance both teachers might lose their tempers. She usually yelled at Ricky Green and Bobby Bloom for flicking paper footballs across the room at each other or inciting some other form of disruption.

Managerial Economics was hard to take seriously because the professor, Sabawala Sir, always showed up late. Students began following in the footsteps of their respected professor and also began showing up late.

When Sabawala did manage to finally show up, it was difficult to suddenly start focusing on demand curves and the Theory of the Firm. Most Saturdays people quietly exchanged notes or rattled off texts messages on their cell phones while Sabawala sketched production functions on the white board.
Sabawala would have never noticed the class’s extracurricular activities had they not given him reason to notice. That day Sabawala had arrived his usual 30 minutes late. When he gave the class a 20 minute break, he returned after 30. Running very behind schedule the class got antsy as the clock lurched toward 4. The class was scheduled to end around 3. The conversations gradually shifted from subtle whispers to a noticeable hum. The notes that were being surreptitiously passed were now flung across the room at crushes and friends, in plain view of Sabawala’s all seeing square framed glasses.

In a tone that rivaled the irate roars of Mrs. Goldstein, Sabawala yelled in Hindi, “Stop! What do you think you are doing? I won’t tolerate this in my classroom.”

Whenever Mrs. Goldstein yelled at Ricky and Bobby the rest of the class’s muffled chuckles slipped out from the other corners of the room while the two class clowns pled their innocence over her rant.

Seven years and 8,000 miles later a similar scene unfolded in Sabawala’s classroom. As Sabawala morphed from a charismatic academic into a grumpy old man, smiles puckered up on a handful of faces across the classroom.

Since most students did not take Sabawala seriously I thought the Saturday morning flare up would be the only time I thought I was slumped back in a chair at my old middle school.

But a few weeks later, the class decided it was time to test Professor Patil’s patience. Professor Patil had showed up to class 30 minutes late because of a
miscommunication about when the class was supposed to start. He arrived to class in his usual appearance. His shirt untucked and lightly ruffled, his curly hair needing a comb.

“I apologize for coming late,” he said as he shuffled to the white board.

Before Professor Patil arrived everyone was scattered across the room chatting, playing cell phone games or sleeping in their seats. As he began scribbling notes on the board, the chatter subsided, cell phones were put away and attention slowly shifted to his lecture.

While Professor Patil lectured about Game Theory and the Prisoner’s Dilemma, a small group of students continued chatting. At first he ignored it. But after five minutes of incessant chatter Patil would no longer tolerate it.

“Excuse me,” he said. The chatter immediately stopped. “Please stop talking. It’s very rude and difficult for me to teach over. If I have to ask you to leave I will.”

The conversation was over. Professor Patil made it clear the plans for the weekend would have to wait. It was now time to study the mathematician John Nash’s contribution to the development of modern game theory.

* * *

I had never had an exam delayed because of a birthday celebration. Before we could take our international business exam, my classmates had to sing Happy Birthday to Irfan and then chant “BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD, BD!!!”
I watched the festivities from my seat next to Shivani. I sat next to her based on Sagar’s advice.

“Gabriel, come here. Sit here. This is Shivani. She is very cooperative when it comes to cheating. She is the topper [first ranked person in the class].”

After the hum of BD chants had died, the head proctor finally started passing out the exams. The head proctor, a skinny middle aged man with a constant scowl, sat at the desk in the front of the room, patiently tapping her pencil waiting for the conversations to stop. Students’ book bags were heaped next to her under her watchful eye. When the quiet she wanted finally arrived she passed out the exams, hissing through her teeth at students who were still whispering.

My proctors for my final exams in high school were not this uptight. The proctors I had for the SAT and ACT were laid back compared to this proctor.

The proctors inherent distrust of the students only compelled the students to cheat. When she left the room about an hour into the test, whispers echoed throughout the room. The assistant proctor, smirked as he watched my classmates take revenge.

It was easy to understand why my classmates had spoken to each other when the proctor left the room. She had treated them like they were high schoolers. So when the opportunity to act like high schoolers arose, they seized it.

* * *

The approach Ambedelakar students had toward business school was not the mentality I expected to find at one of the nation’s supposedly elite management institutions. What I perceived as the typical Ambedelakar student’s attitude toward
business school mirrored that of the average college student in the United States. Most Ambedelakar students took school seriously on the eve of major exams and projects but otherwise saw school as an expected societal pit stop. Graduate school was nothing more than two more years to answer life’s existential questions, a chance to simultaneously learn the foundations of business and pick up another coveted credential. At least the was the attitude I sensed among my circle of friends.

The Ambedelakar student attitude toward school was best seen in a group of students who lived in my dorm and were also in many of my classes. When I was leaving the hostel for class they were still stirring in bed. When they finally arrived at school, usually twenty or thirty minutes after the class had started, their hair was slicked back and neatly combed into place with their motorcycle helmet clutched under their arms, there was no sign of embarrassment or remorse to be found on their wide smiles. Occasionally, they showed up after the midway break of our three hour classes.

Rahul Sir had an easy explanation for the lax attitude found amongst many Ambedelakar students. Money.

“We aren’t independent. We stick with our parents all our lives and we’re proud of it. My father didn’t tell me to f*** off at 18. He paid for my college…” he said. Rahul Sir, he noted, took out a loan to pay for his MBA.

Most Ambedelakar students were not paying for graduate school. Their parents were supporting them through their MBA studies just as they had done during their undergraduate careers.
It was unclear whether the approach Ambedelakar students had toward school would have a negative impact on their careers. Many students were able to ratchet up their intensity level for school projects when they had to. Their future success would not be determined solely by their performance and behavior at Ambedelakar. Their success would determine on their ability to build on the skills they would acquire and their personal desires to achieve.
Chapter 5: The Lure of Leaving

“The dream of every middle class Indian parent is for their kid to go to the United States, get a green card and eventually become a U.S. citizen,” Manoj told me as we caught up over the phone.

The fantasy of Indian parents, Manoj’s mother included, was not necessarily his vision of a happy ending.

“If I had the chance to write my own destiny I would end up in Indian politics. I don’t want to have a house and become an American citizen. India is still in its infancy in terms of democracy in relation to other democracies. I feel very positive about India. If there was an opportunity to contribute politically that would be my ideal.”

When I saw Manoj in India he said similar things about his interest in politics and giving back to India. His optimism came on the heels of protests sweeping the country in which youth had an enormous role. Midway through my stint at Ambedelakar the country was in the midst of a series of protests aimed to pressure the government to toughen up on its notoriously corrupt bureaucracy. A famous TV yoga instructor named Baba Ramdev was leading protests and hunger strikes in the nation’s capital. Anna Hazare, a former army truck driver turned political activist, and Arvind Kejirwal, a former member of India’s Internal Revenue Service, were busy corralling young professionals and university students around the country to fight corruption. The aim of the hunger strikes, marches on famous national monuments and speeches
in stadiums was meant to get bright and ambitious people like Manoj, who usually left India at the first opportunity, to stay and help build the country.

But outside the packed stadiums of idealistic political protesters in Delhi was an enormous swath of the population that was salivating at the chance to leave the country. On every street corner it seemed possible to find an advertisement for an opportunity to study abroad in the United States, United Kingdom, Singapore or Australia. Many Indians had a family member or knew a close friend who moved abroad for work and usually stayed overseas to settle and establish families.

Himani had the opposite long term outlook as Manoj. She wanted to leave India. As soon as possible.

“I wish someone could put me in their suitcase,” she would say when she spoke with foreign exchange students about their home countries.

Himani didn’t fit the stereotype of a middle class Indian aspiring to immigrate to the United States. Foreign pop culture, a favorite topic of conversation and entertainment among India’s young and economically mobile, was something she knew nothing about. She had little knowledge of Western fashion trends instead opting to come to work everyday in a long flowing shirt and form fitting pants known as a salwar kameez. She strictly observed many Hindu religious traditions and enjoyed being close to her family. But underneath, Himani was fantasizing about working in higher education administration abroad.

She never admitted but Himani secretly hated her job. The “highlight” of her day was organizing spreadsheets for the top administrator in her department. More
typical tasks involved sorting graded papers for senior faculty members. Approaching her late 20s, Himani was losing patience with her job, and slowly her hometown and country.

Her frustration boiled over a month before I left the country. I had come into her office to pay a bill. After paying, I stopped at Himani’s desk to say hello. I expected small talk and questions about my travels in India up to that point.

“Gabriel listen to me,” she said. “I want you to find me a job in the United States in educational administration. I am not smart or bright. My little brain can’t handle much, but I can do what you tell me to do,” she said to me. A sense of desperation and despondence displaced Himani’s usual cheery smile. Usually guarded, even keeled and professional Himani’s request was out of character. “Please do this for me.”

* * *

Manoj’s sojourn in the United States and Himani’s quest to live abroad are not unique in the scope of Indian history. Indians have left India in search of opportunities abroad for centuries. The modern Indian Diaspora started in the nineteenth century when indentured Indians were taken to South Africa, Guyana, Malaysia, Mauritius, Trinidad, Fiji and Suriname. In the early twentieth century, Indians primarily from the western state of Gujarat landed in Kenya and Uganda as laborers and eventually laid down roots. Indian construction workers rebuilt the Netherlands and the United Kingdom after WWII and supplied major muscle to the modern construction boom in the Middle East. Indian immigration to the United States mushroomed after the
passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which loosened immigration restrictions by eliminating quotas and instead giving priorities to immigrants with needed skills and to those reuniting with family already in the United States. Today, Indians have established significant communities in the United States, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom where they have been influential in technology, medicine and finance.¹

Not all Indian emigrants leave India for plum jobs and cushy lives abroad. The Indian Diaspora in the Middle East is made up mostly of low skilled and semi-skilled service workers in oil, construction and service professions. The surge in Indian immigration occurred during the Gulf oil boom of the 1970’s. Many Indians in Gulf countries are legally mandated to return to India after their contracts have expired before working again in the Gulf.²

Over the past few years, Western media outlets and academics have written in length how the “middle class Indian fantasy” of leaving India, was slowly losing its luster in India. The growth in India’s economy and the country’s seemingly endless opportunities for growth has slowed the rush of prospective immigrants. Diaspora descendants are now returning to India in search of business opportunities. Immigrants who have been away for years are now returning to retire and raise their families.

Talk of India’s growth and opportunity meant nothing to jaded youth like Himani. She did not feel socially or economically liberated from the country’s recent success. For her there was nothing compelling her to stay in the country. Her feelings
of frustration, rejection and angst were widespread amongst my close friends. Especially Dinesh.

* * *

“My dad had a job offer in Canada a long time ago. I could have been a Canadian. It would have been so much better. I would have been able to date girls, live in Canada. I wish my dad had taken the job,” Dinesh said. He sounded deflated as he talked about the possibilities he might have had he grown up a Canadian instead of moving around the Indian subcontinent.

Dinesh had lived abroad before during his college years in the United Arab Emirates. His father had a job there at the time and Dinesh decided to follow him there. He didn’t particularly like the UAE. Everything was too expensive for a student budget and he had to take a taxi everywhere.

When he returned to India after college he had to readjust to the roar of car horns, crawling traffic jams and the never-ending barrage of screaming toddlers and idle rickshaw drivers. The UAE’s modern infrastructure made him forget about his homeland’s crumbling roads and nonexistent traffic laws.

“It’s a process to readjust to India’s chaos,” he said. “It’s something I didn’t expect.”

Dinesh was proud to live in India and knew the country very well. His family hailed from the South Indian state of Kerala but moved around throughout his childhood because of his father’s job in the Indian Civil Service. He spent the early years of his childhood in the northern states of Assam and Himachal Pradesh and
finished high school in Chennai, one of India’s four major cities and the largest city in South India.

What really fueled Dinesh’s interest in living abroad was the experience of his friend Ratan. They were classmates in the UAE before Ratan left to study at a state university in Florida. While Dinesh lived with his parents, Ratan shared an off campus apartment with four Americans who introduced him to fantasy football, fishing and drugs. Had Ratan been able to, he would have stayed in the United States. But he did not find a company that was willing to hire him since he was not a citizen. When he returned to India, he enchanted Dinesh with his tales of American college parties, hook ups and drugs.

In the United States, Ratan was liberated from India’s gridlock. He did not have to sneak around when he wanted to smoke a cigarette or arrange clandestine meetings with his girlfriend.

Dinesh was envious of the freedom Ratan had in the United States. Though his parent’s lived in the Gulf, they still had tight control over Dinesh’s life. They called him every night on Google Talk and controlled his bank account. They were the ones who encouraged him to go to business school. To an extent he feared them.

“Are you kidding?” was his response when I asked if he ever had introduced his ex-girlfriend to his parents. There was no way he explained he would risk introducing his parents to a girl whose family was not from Kerala.

Dinesh was in search of more freedom and independence. He was tired of sneaking around his parents and consenting to their demands. He yearned for a place
where he could experiment with different ways of living, date girls from different backgrounds and have his own space. Many people came to Mumbai for these purposes. And in a way, the city played the same role for Dinesh. His family’s apartment became his place to flee from the pressure cooker of Indian society. But despite living in India’s city of freedom, Dinesh still felt trapped.

* * *

The day after I emailed Himani I left Mumbai to travel around Southern India for a few weeks. By the time I went back to Ambedelakar a month later with my family, I had forgotten about Himani’s request and my email. She hadn’t.

“I’ve asked Gabriel to help me get a job in the United States. I’d like a position in educational administration,” she said to my brother and Dad.

My brother and Dad already felt out of place in India during their two week trip there to visit me. Himani’s comment made them feel even less comfortable. My brother failed at masking his smile. My Dad did his best to muster a tactful response.

“You should look at Gabe’s university. It’s a good university and I’m sure there are jobs there for you,” he told her.

Himani said she appreciated the advice. She quickly changed topics and begin speaking about another aspect of Ambedelakar’s curriculum.

Manoj said he had no interest in achieving the dream Himani and Dinesh pined for. When he was in India it was easy to see how comfortable and relaxed he felt there.

When I visited at his family’s home in late August, he spoke to cab drivers and his aunts and uncles as if he had never left the country. He effortlessly slipped back
into speaking Hindi, was fluent in local and national politics and spent hours laughing at old YouTube videos with his sister and cousins.

A few days before I went to his home, Manoj told me at a coffee shop in Bombay that his family in India, the force that Dinesh felt was driving him from the country, was a major factor pulling him back to India.

“The Indian-American kids I meet at school do not have the same values and respect for their parents as kids in India do,” he told me.

But a year back at school in the United States, had changed Manoj’s thoughts. His commitment to living in India came with a caveat. He would only seriously consider living in India long term if he was able to successfully penetrate the sketchy world of Indian politics. If he was unable to break into the political circles, he wanted to come back to the U.S.

“I’d rather live in the U.S. long term because it’s more comfortable and people are more disciplined here,” he told me shortly after he finished the last final exam of his collegiate career. Though he said he was not interested in his mother’s ideal of him returning to the United States, her wishes subtly did influence his long term thinking about his immigrant future.

“Earning an American salary is low risk and comfort is ensured. It’s a high risk proposition to go back to India. I would have no salary, no guarantee of any success or magnitude of failure. Every parent wants their kid to have a comfortable life. My parents would be more comfortable and happy if I was in the U.S. long term. It’s a matter of relativity. All parents have the same general motives and incentives. They
want their kids to have comfortable, low risk lives. My parents are no different,” he said.

Himani and Dinesh’s desire to leave India for a bit was really not unique or all that concerning. Their yearnings to live in the exotic locales of Western Europe or America’s Heartland are no different than the daydreams American college students have of living as expat writers in Paris or as English teachers in Thailand. Part of being young, is the desire to roam freely and see what the world has to offer.

If India wants to truly assert itself as a super power, it does not have to win over the minds of Dinesh and Himani. It must change the attitude of parents like Manoj’s mother who still define success for Indian youth as leaving the country for a more developed nation like the United States. If a social reformer as politically competent and inspiring as Gandhi appeared in Indian society tomorrow in India, it would not matter. Because the leader’s most important political allies, the Indian middle class, would be focused on achieving the Indian middle class fantasy.
Conclusion

I did not think I would miss India when I returned back to the United States. I craved American food, missed my family and friends and was eager to go back and finish my undergraduate degree. After six months in India, three as an exchange student and three spent backpacking throughout the country, I was ready to return to the United States where I spoke the language and effortlessly blended in.

But the moment I returned back to Athens, Ohio, where I was a student at Ohio University, I felt out of place and out of touch. It was a shock when classes started on time. I felt weird transitioning from being a prominent to minority into being just another member of my university’s white majority student body.

The most difficult adjustment was moving into my own apartment. I went from always being around people and frequently welcoming unexpected visitors to renting a one-bedroom apartment. I felt selfish with all the space and privacy I had in my apartment.

A week after I graduated from Ohio University, Manoj finished up his college coursework. He was scheduled to graduate the same semester I did, but prolonged it due to visa concerns. After he graduates with a degree in environmental economics he plans on living in suburban Washington, D.C. and working for an environmental consulting company and eventually getting his MBA.

After his first year of graduate school, Dinesh headed back to his adopted hometown of Chennai for an internship with a marketing company.
Shortly after I left India, Bhshuan’s comedy career began to blossom. He had a successful gig at the Comedy Store, a Bombay comedy club affiliated with the Comedy Store chain of comedy clubs in the United Kingdom. He was also working on beginning a podcast.

I unfortunately lost touch with Arun and Himani.

The last week I was in India I had dinner with Bhshuan, Dinesh and my family. Over greasy slices of pizza my family laughed at Bhshuan’s jokes and listened to Dinesh’s explanations about the differences between people from northern and southern India. It was the first time my parents met two of my closest friends in India. For two hours my family got a glimpse of the warmth that propelled through my time in India and made my journey smooth and memorable.
Notes to Chapter 1


4. Kumar and Jha, 7

5. Kumar and Jha, 6


7. Kumar and Jha, 6

Notes to Chapter 2


Notes to Chapter 3


Notes to Chapter 5

