

The Boy with the Red Rag

We had finished up dinner at New Friends Colony in New Delhi and were walking towards our bus. Usually I am accustomed to walking around the places that I travel - a chance to explore the city. However, our tour bus made things very convenient. It would always drop us off and pick us up at our destination. This evening, we had to wait on the bus a minute. It's a big bus on a tiny street so it took a while to maneuver through the traffic. Our group was huddled in a circle - a few had already gone back to the hotel. A little Indian boy came up to us with his hand extended. By this point in the trip, this sight had become common. Little children would come up to our group - a group of lighter-skinned Westerners - asking for money. Some children were very assertive - touching our arms, following us, incessantly begging. This boy was maybe 7 or 8. He was so very thin - his pants barely hanging onto his narrow waist. As he came closer, we noticed that he was putting a red rag in his mouth. The two Indian students that were accompanying our group told him to go away. The boy ignored them and continued to surround the group...begging for money. At this point, we could tell he was not clear-minded. One of the Indian students told him to leave again. The boy became angry at the student. In the boy's mind, the student was preventing him from getting money. Of course in the student's mind, he was trying to protect the group. The boy kept sucking on the red rag like a pacifier. He became explosive. The boy started yelling at the student - cursing his mother and his sister. The student tried to calm the boy but it only seemed to make things worse. The boy walked away and came back with a brick. He tried to throw it at the student but didn't have the strength. He threw it on the ground in rage. Finally, after 5 minutes that felt like an eternity, the bus arrived. We all quickly got on the bus and watched the boy fade in the rear-view mirror.

To me, someone who is pursuing a career in child welfare, this event was traumatizing. I still cannot get this little boy's face - sucking on his red rag - out of my mind. I have heard about

little children huffing paint or nail polish remover, but it was disturbing to witness a child so desperate. So self-destructive. So high. During our trip, it was easy to become numb to the needy - the disabled, the women, the children, the babies. There is so much need and it's impossible to internalize and make sense of it all. After all, we are here to see the Taj Mahal right?! I think that many people put the USA on a pedestal as if we don't have people in need - as if we care for our own. The fact is we don't.

As someone who works for Mecklenburg County, I see the need everyday. I see people in desperate situations that are grasping for a safety net - something to catch them when all other means of provision have failed. It's just that in India and in America, the need looks different. In America, the government bears the burden of the needy (or attempts to). Of course in every city of the world, I am sure there are people begging on the corner. However, in America, the government has provided services in attempt to alleviate such poverty. There are services intended to help people pull themselves up by their bootstraps. In Charlotte, we can relegate people in need to the DSS on Freedom Drive or the Homeless Shelter on Spratt Street. We can put on our sunglasses and lock our doors as we speed by the "God bless, please help" signs. In America, we have made it easier to ignore the plight of the poor. We want to believe in the facade that America secures liberty and justice for all.

In India, the need is in your face. The need is proportionate to the population - BIG. It is hard to ignore. The need slaps you while waiting in the bus at a stoplight...while women are trying to put their hands in the window to grab your attention. They want you to see their baby - drugged with opiates - feel pity on them, and spare your extra change. Parents train their kids to approach tourists and pull at your heartstrings. In both societies - America and India - there is need and there are people that are trying to survive. When your babies are hungry, you will do a lot of crazy things. In America, I feel fortunate that we do have programs that create a safety net - that people don't have to fall as far before they get help. In India, people in need just keep falling. We witness people at a place of greater need because nothing is in place to catch them.

We witness kids huffing paint and begging high on the street because that's their means of livelihood. That's how they have been trained to bring food home at night. In India and in America, the need is there - it just looks different. Will I pay attention or pray the bus comes sooner?