

Hello from Hyderabad...

5th Edition, February 2006

February is just three months away from June. While I didn't have to come to India to realize this fact, I did have to realize this fact to appreciate how much longer I'm in India. My current plan is to return to the U.S. in late June. In February, I realized how little time I have left and in this realization found new motivation and energy for life here. The month of 28 days held more activities than I usually fit into 31: my first train ride; two weddings; travels to Chennai, the tsunami project, and Sri Lanka; a 5-day staff retreat; goodbyes; and the continuation of every day routines.

Birthdays and chocolate

Naqi arrived late for his own surprise party on 1st February. We had decorated the tv room after work, and by 6pm were waiting for him to arrive. He had gone for a shower, unaware of why we were anxious for him to come. About 6:30, he came down the stairs. Indeed, he was surprised by the balloons and applause. By this time, I'd noticed that the cake set out a few minutes earlier said "Happy Birthday Naqi and Emma". I, too, was surprised, thinking I would miss celebrating my birthday (2nd Feb) at the hostel because I was leaving later that night on a train to Chennai. Naqi and I soon found ourselves being treated as the guests of honor. At HMI, that position almost always comes with a flower garland. And so two were bestowed upon us.

Shobha asked us each to say something. I hesitated. She encouraged me, "Tell us your birthday wish. In my place," she said, "it is tradition to share a wish on your birthday." Oh no, culture clash. I responded, "But in my home it is considered bad luck to announce your birthday wish." We resolved the cultural incompatibility; I shared my second-to-top birthday wish. Naqi's speech was more revealing. Visibly moved by the gathering in his name, he said, "This is the first time I've celebrated my birthday. Thank you so much." His response is not unusual. Many Indians do not grow up with birthday celebrations. And if there is a celebration, it's less likely to be a big party and more likely to include prayers, a special trip to the temple or church, and maybe some sweets or special food at dinner.

Here, I've witnessed people using their own birthdays as a chance to celebrate their community. For instance, one friend spent her birthday delivering soaps and sweets to a nearby orphanage. Another friend organized a picnic (Indian for "outing") on his birthday and took 18 of us to another city to visit historic Islamic sites. Often, the birthday celebrant will distribute sweets at the office. If it is the birthday of someone living in the hostel, we do usually throw a party. It is simple one: cake, decorations, maybe some chips, music and dancing, cool drinks. ("Cool drinks" is vernacular for soda or pop. I assume this phrase originates from the times when refrigerators were even more scarce in India and store-bought soda was a treat especially because it was chilled.) I have nothing profound to say about birthdays in India. Generally, the celebrations reveal the simplicity of traditions that originated among people accustomed to dealing with limited resources. I can only say that some of the sweetest, most life-affirming moments have come in these small, predictable parties, or the gesture of being offered a chocolate from someone on his own birthday.

Speaking of chocolates, in February I finally confronted several Indian friends on a particular point of linguistic contention. "Why do you say 'chocolate' when you mean hard candy? If you want me to bring you fruit candies, why do you ask for chocolates?" The language of sweet foods in India is confusing. "Sweets" may mean anything sweet, but usually refers to the pieces of cooked sweets sold at sweet shops or hot desserts consisting primarily of sweet syrups. The word "candy" is used far less than it is eaten. "Chocolates" might mean wrapped hard candy. "Chocolate" without the "s" most

often refers to chocolate. You may be surprised to know that my outburst of linguistic frustration did not forever change the course of Indian English. Fortunately, I'm dealing with it . . . by eating chocolates . . . or sweets . . . or whatever it's called.

Before leaving the topic of birthdays, I should mention another tradition about the birthday cake. The first piece is not eaten by the birthday celebrant. Rather, she is to feed the first piece to the person of her choosing. Because Naqi and I shared a party, we were each other's chosen one. The photos from our party more closely resemble an American wedding reception. It's a nice tradition . . . to have your cake and feed it too.

The Chennai SuperFast Express

I had to leave the party early to catch an 8pm train to Chennai (Madras) with Florina and Spring. Florina is the Associate Director for Praxis (Conflict Resolution and Community Development) at HMI. She lives with her husband Ashok in Chennai (Madras) and comes to Hyderabad (a 14-hour train ride) for half of the work week. Spring is from Montana and came to HMI to visit Florina and Ashok whom she'd met the previous year at a conference. We traveled home with Florina that weekend to see her family, attend weddings, and visit HMI's tsunami project on the coast further south.

This was my first train ride in India. A few highlights.

- The Indian Railway system – a government entity – is the largest single employer in the world, with over 1.6 million employees.
- One of the most famous jokes in India is to mimic the voice of the men who sell food on trains. Walking through the aisle announcing metal canisters of “coffee” or “chai”, packets of “biryani”, trays of “idly”, their voice is the same across the country, as if trained to sound like the distortion option on a megaphone.
- At each train stop, young boys get on the train and crawl along the aisle wiping the floor with a rag and collecting trash. Before moving to the next cabin, they put out their hand for money. They may ride for several hours, moving from one car to the next. I presume they get off eventually and catch the next train back to their home. Though they are technically not allowed to ride the train without tickets, their presence, and their work, is part of how the rail system works. (No railway employee ever came by to sweep the floor or collect trash.)
- Trains are slow. The distance between Hyderabad and Chennai is 704 km (less than 300 miles). The scheduled duration of the train, though often delayed, is 14 hours.
- Transportation in India is cheap and abundant. Especially considering trains *and* buses, there is no parallel in America providing public, long-distance travel options to the masses.

Weddings . . . too much to say

Last week I noticed a friend reading a book called Marrying and Burying. The book explores how cultures structure their lives around a few basic rituals, of which marriage and burial are two. February brought my Indian introduction to both.

After a delay of 4 hours, we finally got off the train in Chennai, spent the afternoon with Florina's mother and nephews and then traveled by car to a town about 4 hours away, to attend the wedding of Bala, Ashok's friend from their days studying social work. Bala now oversees the family's large farm in a village near to the town. Because of the family's prominence in the village, this was a big wedding. (I'm not sure if there is any other kind in India.) I'm afraid that if I try to describe

the ceremony, I will be overwhelmed to the point of giving up on this entire newsletter. I have thus far attended two Hindu weddings and one Hindu wedding reception. These are big events: big for the community – everyone shows up; big for the family – so much energy into planning the relationship, and families play a large role in the actual ceremony.

Whether Hindu, Muslim, or Christian, weddings in India are full of ritual. And even a surface analysis of any wedding ceremony could become the table of contents for a thorough analysis of the anthropology, sociology, and theology of India. Precisely for this reason, the wedding of an urban, atheist Indian couple might look much like the ceremony of a rural, traditionally religious bride and groom. And in these ways, Indian weddings are like many American weddings – so revealing of culture that they often reveal very little about the people involved. And, just as I need not know the bride and groom to enjoy the romance and significance of an American wedding, I could know the bride's entire life story and still be bored at an Indian wedding. While sitting with surprising disinterest at a fascinating Indian wedding ceremony, I considered that perhaps the ceremonies with the most meaning are the most meaningless to the foreigner. (Disclaimer: I admittedly speak only for myself and like-minded persons; there are many foreigners who love Indian weddings and Americans who are bored by their own vows.)

My reaction to these weddings provoked me to consider how culture shapes our most personal ambitions. I cannot imagine daydreaming as a child about being a bride in the ceremonies I witnessed here. Ashamedly, I even felt sorry for the marrying couple, thinking, "Oh, it's too bad you can't have a nice wedding ceremony." I'm so attached to my expectations for a wedding that I actually felt sympathy for these couples because I did not find meaning in their rituals. It is not as though any wedding ritual – whether Indian Hindu or American Christian – holds the secret for a lasting, happy marriage. Nor do I think all weddings should be exactly alike. In my ashamed feelings of sympathy, I realized how much I am a product of a culture dominated by "western Christian" rituals. Confronting this reality is part of dealing with the challenge I mentioned in the first newsletter – the challenge of accepting that people "can be happy in the midst of this".

(For a glimpse of how prominently marriage features into Indian society, take a look at the advertisements and links on Yahoo!'s India website – www.yahoo.co.in)

February also brought opportunity to witness another passage of life – burial. Francis is the co-manager of the hostel. His mother, Lizzie, expired on February 12. (In Indian English, "expired" is often used in place of "died".) Though she became sick several months ago, doctors could not diagnose her condition and her death this month was unexpected. It was a difficult loss for HMI, primarily to see Francis suffer, but also because Lizzie had worked for years as the cook at the Director's residence. As the only son in a family now without both parents, Francis is responsible for the family (sisters, nieces, nephews) and all that had to happen after his mother's death.

In India, the funeral generally occurs on the day of death. (Additional gatherings happen after a set number of days, depending on the local tradition. Indians also recognize death anniversaries.) Lizzie died in the early morning. By 11am, the first carload of hostel residents left HMI's campus to pay our respects. We arrived at Francis's house and walked toward the front area. Twenty or thirty women were gathered on the ground outside the front door. They surrounded Lizzie's body which was laid on a platform, wrapped in white cloth and covered in garlands, exposing only her face. We stayed for the next half hour. Every few minutes one of the women would begin a hymn (Francis's family is Catholic) and others would sing. As people arrived, they added garlands to Lizzie's body, placed candles or loaves of bread (presumably food for the family) on the altar, kissed the forehead, and touched her feet. This gesture of touching feet is a sign of deep respect. Though men approached to pay their respects, only women remained with her body. I don't know whether this is

the same when the deceased is a man. The funeral began later in the afternoon with a procession of the body from the house to the church. A similar procession is customary in many religious traditions here.

In India, the hours and days following a death are full of rituals. I was reminded in this month that the average American practices far fewer traditions regarding the end of life. Twelve days after Lizzie's death, my Grandmother, Ruby Crossen, passed away in Kansas. Because her passing was peaceful, expected, and came at the end of 93 full years of life, her family saw the occasion as cause for celebration more than mourning. Still, as I learned of her death from an internet café in Sri Lanka, I wondered how to respond: Can I go on with the day as planned? I am not feeling particularly emotional, but should I act different because I just received this news?

If I were at home, I would have immediately become involved in the planning – traveling to Kansas, arranging details with the funeral home, etc.. But when I was present for those details at another family funeral, even then I wondered, "How do I respond?" Surely, anyone suffering loss feels this uncertainty. But I observe in India that rituals provide an outlet for expressing emotion and energy. This outlet is not always personal. It does not always provide space for a son to express why he is sad. (Some families even hire professional mourners to attend the ceremonies following a death.) But rituals give everyone a common understanding of "what to do next". Prepare the body . . . gather at the home . . . friends will come . . . process to the church . . . hold funeral . . . go to cemetery (And this all happens within 20 hours after the death) . . . spend a prescribed number of days in "mourning" without leaving the house . . . after 10 days host a worship service and dinner. (One element of this process that amazes me is the way people seem to show up to take care of these details. In India, I often find myself amazed that, somehow, it all gets done.)

As an American, I'm less likely to take comfort in the abundance of rituals, but when I sat in that internet café in Colombo, wondering "how to respond" to Grandma's passing, I thought of Lizzie's death and how rituals, even if not comforting, do provide answers.

Tsunami Project

During the trip with Florina and Spring, we also visited HMI's tsunami project in the Nagipatnam District of Tamilnadu state. HMI began the project in January 2005 with funding from Mennonite Central Committee and in collaboration with BEST, a local Nagipatnam NGO. HMI calls itself an International Centre for Research, Interfaith Relations, and Reconciliation. The tsunami project was initiated as an expression of the latter, to help victims reconcile with their life on the water. The project puts strong emphasis on reclaiming land, returning fisherfolk to the sea, and counseling. We spent a long day driving along the beaches.

At one point, we were visiting three farmers at a house several kilometers away from the beach. I could not see the ocean from this distance. Someone commented about the tsunami, "The wave came this far." Eye-witness accounts vary about what happened on that fateful day in 2004. Some residents claim the water stayed in their homes for a few seconds, others say their homes were flooded for 30 minutes. Florina, who has worked extensively with trauma victims, said that such varying accounts are typical after a trauma like the tsunami. Levels of water damage in the buildings suggest that water from the tsunami returned to the sea after only a few minutes. I stood in the farmer's yard that evening and looked out over farmland in every direction. What left me awe-struck was the thought that a wave had come this far. Not a downpour from the sky that sits in the house until it dries or drains. No, this was a wave, a moving force of water, dynamic enough to come several kilometers inland and return to sea within a few minutes. Perhaps I came a little closer that day to standing in fear of God's creation.

Life continues in these communities. BEST's farmland supervisor showed us the fruits of much labor - acres and acres of soil reclaimed after a giant wave left the land full of salt. We picked grains from the first rice harvest since the tsunami.

The contributions of international charities were obvious throughout the district. Thinking back, I might compare that first relief camp to a home decorator's showcase, except that instead of interior designers advertising their decorating skills in a living room or kitchen, roadside signs in Nagipatnam acknowledged a Dutch organization that built the shelters, or a German church that set up the water system, or an American group that contributed funds for the new homes.

That first relief camp of fisherfolk families was, of course, anything but an interior decorator's showcase. Rather, the living conditions met all the criteria of cramped and smelly. These fisherfolk never lived in fancy houses, but before the tsunami they lived within feet of the sea, rich with space. Florina explained that many fisherfolk actually lived lives of relative leisure and abundance, sometimes bringing in 100,000 rupees for a single day's catch. They would often spend it the same day on village parties and gatherings. Some days brought a much smaller catch, maybe only 1,000 rupees to be shared by several families. Their lives were simple. They did not emphasize saving, but the money that was saved was kept at home, and was swept to sea in the tsunami.

Thus, one dynamic of relief efforts in this district was the challenge of delivering charity to persons accustomed to being wealthy and living with abundance. Florina described one particular conflict from the initial days after the tsunami. News of the devastation quickly spread throughout India; Many people, wanting to respond immediately, cleaned out their closets to share clothing, which was delivered to victims by the truckload. The next day, most of it had been tossed back on the highway, rejected by the recipients who were deeply offended at this charitable gesture, feeling belittled by the suggestion that they should wear other people's clothes.

The dynamic in fisherfolk communities also highlights another dilemma. If not for the tsunami, international charities probably would not have bothered with fisherfolk communities in Tamilnadu. The fisherfolk were self-sufficient people who enjoyed their lives and were proud of their lifestyle, even if these lives were simple and un-educated. But now that charities are there, they face the dilemma of whether to restore the quality of life that fisherfolk cherished, or to give them what the charities consider essential for quality of life - education and better connections to the outside world. The latter may improve their status on the development index, but will they enjoy life more?

Florina also shared stories of post-tsunami "volunteers" from America and Europe who came to help, but did not know the language, and stayed for weeks or months, partying every night in their hotel rooms. There were others, of course, who came to help or came to learn and were effective and respectful at both. Even so, in a land with a population the size of India, it does seem ridiculous to think that an appropriate response to any crisis is to send some foreigners to help. The depth, skill, and quantity of human resources in this country is overwhelming.

All this said, the challenges I mentioned - rejected help, disrespectful volunteers - are the exceptions in a relief effort of global proportions that continues to transform lives for the better. The exceptions point out the delicacy and complexity of an effort which, even if it is mildly successful, is a historic accomplishment.

We spent several hours accompanying the counselors to meetings with village women. Our visit began at a relief camp where we gathered with women and girls at a session facilitated periodically to provide them a place to share their stories and concerns.

A memorable moment in our visit came towards the end of the day, when I heard the story of a woman who had been with us since morning. She came to that first women's meeting with her 1 yr-old daughter. She was introduced as a local and a volunteer with the relief effort. We saw them throughout the day as we followed the counselors to other appointments. After an afternoon meeting, I stood with this woman and several others, one of whom asked about her family. The translator explained that this mother with whom I'd been smiling all day, making conversation without words, adoring her little girl, was the mother of a young boy who died in the tsunami. There was a point during that first women's meeting when I realized that every person in the room – except for the visitors – had lost a family member or close friend in the tsunami. This was a community bound by mutual loss. At the time, I felt like I was experiencing a rare opportunity to be in a community bound by common loss, a concept foreign to me. But, thinking back on that room full of women, and thinking of the refugee communities I met in Atlanta, the slums of Juarez, Mexico, and the war updates on nightly news, I wonder instead if the rarity is to be in a community in which loss and hardship are private affairs.

Morning on the water; lunch on the shore

The lighter side of our visit to the tsunami project was a morning boatripe in the Bay of Bengal. We three visitors along with Subhash, HMI's project staff, and Nagalakshmi, a BEST counselor, visited one of the fisherfolk villages along the beach. The vehicle stopped at the house of one of the locals who is also a volunteer. Along with 4 other locals, we walked to the water. Along the beach were 10-15 new boats, purchased by the project to replace the boats destroyed in the tsunami. The men pushed our boat to sea and we climbed in. I had not before ridden that far out to see on a small boat. (We probably traveled out about 2 kilometers before circling back.) And never before was I so absorbed by the waves. Each time the boat rose and fell, I thought of how much water was underneath us and how big the next wave might be. As I sat on the rear bench enjoying the rough waves, in front of me our fishermen hosts stood completely relaxed, as though they made this ride everyday (they do). I thought of HMI's goal of reconciliation – reconciling the people with the sea, with their lifestyle and environment. I thought of my minor fear – resulting from my inexperience of the sea. And I wondered how much greater their fear must have been after the tsunami – because they had complete experience of the sea and its power. Reconciled, indeed. It was a picture perfect day and a beautiful ride.

After the boat ride, we attended a community meeting and then went for lunch. We arrived at the house used as living quarters for the men on BEST's staff. Stepping inside brought immediate relief from the sun and heat, and we sat on the unrolled floor mats. Nagalakshmi and another counselor insisted on serving us before eating, so they brought out the banana leaves. Leaves from the banana tree are the typical plates in homes and casual restaurants in southern India. (During the course of our 5-day trip with Florina, I learned the proper way to rinse the leaf before taking food and how to fold the leaf after eating for easy disposal of the "plate" and its contents.)

What followed was a lunch to put Red Lobster to shame (except for the absence of cheese biscuits). Fish curry, fried fish, crab with a curry gravy, and prawns to beat all prawns. With second-helpings a must, it was, to say the least, a feast. I thought of how much this meal would cost at home. And I wondered . . . would Americans be a more patient people if we had to de-bone our fish?

Pondicherry: a short paragraph

Another stop on the trip to Chennai was a morning visit to Pondicherry. This popular tourist spot on the ocean is actually part of a separate union territory made up of Pondicherry and Karaikal in Tamilnadu state, and Mahe in Kerala state. These three areas, amounting to approximately 500 sq kilometers, are geographically separate but united in their heritage as areas colonized by the French.

In Pondicherry, architecture, street layout, and police uniforms are a few of the testaments to French influence. Also, Pondicherry schools teach French rather than English as the second language. Pondicherry is also known as a spiritual centre because it was here that Sri Aurobindo and The Mother established their religious community in the early 1900s.

Came all the way to India to hang out with Americans

February afforded me more opportunities than before to spend time with Americans. Jaclyn arrived from Boston to study Persian, Spring stayed for several weeks, and at the end of the month I travelled to Sri Lanka with another group of ELCA volunteers who are living in India.

After one night out with Spring and Jaclyn, I returned to the hostel thinking of how much I enjoyed the evening; how inspired I was by our conversations – their ideas, plans for future, passions in life; and how easy it was to be with them. At this point, neither of us had known each other for more than a month.

For the last five months, I had lived with Indians, Europeans, and Africans. We had shared a hundred meals, stayed up late in conversation, shopped together, ridden all over the city in buses and autos, and lived each day in the same small community of HMI. Yet, I never in those five months felt the same ease as I did that night with two Americans whom I'd known for a few weeks. Likewise, before meeting the other American volunteers in Sri Lanka, we had previously exchanged only a few e-mails; but it was so easy to join their group and talk for hours on end.

These and other instances are teaching me how much I rely on common experience to communicate. I suppose it's similar to what happens when a group of college friends reunites years after graduation – all they talk about is the college days; or when colleagues gather for the company picnic – they still talk about work. Obviously, culture and country of origin determine much of whether our experience is common. But it was not until coming to India that I realized how much this common experience contributes to communication.

In the U.S., Jaclyn, Spring, and I would surely take more notice of our differences. And I might have more common interests with a friend from India. But what I am learning in India is that culture and country determine so many of the *fundamental* experiences – education systems, climate, significance of certain months, familiar locations - that form the framework for how we tell our stories and communicate ideas. And I make communication easier or more difficult by assuming that we do or do not share these fundamental experiences.

That said, I am able to tell more stories and better understand my own stories because I've left country and culture and encountered the fundamental experiences of people from Nagaland, Hyderabad, England, South Africa, and Frankfurt. In so doing I am reminded that common experience is not limited to shared citizenship. And friendship can grow just as easily from a multi-national affection for black coffee.

Indeed, there is no substitute for an evening with Americans. And there is no substitute for six months without.

Sri Lanka: What conflict?

The day I arrived in Sri Lanka was the day after the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tiger leaders reached an agreement to continue the cease-fire in this island nation “on the verge” of civil war. I was curious to see how much the nation's political tensions would show up on the streets of Colombo and other areas we visited. The quick answer is “not much”. In Colombo, we stayed near

a residential area. Every few blocks, soldiers stood on the corners in full uniform with automatic weapons. But, besides this frequent appearance of soldiers, I did not notice any signs of pending war. Walking through the neighborhoods of the nation's capital, I did wonder how life would change if the cease-fire ended. Would these streets be safe?

(The presence of armed soldiers in Sri Lanka did not startle me as it might have before I lived five months in India, where police officers often appear to me as armed soldiers. The appearance of police officers in India frequently reminds me that my concept of security is based on what I am accustomed to. For instance, I marvel that traffic police here can be effective when they are on foot and could not possibly catch up to a vehicle that dangerously breaks traffic rules. Or so I assume because my expectation is that traffic police need fast vehicles. Similarly, my adrenaline rises when I see an Indian police officer carrying a semi-automatic rifle on routine patrol. In my home context, the presence of such a weapon signals danger, not routine law enforcement. And police here do not carry these weapons because Hyderabad is such a dangerous place. Rather, it is just part of their uniform – part of what denotes them as agents of security. Surely, there are Americans who feel fear at the sight of routinely dressed American police officers because they have experienced these officers to cause more trouble than security. With that as the exception, I assume that most Americans do not feel greater danger at the sight of an American police officer on routine duty. In India, I do feel that danger, simply because the uniform is not, in my experience, a fashion statement of security.)

Kandy is the second-largest city in Sri Lanka but feels more like a crowded village in the hills. We spent two nights in this popular tourist spot, known especially for Buddhist holy sites, including the temple of the tooth – a temple that is home to a tooth from the mouth of Buddha. On our first afternoon there, we left our accommodation at the YMCA and stepped onto the city streets in search of the temple, which we knew to be close by. Two men stood outside a nearby store, so we asked for directions. “Temple of the tooth?” I asked. They did not understand. “Temple,” I said with hands in a prayer gesture. “Tooth,” I touched my tooth. “Oh,” the man responded. “Straight and right.” We walked ahead in the direction of his pointing. A cluster of storefronts advertised, “Dental Surgery”. The temple was the other direction. But I appreciate the man who gave directions, as I'm sure he prayed that afternoon for my successful root canal.

Back in Colombo, I met a man from a town near Kandy. We exchanged thoughts about our homelands. He was a professionally successful insurance broker. He had never left Sri Lanka. I shared my curiosity about how living on an island – and needing a visa to leave - affects Sri Lankan's perspective on the world and identity, and likewise how my relative mobility as a “middle class” American affects mine. And I asked about the political situation, explaining that I was surprised by the very few visible signs of civil conflict. He explained that Sri Lankans are peaceful people and that the conflict is being initiated by a very small minority.

Florina and her husband Ashok are both writing doctoral dissertations based on their work with the Sri Lankan refugee community in Tamilnadu, India. Thousands of Sri Lankan refugees have been unable to return to their country for over a decade. The conflict in Sri Lanka inflicts serious consequences on daily life for millions of people. But its presence in the country itself is hardly noticeable. What does conflict look like? What does it feel like? Do we prolong conflict when we arrange for the majority to continue with life as normal while a minority of victims suffer its effects each day?

Staff Retreat and Translation: Say again?

HMI held its staff retreat in February. This was a 5-day workshop consisting primarily of large-group and small-group discussions. It was the first time I experienced all staff coming together for more

than a one-hour staff meeting. And because this retreat was about dealing with staff concerns, staff development and planning for the future, it was essential to have everyone's participation. Doing so required extensive translation of everything that was said. All but 2 people spoke Hindi (myself among the exceptions), but a significant number of these Hindi speakers are more comfortable in English or Telugu. Every exchange, every activity, every discussion took twice as long. (But if I say it was "twice as long", that reflects my narrow definition of "efficiency" because I'm measuring it against how discussion occurs when everyone speaks the same language, a circumstance that isn't so readily available in India.) Because I was documenting the process and taking minutes, translation conveniently provided extra time to record each comment while it was translated into Hindi. The need for translation assumed patience from everyone, and required extreme amounts of energy from the staff who translated. I am still in awe of their skill and flexibility. How they were anything but completely exhausted at the end of the day is a mystery.

The entire retreat was a lesson in how multi-lingualism affects a working environment. For instance, in our small group discussions, the several attempts to randomly assign partners posed the difficulty of making sure that the woman who spoke only Telugu was in a group with someone who could translate. If it feels like I already wrote about the dynamics of language, 'tis true, and you can expect more in future newsletters. If I repeat myself enough, maybe I will eventually learn what India is teaching me – that communication does not happen automatically and efficiency is not an abstract concept but must be defined within its context. The task of translation still seems overwhelming to me. Once again, I was amazed in India that somehow, it all (the translation) got done. Perhaps I'm so amazed that translation occurs because I'm still struggling to accept that it's necessary. How un-Indian of me.

Protests, Processions, and Response: February in Old City

I sent the January newsletter just a few days after riots erupted in Hyderabad under the pretense of protesting the Danish cartoons of Mohammad. Those protests calmed soon after, but Hyderabad's Old City saw more organized demonstrations in February. After the 22nd February bombing of the Al-Askari shrine in Samarra, Iraq, Shi'a Muslims in Hyderabad organized processions to mourn the destruction of one of their holiest shrines. And, most recently, protestors rallied in the days leading up to the visit from President Bush on 3rd March. On the evening of the first protests, I watched the local news on the hostel television. The television footage I saw here is hardly distinct from what was shown on the international news in the U.S.. But as I watched Teja TV (a Telugu-language channel) on the night of the first protests, I definitely felt the difference of seeing this footage – including a burning effigy of George Bush – on *local* news.

I did not feel endangered by the events. HMI is located south of the city, about 8 km from the Old City area where the most intense riots occurred. I felt the effects most directly through colleagues living in the Old City who could not find transport to work or a friend who cancelled her visits to HMI's community centres because she was warned against traveling through the Old City. Because I know people living in that area and have walked the streets, I am more in tune with the significance of the question often asked after such riots: Why do people repeatedly damage their own neighborhoods (looting stores, destroying vehicles, risking lives) to protest against someone who will never set foot in their community? Any effective response must acknowledge this question and seek answers that account for more than religion.

Goodbye, Friends

February brought a significant shift in my community here. The PGCR (Post-Graduate Diploma in Conflict Resolution) students, who arrived with me in September, completed their course work in February and left HMI to return home: Lemwang to Nagaland; Naqi to Kashmir; Micah, Alwyn,

and Athing to Manipur; Akunge to Arunachal Pradesh. They were my introduction to India. They were my teachers. I could write many more pages about these friends. Hopefully, their stories and influence will show through how I live life differently because I shared six months with them.

They are all returning to their homes. They showed me what it means to care for “their people”, to be committed to “their place”. One thing I’ve learned about myself in the last 6 months is that I’m still more interested in what happens in Terre Haute, Indiana or Kansas City than I am about the city calendar of Hyderabad. It takes effort and intention to care about people here as much as I care about people at home. Poverty, though far worse here, does not affect me the way it does at home. While I don’t consider this to be a virtue, I am convinced that it is not evil, but rather a challenge of loving in a strange land. I have also felt my own inadequacy to be effective in this place, where my language and life experience is so foreign to most people. Perhaps I am just too lazy for the challenge and perhaps my efforts are better put to other challenges. I suspect both are true.

These Indian friends who returned home in February have far fewer options than I to live and work away from “their people”. Regardless, they will serve their people well. Their commitment to their people has helped me to consider that home is part of God’s intention for the world. Perhaps, attachment to home, at its purest, does not divert us from vocation but rather directs us to the place where we can be most useful. Perhaps “saving the world” is really about allowing everyone to be in the place they can call home and to be content with that position. With the world not as God intended it (at least I hope not), restoring people to home may require some to step away from their people and live in a far off place. Perhaps some of us are even equipped with the patience and motivation to do so. I don’t know that I am among this group. But I thank my PGCR friends for reminding me that I, too, have “my people” and it is okay if I am most useful in “my place”.