

INDIA: the land of bollywood stars, business tycoons, yogis, & snake charmers - post feb 7, 2015

Contemplating the paradoxes of India my entire lifetime, I honestly can say this country is still a fascinating enigma that I cannot wrap my head around. The mysticism of the East and the richness of spirituality and culture is an undeniable attraction that travelers here fall in love with instantly. Considered the land of yogis, mystics, and snake charmers, it also boasts some of the world's most amazing architecture seen in its palaces, temples, or the most famous Taj Mahal.

Yet the poverty, lack of infrastructure, and economic disparity, just to mention a few issues, are devastating. *Slum Dog Millionaire*, a hit sensation in Hollywood a few years ago, tells the fictitious and impossible rags to riches stories of a mumbai slum-dweller, a dream no poor slum dweller would even dare to think of in their wildest imagination. It's easy in a tourist blog to glamorize a country but here is an in-depth look at some startling statistics that shed light on why we need to see the world more as a global family.

(Forgive me in advance for not citing references here- but have put links to most of the articles where I obtained information.)

ECONOMY Compare the life of a slum-dweller to the fabulous wealth of business tycoons such as the Ambani's, owners of Reliance and listed on Forbes as the sixth richest man in the world with a net worth of close to 23 billion. India is included by global economists as one of the BRIC (Brazil Russia India China) countries with an explosion of economic possibilities with 8-9% GDP growth several years ago but has dropped closer to 5% now.

India ranks second worldwide for agriculture output (including fruits, vegetables, rice, and nuts) which makes up 17% of GDP and employs half the workforce. Industry makes up 26% of GDP and services 57% GDP. In 2013, close to 7 million tourists brought in over \$18 billion to support the economy. Thank god for tourists! Read more at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_India.

Quote from the World Bank's 2013 Overview of India:

“With 1.2 billion people and the world's 4th largest economy, India's recent growth and development has been one of the most significant achievements of our times. Over the 6.5 decades since independence, the country has brought about a landmark agricultural revolution that has transformed the nation from chronic dependence on grain imports into a global agricultural powerhouse that is now a net exporter of food.

Life expectancy has more than doubled, literacy rates have quadrupled, health conditions have improved. India will soon have the largest and youngest workforce the world has ever seen. At the same time, the country is in the midst of a massive wave of urbanization as some 10 million people move to towns and cities each year in search of jobs and opportunity. It is the largest rural-urban migration of this century. Massive

investments will be needed to create the jobs, housing, and infrastructure to meet soaring aspirations and make towns and cities more livable and green.”

POLITICS In the world’s largest democracy, the 2014 landslide victory of prime minister Narendra Modi shows some hope for change in creating more stability and infrastructure in India but it is too soon yet to see what his accomplishments will be. Hopefully he will put a mark on rooting out the rampant corruption that has plagued Indian politics for centuries. He has made traveling to India easier by granting visas that can be obtained at the airport though. (*After the harrowing ordeal I went through including flying to New York to get my visa this is a godsend!*) The recent visit of President Obama on January 26th, India’s republic day, was cause for great celebration as these two great nations forged closer ties. Read more at <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21641295-closer-relations-america-will-make-india-more-active-asia-bit-more-player?zid=309&ah=80dcf288b8561b012f603b9fd9577foe>.

Bollywood, the multi-billion dollar Indian cinema industry, prolifically produces about 1,000 films annually, twice as many as Hollywood, and is increasingly collaborating with companies such as Disney, Viacom, and Sony Pictures. Mumbai, Maharashtra is the home of this booming industry. 20 million people visit the movies daily. Only about 45 million of the 300 million that comprise India’s middle class are movie-goers, which accounts for less than 4% of India’s population. It is the fastest growing industry in India with 11% growth per year and contributes 29% to the economy. In 2011 film revenues generated approximately \$3 billion and by next year will reach \$4.5 billion. Even in the US, screening and sales of bollywood films earn \$100 million/year. To read more visit <http://www.ibtimes.com/bollywood-100-how-big-indias-mammoth-film-industry-1236299>.

POPULATION The population explosion in India is one of the largest global concerns. At 1.27 billion currently, it will surpass China as the most populous country by 2025. Every minute there are 51 births! 17.5% of the global population lives in India and yet by surface area it is roughly a third the size of the US. More than 50% of the population is under age 25 with the average age being 29 by 2020. Life expectancy remains at 65 years of age. The religious breakdown is 78% Hindu, 14% muslim, 2% christian, 2% sikh, less than 1% buddhist, less than 1% jain, less than 1% parsi. The 5 largest cities in India are Mumbai (12.5 million), Delhi (11 million), Chennai (8.5 million), Hyderabad (7 million), and Bangalore (5.5 million). Pune, my birthtown, is at 3 million. The majority of India’s population still lives in villages with limited access to clean water, food, electricity, transport, etc. That is mind-blowing when you see the over-crowded cities and roads swelling with bumper-to-bumper traffic all day long. We spent an average of 1 hour in Mumbai traffic trying to get anywhere. Read more at <http://www.indiaonlinepages.com/population/india-current-population.html>.

The literacy rate is at 74% but it is still the country with the highest rate of illiteracy in the world. The competition to survive here is fierce and I feel for the youth who struggle to get into the top schools. A young cousin of mine who scored in the 95th percentile will not be able to get into the top 3 information/technology schools whose applicants must

be in the 97th percentile or higher. My dad's entire education from grade school to college to medical school was through scholarships and scoring in the highest percentile was his only option because his parents could not afford his education. There is no way I would have ever survived in such a fiercely competitive environment so I guess my parents decision to immigrate to the US was in my favor!

Given these startling population statistics though, what is most alarming is the income disparity. The GDP per head is only \$1,980. The richest 10% of Indian households hold 33% of the countries wealth. The poorest 10% of households hold 3% of the wealth. 86% of the population survives on less than \$2/day and 44% under \$1/day. Poverty is everywhere and overwhelming. The network of deformed and handicapped beggars run by corrupt hustlers only compounds the problem.

EVERYDAY LIFE in India

Looking at trying to survive in India, property prices are at a premium making the joint family household still the norm for most people. Salaries for average workers like the massage therapists at my ayurvedic spa working 7 days a week were 12,000 rupees (approximately \$200)/ month. That broke my heart to hear that seeing how hard they work. A driver commonly working 12 hour shifts 7 days a week was also about the same. Salaries for managers and those at the top of their field can be six digits. There are lots of NGO's (non-government organizations equivalent to our term for non-profits) who are working to address these inequities but it is a long uphill battle. One of my biggest struggles every time I visit India is seeing the effects of global warming and the pollution that has made the mumbai skyline a hazy blur where you can no longer see the sunset dip into the Indian ocean, one of my favorite memories of childhood.

It was a whirlwind with my family here for 2 weeks as we made a mad dash to as many relatives homes as we could in Mumbai Thane and Pune, went shopping of course, and attended my nephew from Australia's beautiful wedding held in Pune. After my parents flew back to the U.S. I spent this past week visiting family in Bangalore and it was refreshing to be out of the Mumbai traffic, crowds, and pollution. Meditated at pyramid valley, the largest pyramid meditation center in the world!

It has been 9 adventure-filled weeks in India and I am amazed at how much time has flown by. I have grown by leaps and bounds in this time and owe so much to all my amazing relatives who have taken me into their homes, fed me gourmet meals all day long, and been patient with all my excursions and projects. I don't know what I would have done without you all! Yes I will miss my daily refreshing coconut water stops- perhaps someone in cleveland can find a way to set one up (*abraham this would be an excellent feature for the mustard seed market*) I am sad to leave my beloved homeland but am headed to the airport tonight. Stay tuned for my next blog post to see where I fly to next as I really embark on an adventure of a lifetime!



mumbai slums fruit market school kids packed into a rickshaw mumbai skyline



pune street i walked everyday to yoga studio my aunt shopping at a bangalore marke



sitting in the streets bangalore skyline gorgeous view of mumbai my nephew's wedding



buying garlands of flowers daily coconut water stop