

An Undiscovered Sense of Reality

By: Anubha Agarwal

I began this month long investigative foray into India with the smug attitude that often follows one who feels all too familiar and comfortable with a place. I was born in India twenty years ago. I could speak Hindi fluently. I've been eating roti, dal, chawal for as long as I can remember. I even knew some of the religious Hindu hymns by heart. So clearly I already knew India, right?

Wrong. I knew India through the foggy panes of air-conditioned cars. I knew the India that upper middle class and those lucky few that are converting from the dollar to the rupee understand. I knew India from inside the all too comfortable walls of luxury built by those who were lucky enough to have turned over the "right" card in the poker game of life.

But after being jammed inside local trains with the sweat of every surrounding person converging onto my clothes, after spending time with slum-dwellers that live in horrendous subhuman conditions – I witnessed a harsh reality unlike anything I've ever seen before. I gained a unique understanding of the complexity of poverty and the multidimensionality of life itself in India. But more than anything, I found something that I was feverishly passionate about: working to alleviate extreme poverty. AVSAR played a pivotal role in creating a comfortable atmosphere of learning and discovery. The girl with that smug attitude of familiarity (me) was faced with an India that she had previously only seen through an external lens.

Some of the most critical people in unveiling my own ignorance were none other than the students that I taught English to every day. And I think the only way that I can arouse your own awareness is by sharing with you one of the most important parts of my experience: my students themselves. I introduce to you Deepali Mestry and her life story: read it. Think. And then read it again.

On September 2nd, 1981, Deepali Mestry opened her eyes for the first time, entirely incognizant of the hand destiny had dealt her. She was born with a rare form of spina bifida (a birth defect of the spine) termed meningomycele. At time of birth, the lower part of her spinal cord protruded out of her infant body and was entirely unprotected due to undeveloped vertebrae. The damaged spinal cord caused paralysis of her lower legs and left Deepali without normal use of two of the most important limbs of the human body.

At a time when most six month old infants are waddling around and curiously discovering the world surrounding them, baby Deepali had already undergone two major operations at Hajji Ali Hospital to correct her condition. The operation involved the incision of a critical nerve that could leave the infant with a life-long physical disability or a major case of insanity. Not only did this necessary surgery leave Deepali without the use of both her legs, but the government employed doctor also forgot to take out a staple inserted during the procedure into her back. For an entire year afterwards, no one in the family could understand why white pus would ooze out of her back, right over the area of

the secretly injurious, metal staple. This potentially fatal mistake was quickly fixed by her own grandmother, and Deepali was enrolled into a special day school for the disabled and handicapped in Mumbai.

However, as Deepali grew older, other physical difficulties came to light. Mrs. Mestry often noticed a trail of urine droplets behind her daughter and immediately took her to see a private doctor at Gandlekhar Hospital. The first doctor found a problem with one of her kidneys and advised the removal of the entire organ. A second opinion was soon sought after and this doctor discovered the possibility of saving 25% of the injured kidney. The altruistic doctor offered to perform the important kidney-saving operation for free, but even the necessary government taxes for the crucial procedure were too much for Deepali's family. Instead, Deepali was left with only one working kidney and a removable catheter for urination. She was left with a condition that required her to go to the bathroom every three hours. And she was left with a life-long reminder of her immense pain.

After six surgeries, 10 year old Deepali was admitted into the 5th Standard in a private school in Mumbai. There life became a regular tension between periodic satisfaction and persistent frustration. Her fellow classmates, unable to fully grasp the reason Deepali often urinated over her clothes and smelled poorly, refused to befriend her. Without many friends, lonely Deepali sought and found compassion in her teachers. To this day, she still remembers the assistant principal ("Patanker Maam") that held extra classes after school just to tutor Deepali. Even among her years in secondary school, there were gems of instances that make one realize the true benevolence of humanity. For example, in 7th grade, Deepali's invaluable crutches suddenly broke while she was at school. Amidst her delirious sobs, she heard the boy who always helped carry her bag come running back. He immediately pulled out his own bright white handkerchief and used it to tie the two dangling parts of Deepali's sole source of support. While holding her bag with one hand, the boy used the other to assist Deepali home.

Finally, at 24 years of age, Deepali discovered NASEOH and immediately enrolled herself in the six month computer course as well as the six month typing course. Not only did she discover a place where others like her can gain important skills, but she found a place that introduced her to life-long friends, something that Deepali severely lacked before. The sheltered and comfortable atmosphere of NASEOH gave ample space for Deepali's self-confidence to be nurtured. With this newly gained confidence, Deepali knows that she wants a good job in the future in order to be able to support her parents, her lifelines ever since birth.

Giggling, she boldly tells the story of how she and her sisters went to a local pub last Sunday. Mrs. Mestry, extremely hesitant in allowing her fragile daughter to be exposed to the brutality of ignorant minds, suggests that Deepali stay inside the well-worn walls of their comfortable home. Deepali's immediate response quickly revealed a total absence of fear and a grounded sense of confidence in herself, her body, and her world. She has no fear of who she is, something that only a lucky few can ever confidently state.