

ICWA LETTERS

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America: Looking Back

VARANASI, India

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By Pramila Jayapal

Winter crept into Varanasi. Cold nights replaced humid, musty ones. Our fans have become dusty from lack of use. In the early mornings and late evenings, fog settles over the city, creating a mysterious air. At night, cycle rickshaw drivers cover their heads and necks with thick shawls, and pedal rapidly to keep themselves warm. People seek refuge inside their huts and houses before the sun goes down to avoid the cold; those who have no shelters build small, smoky fires and create halos of glowing light on the broken pavements. Over the Ganga River, the sun still rises golden but is often covered with thin films of white mist.

The coming of a second winter in India reminds me that I have been here almost 20 months. In this time, I have learned just to "be" here and engross my senses in the complex, beautiful and often harsh, world around me, rather than trying to analytically understand it. As I do this, I find I understand more clearly the subtle interplay of societal issues at work. I am more convinced than ever that a deeper, truer understanding of social issues comes when the issues are examined not just from a macro perspective, but from an individual perspective: by an analysis of one's own reactions to an event, an issue, a conversation. Perhaps, most important, I have begun to acknowledge that any understanding of India begins with seeing the divine and the mundane, the good and the bad — and all that lies in between.

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About a month ago, I had the first real crisis of my 20 months in India. There have been plenty of ups and downs in that time, but until now, nothing that I would classify as a crisis. My crisis was as simple as this: for the first time since returning to India, I missed America.

My crisis began when I was ineluctably drawn to thinking about the physical comforts of America. My husband and I had just found out that I was pregnant, and were thrilled. However, our excitement melded into fear when I developed chronic bronchitis, which, in turn, led to sinusitis and several nasty asthma attacks. Doctors identified the key culprit of my illnesses as the environment we live in, where a cold winter fog condenses low to the ground and traps horrifying amounts of particulate matter that eats at one's lungs and creates chronic respiratory problems. They told me very seriously that I would be fine if I avoided cold and dust. I listened with a combination of disbelief, frustration and amusement, knowing that following their instructions literally would mean leaving India and its medical care behind.

Obtaining accurate medical information so readily available in America proved to be difficult. Doctors gave me different information on what medication was safe for pregnant women, and what the best course of medical action would be. My confidence in the accuracy of the medical information I was receiving dipped to

rock-bottom when one doctor gave me a medication that I knew to be contra-indicated for pregnant women. I began sending a flurry of faxes and e-mails to friends and relatives in America, asking for confirmation of the appropriateness of my treatments and medications.

Apart from my illnesses, pregnancy brought new challenges with respect to my diet. Satisfying our palates with local food rather than craving the variety of options we know are available in the States was never an issue, until my body metamorphosed into an unknown monster that rejected whatever I put into it. My favorite Indian foods — masala dosas, paneer, spicy vegetable curries — ended up in colorful undigested displays on the pearly white porcelain of our lavatory.

I yearned for hearty soups and fresh brown breads from our corner cafe in Seattle; for clear information from my competent doctors at Providence Hospital; for the resources and facilities in America that ease any difficult period. Going out of the house, installing my tired body into a rickety rickshaw and then pounding through potholed streets with each bump coursing through every vertebrae of my spine, no longer counted as a pleasurable activity — nor did immersing myself in the ceaseless sights, sounds and smells that usually enthralled me. For two months, I remained a virtual prisoner in our flat.

For the first time since returning to India, I wondered if the life I had become accustomed to in America had made it impossible for me to be satisfied with life here. Returning “home” seemed quickly to be turning into just a romantic ideal. It was as if, all of a sudden, I had become dependent on my connection with America: in craving what I knew it could offer, in dreaming about how life would be different if I were there.

In search of a gynecologist I could fully trust, I was told by several people that the best one was the head of the Benaras Hindu University (BHU) Medical School. She gave me a 9:00 a.m. appointment one morning at the BHU OBGYN general wards. Sheila, my landlady, kindly offered to accompany me so that I could safely find my way through the enormous BHU maze of buildings and bureaucracy.

BHU, inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi, was once considered one of the finest institutions in the country and the hope for revival of India’s great intellectual capacity. It is still, to my surprise, ranked as the fourth best university in India, in spite of its well-known academic deterioration over the years. The campus itself is beautifully designed, with domed buildings and wide arches gracing the sides of wide, tree-lined campus avenues. Entering the BHU gates, one feels almost as if one has entered an American campus with enormous fields of green and hundreds of students on

cycles. Only upon walking inside the buildings does one see the disrepair, the signs of student and teacher disdain: walls ruined by signs of red *paan* stains from spitting out beetle-leaf juice wherever is convenient, a pervasive smell of urine, litter along the halls and stairways. A highly political university, BHU often remains closed for weeks at a time because of student political strikes. Even when it is open, offices are often empty and devoid of the vitality that characterizes most university campuses.

BHU Hospital, however, as a public institution and primary medical teaching center that offers free medical care, always remains open and crowded. Sheila and I made our way through disinfectant-smelling urinals, up winding stairs, to a *paan*-stained corridor where we waited for the doctor. She appeared half an hour late, with an army of younger students and doctors in tow trying to get her attention. She cast us a marginal glance when we told her I had an appointment, and ordered me to keep waiting. Ten minutes later, she emerged with a young woman assistant and gruffly beckoned to me to follow her. I did so meekly, while Sheila waited in the cavernous, rather musty hall outside.

“Her replies and her silences all seemed to ask who I thought I was to question her actions.”

The inspection room looked as if it had not been used for medical care in years. The walls were completely bare: no colorful ante-natal charts, no comforting pictures of doctors cuddling newly-delivered babies like those that fill the clinic of my family practitioner in

Seattle. I lay down on a table. The doctor, without even asking my full name, or proceeded to conduct an internal examination. She offered no explanation of what she was doing or why, and only grudgingly answered a few (not all) of my questions. Her replies and her silences all seemed to ask who I thought I was to question her actions. The rest of the appointment — a mere 10 minutes in total — was equally miserable.

I left the room feeling completely violated. I felt this doctor had no sense of a patient’s basic right to information about what was being done to her body, nor about the need for human interaction on an issue as personal as one’s own health. Perhaps my past work experience with an international health organization that focused on women’s reproductive health had heightened my sensitivity about both the objective and subjective parts of quality of medical care: the need for not just good information and good knowledge but also a sensitive and caring approach to providing health care. Certainly, my exposure to some excellent medical providers in America had also raised my expectations.

Sheila could see that I was upset. I did my best to explain why, and she tried her best to understand. “She is the best doctor in Varanasi,” she soothed. “Certainly if there was something wrong, she would have told you. Anyway, you have to understand, this is free treatment. You know,

she has so many patients — what to do?” Sheila’s words, well-meaning as they were, sent me off on another tirade. What did it mean to say she was the “best” doctor in Varanasi? As for free treatment, I found myself enraged by the idea that just because something is free, it should be excused for deficiencies in quality. Sadly, I knew, it would be the poor who would suffer; people like me who could afford to pay would be able to seek better treatment elsewhere.

The visit mocked my lofty ideas that patients often know their bodies better than a doctor may, and that it is a doctor’s responsibility to extract this information sensitively and combine it with his/her own medical knowledge. And, I could not help but wonder, if I had to fight this hard to get information and had received treatment like this, what about the hundreds of women who come in every day with far less information, far less ability to argue? What did they feel? What about their right to appropriate care? That day, I longed not just for the physical comforts of America, but also for the progressive notions of individual rights — to information and to individual dignity — that it represents.

This was only the beginning of my crisis. My ailments clung like leeches, sucking from me any remaining shreds of energy and sanity. I spent hour after hour in bed at home, unable to go out because of the effect the pollution had on my lungs. I fell into a decidedly ugly self-pitying stage, took to watching our resident ghekkos scour the walls in search of unsuspecting insects. He was efficient, often catching dozens in mere minutes.

To fill my free time, I started tuning in on my short-wave radio to Voice of America’s reports of the American election, which were taking place at the time. One morning, I caught the live broadcast of both Clinton’s and Gore’s victory speeches. They talked about their promises for the next term: that 8-year old children would be able to read, that 12-year olds would be able to log on to the famous information super highway, that 18-year olds who wanted would have the opportunity to go to college, that families and communities would work together to build a better America, that the government would commit itself to less crime, better environment and on and on. Usually, I would dismiss most of this as campaign rhetoric, designed only to win votes, but this time, I actually felt possibly my first twinges of what I hesitantly call U.S. nationalistic pride. I stopped and recognized the gifts I have been given by my life in America, the fact that America really does offer something wonderful and marvelous to its citizens — opportunity.

The kinds of issues I heard discussed in those speeches were on a completely different plane than the kinds of issues on the table here. In India, we talk desperately of ridding the country of fundamental ills like hunger, starvation,

homelessness, nonexistent infrastructure, institutionalized societal discrimination around caste, gender, class. Although plagued by many more evils that are still at their nascent stages in India — drugs, crime, economic expectations and pressures — a baby born in America has so much more opportunity than a baby born in India to live a life where basic comforts are satisfied. Despite my opinion that the American system of values over-emphasizes individual versus community, rights versus responsibilities, and economic versus spiritual development, I could not, at that time, focus on much other than the good in America.

In a moment of stark clarity, I saw that in my quest to get closer to and understand India and my own “Indianness” better, I had unconsciously distanced myself from — even rejected — America, which is as much a part of my life as India. Part of the reason for this, I realized, was a reaction to what I saw and heard around me. There is so much good said already about America, why do I need to add to it, I would unconsciously ask myself. Whereas India — always criticized, put down for its poverty, its filth — seemed to need its champions...specifically, me. To accept the U.S., its good and its influence on me, I thought, would imply to people a rejection of India. People, I was

sure, would instantly see me as making a choice between allegiance to the two countries; and to them, the choice would be so obvious: who would take poverty and filth over individual rights and opportunity? The “sensational” always emerges quickly, especially in countries like India where one’s vision is barraged with sights of lepers wheeling themselves around on skateboards, shacks built in garbage dump sites, human and animal excrement on the roads. The good of America is on display for all to see; the good in India is not what one experiences immediately through the senses. It reveals itself only to the dedicated, to those who are willing to both take from and give to the country, to challenge their notions of right and wrong, to question ways of life often taken for granted in the West.

Who would understand that what India has to offer is sacred, rare, and deep? It is not to be found in the glorious monuments like the Taj Mahal, that people see but then contrast with the heaps of excrement outside. It is not to be found in 5-star luxury hotels that offer finer service than one might find in the great hotels of America, but in fact, shield you from what is really to be discovered in India. It is not to be found in the “quaint” nature of the mystic Indian snake-charmer or his colleagues — usually only fakes who frequent the tourist spots and play to the romantic notions of India created by hordes of Western documenters.

I have found what India has to offer in the relationships people have with each other; in the respect they have for the connections of family and friends; in the regard villagers still maintain for the earth and for what is sacred; in the

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knowledge most Indians have that man is, after all, only man. I have found it in the joy that people take in living, in being, in drinking tea, in greeting one another, in savoring the minutes of a day leisurely. I have found it when I sit on the banks of the Ganga River and listen to a music concert that displays the wealth of Indian art and combines it with spirituality and philosophical beliefs. India, to me, is an example of life: colorful, pulsating, often overwhelming, and in the end, rewarding — if one learns and takes from it.

Many visitors see only the larger Indian cities. These cities, often a miasma of pollutant-ridden odors, diesel-spewing vehicles, uncollected garbage and filth, serve to strengthen the viewpoint that India is backward and has little to offer the rest of the world. Ironically, cities have become this way from following the glorification of Western ideals without instituting the “checks” that those nations have instituted. India and Indians are beginning to pursue what is projected as the best future course for development — industrialization, technology, consumption, individualism — at the cost of what has served Indian society so well for eons.

The latter one can still find, though fast disappearing, in India’s villages. Here, one sees the remnants of the so-called “less-developed” society that existed before: careful recycling of everything, no wastage of food, production of essential items in one’s own home, relationships to humans and the earth that acknowledge an individual human’s limitations. Have we progressed, I often wonder, if “progress” is what we see in the cities? Have we progressed if “progress” means an insatiable

desire for consumption? Although India is often blamed for the destructive effect her population is having on the earth’s limited resources, a baby born in America actually has *thirty times more* impact on the environment than does an Indian baby.

I realized, in my crisis, that because of all the preconceived notions I feel exist, particularly in the West and among the Westernized elite of India, I have not been completely honest in all my writings. Often, I simply avoided

writing about those issues which were most disturbing to me — like caste, corruption, or gender — because of my loyalty to India. My feelings for India are complex, and I am only just beginning to accept and understand that loving India does not mean loving each and every part of it. It means loving it *in spite of* its bad, and loving it

enough that I am committed to doing whatever possible to changing the bad — including exposing it.

Out of every crisis, they say, comes the opportunity for growth. My growth came in one very fundamental realization about the complex triangle that exists between me, India and America. I see now that the confidence I have gained through deepening my understanding of India — although it first took me away from “claiming” America in any way — has now brought me back to the middle. In my new understanding of India, of its good and bad, I have a better understanding of America. My roots are not in one place or the other — they are in both. Dug into different aspects of both cultures, they thrive, feed each other and make me a richer person. I am lucky, not torn apart, to be a part of both countries. □

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