

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

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I have just returned from spending several weeks in India. Traveling through India was not really *being* in India, of course, because I saw India only through my own opaque lenses of cultural ignorance, privilege and confusion. As I moved around the country, I was struck by the diversity of the human population swelling into the apparent chaos of the urban and village streets, all spinning madly without discernible order. Animals and humans, brightly colored silks and the thinnest of muslin coverings, bicycle rickshaws, dogs and elephants, cars and camels filled the streets in whirl of movement and sensation. Not wanting to be an Orientalist* and consign India, as other Westerners have done before me, to a place of exotica, I strove to talk with Indians every chance I had. Of course there were many chances in a country of a billion plus people with very few tourists. The Indians I met were friendly and bemused by my own cultural attitudes, dress, behavior and limitations. As I talked with people it became clear that their views of themselves were far different than the views I held of them. Indians viewed the contradictions I saw—of scarcity and plenty, of gentle caring and stoic unconcern—as a consistent way of life. They likely would have seen contradictions in my way of life that equaled or surpassed what I experienced in their country.

Having digested an enormous assortment of books and essays about the country, its history, its people, its religions and its leaders, I nonetheless left uneasy with my complete inability to even begin to comprehend what I experienced. I can only *describe* these things: the richness and sense of extraordinary vitality

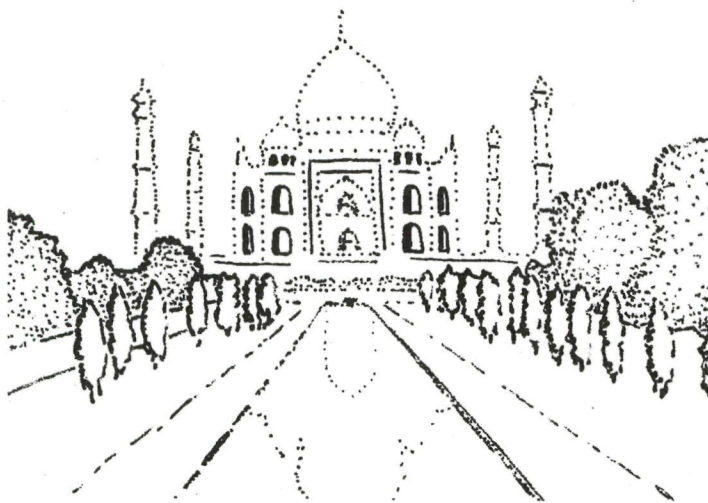
I sensed in family life, in the spiritual electricity that illuminated every village and town, in the riot of flowers and diversity of the presentations of self, including dress, facial decorations and jewels.

Of course the most important thing about travel to another culture is how such travel deepens our understanding of our place in the world. India reminded me that if I cannot understand the experience of persons from other cultures, neither can I understand the lived experiences or the perspectives of people in this country whose lives have been unmarked by the privilege that has shadowed my own. It reminded me that economic prosperity is only one measure of satisfaction, and that poverty is relative to the lives lived by others and the resources available in the places we find ourselves. Like the United States, India is characterized by inequality. Unlike the United States, you cannot escape the knowledge that people are poor, that some have no shelter, that many have little to eat, that most have no health care. In these matters India's hold on life seems precarious. In India there is no privilege of not knowing of the suffering of others: even the wealthy must see it as they drive through the streets.

In this country all those problems exist, but most of us do not see them. Is it because the suffering of people in this country is less? While the absolute level of poverty is less grinding in the United States, the fact that many live at the edge of misery and desperation cannot be denied. The major difference seems to me to be the invisible nature of the suffering in the United States. Since most of us do not see people who endure these privations, we

notice them only when they are pressed upon us. Only those dedicated to ameliorating human suffering, including social workers, physicians and nurses, experience human privation directly and routinely. This experience is itself a privilege, one that carries a heavy burden to respond—to be responsible. In the United States, unlike in India, economic resources are available that could wipe out a good deal of the human suffering caused by inequality, selfishness and ignorance. As David Gil reminds us in this issue of *Reflections*, the solutions to many of our problems are already known, and the will to act is the only element missing from our ability to ease the suffering of many. In this regard, Americans indeed are fortunate.

* Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.



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