

Hello from Hyderabad...⁶

6th Edition, March 2006

March was a quieter month at Henry Martyn Institute. Fewer visiting groups, hostel residents moving out, and the slower pace of summer's onset. To the untrained body, these first signs of summer, i.e. "hot" and "hotter", are difficult to distinguish from the signs of the season preceding summer, i.e. "not as hot as it's gonna get". But soon we all learn, and so March trained me in the fine art of distinguishing hot from hot. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the importance of architecture, and especially to appreciate the design of HMI's buildings such that each time I walk outside I am reminded of the intensity of heat which I'd forgotten in the cooler concrete and bricks of the buildings' interiors. Air-conditioning is not a given in India. Rather, it's a selling point that distinguishes one restaurant or store from another. What is a given here is civilization built by people who cope with heat. Knowing that I would find the heat difficult, I think I expected to be humbled by Indians who endure the heat as if it were not hot. Instead, I've found something more humbling – that Indians dislike the heat as much as I, but live with it anyway, every year, because coping with heat is just part of life. India reminds me to not attach labels of "good" or "bad" to the unavoidable things in life. On to March and a newsletter of musings - the good, the bad, the unavoidable.

Cricket, Celebrity, & Culture

A recent newspaper column claimed that the sport of cricket, which came to India through British colonialism, is, at its essence, an Indian game that got its start in Britain only by a fluke of history. The article included examples about the spirit of the game being the same spirit of the Indian people and the diversity of the Indian team reflecting the diversity of India. All these are valid points, but I think the logic is skewed. Cricket reflects India not because cricket, at its essence, is Indian. No, cricket, like so many imports to India, reflects this place because India, at its essence and all other levels of being, is Indian. India is a place with the cultural and people power to always produce an "Indian version". Anything - be it game, food, or movie - that lasts in India will become an Indian version of its previous existence. The examples are abundant, especially in entertainment and the supermarket. The first movie I saw here was "Chocolate", an Indian remake of "Usual Suspects"; Corn flakes come in Mango and Lays potato chips in 5 flavors of masala.

At the staff picnic in March, we split into teams to play the HMI version of the Indian version of cricket. I kept a low profile for most of the game but accepted the invitation to bowl (= pitch) after our team had been fielding for a while. The batter was Robert, a professor at HMI and fellow American who later said, "Emma, I appreciated that you threw the ball like a baseball pitch instead of a cricket bowl, which was why I could hit it." In cricket, the field is called a pitch. Throughout the cities and villages of India, from dawn to dusk, local boys transform empty spaces of grass or dirt into cricket pitches. At the staff picnic, despite my best attempts to imitate the action of cricket bowlers I'd seen on television, using a running-start-fully-rotate-the-shoulder-bringing-arm-extended-above-the-head-aim-for-ball-to-bounce-just-in-front-of-the-batter, my "bowl" betrayed that my game of bat and ball is played on a diamond. If America had colonized India, would the newspaper columnist be claiming that baseball, the all-American pastime, is at essence an Indian game?

Perhaps cricket in India has parallels with the popularity of baseball in Puerto Rico and Cuba and the number of top baseball players who came from these places . Baseball did arrive there through America's influence, whether or not this influence is comparable to the British colonial presence in India. One difference, I suppose, is that the best players in Puerto Rico and Cuba come to America to make it big. Indian cricket players make it big in their home country; making it to the top of the game in India is not one step below the big leagues of another country. With cricket, this is in part because the sport itself is biggest on an international level, so India's top players are known by fans of England's team. Baseball's "world series", on the other hand, is an almost entirely American enterprise.

Whether or not India's celebrities are known around the globe, the "local" fan base alone, within India, supports a culture of celebrity like none-other. Of course, most Indian stars have some international acclaim because India, as the largest economic/cultural influence in South Asia, and home to the world's largest film industry, provides entertainment to its international neighbors and to the millions of NRIs living around the world. (NRI, a common acronym here, stands for non-resident Indians who reside in other countries.) A visitor at HMI from Zambia commented that he should purchase posters of Bollywood stars to take home because the same posters are popular but expensive in Africa. But even if Indian movie/tv/cultural icon Amitabh Bachan were popular only in India . . . that still makes for nearly a billion people with access to daily news updates about his physical condition when he spent time in a Mumbai hospital earlier this year for a fairly routine treatment. To be famous in India is to be famous like no other.

And this applies not only to national stars. Earlier this month, a Telugu TV station showed live coverage of the wedding for the daughter of a Telugu movie star. I'm sure millions of people saw that wedding. And the father? He is not a national star. No, he's "just" one of the most famous actors in *regional* film, acting primarily in Telugu and South Indian movies. Of course, in India, the Telugu-speaking population is 60 million strong. His photo is likely to be next to Amitabh Bachan on the concrete walls of village and city homes.

When my mom was here in December, she commented on the amount of advertising in India, another element of celebrity power. After being here 4 months, I had grown accustomed to what she accurately perceived to be advertisements everywhere, many of which feature entertainment or political celebrities. And, while Americans balk to see our top actors "stoop" to the level of doing ad spots for credit cards or make-up companies, Indian celebrities are no less adored when their face appears holding Pepsi on the signs of road-side snack stands or marketing floor cleaner on a TV ad.

I question whether there is any parallel in American culture to the role of celebrity in India. There is more to it than just a quasi-worship of actors and sports stars. The obsession with celebrities and glamorous lives is curiously paired with Indians' modesty and intense loyalty to family, god, and home. Many of the same viewers who watch a movie in which Aishwarya Rai's character wears tight jeans and a t-shirt while riding across the Rajasthan desert in a convertible with her boyfriend whom she has not married, would never consider wearing anything but a salwar kameez or sari, nor even dating before marriage, and their vehicle aspirations are to someday save enough money to buy a motorcycle. Even though Bollywood movies reflect much about Indian culture (for instance, TV serials often show religious rituals and generations of families living in the same house), the lifestyles portrayed in movies are sooo far removed from how the vast majority of Indians live . . . yet there seem to be no hard feelings between the viewers and the viewed. Rather, India approaches its celebrities with a remarkable adoration and concern for their well-being. In contrast, I feel like I enjoy and am inspired by American movies when I see in the character's lives possibilities

for my own life. This is, in part, because American movies use more main stream characters. Often, the lead character grows up in a middle-class family, the plot lines involve daily jobs (even if the movie never shows them working), and love stories often feature matchmaking across social or economic classes (there is a “Romeo and Juliet” element in some Bollywood storylines), so that everyone in the theatre can think “this could happen to me”. In India, the characters in most films and TV shows live lives of wealth and comfort beyond what even wealthier Indians experience.

Perhaps Indian audiences do not need to relate to the characters to appreciate them. Unlike America, where we emphasize equal opportunity and most people call themselves “middle-class”, India is a far more layered society and moving from one class to another is far more difficult. Millions of Indians who will never own a motorized vehicle walk or bike the same roads everyday next to cars owned by Indians who do. Thousands of Hyderabadis who will never eat in an air-conditioned restaurant pass them each day on their way to work. Here, wanting another’s lifestyle is far less likely to mean you’ll achieve it; maybe being content with what you have is a more desirable option.

Generally, I have found Indians to be a more content people, more willing to enjoy entertainment without criticizing, and movies reflect this. Almost every movie that comes out of Bollywood features extensive song and dance routines. Often, these scenes have nothing to do with the storyline and are even set in an entirely different backdrop (a movie set in an inland city will feature a dance routine on the beach). To many “western” viewers, these scenes are entertaining at first but soon become endlessly annoying. But in Indian cinema, the dance scenes are essential; that’s why Bollywood keeps making them, regardless of a movie’s storyline. I get annoyed because I feel like somehow the song and dance makes the movie seem trivial and of lesser quality. Why can’t I just be content to be entertained? Maybe it’s the American in me. Maybe it’s just the me in me. Whether my reaction is due to American culture, I am most certain that trends in Indian movies and the power of celebrity here do reflect and influence Indian culture. And somehow, I wonder if it’s all connected to identity and the possibility that, in India, identity is more about where you come from, happiness is about the moment-at-hand, and both are less about where you’re going.

Rock, Walk, Iraq, & Muharram

The soundtrack to which I wake each morning - music from the Hindu temple, bird songs, a Muslim call to prayer, construction hammers – is a mix of routine and occasional “bonus tracks”. In March, one of these new tracks came with sounds of thunder. My first reaction was “Ahh, maybe a rain will cool things off.” But, despite wishful thinking, I learned that the rumbles were not natural thunder but came instead from explosions. I could stop the newsletter here to build anticipation for the April edition: “What explosions? Will Emma survive? Will she save the day?” Unfortunately, you probably know me well enough to doubt my claims to super powers or even physical bravery, so I’ll go ahead and tell it like it is. The explosions came from nearby rock quarries. Hyderabad’s landscape is dominated by granite rock formations that shape every horizon. In March, I discovered the formations from a closer view, through a monthly walk with the Society to Save Rocks.

As with most massive explosions, there are at least two sides to the story. The Society to Save Rocks (sweet name, eh) is a local organization dedicated to preserving one side – the 2500 million years of rock heritage. Construction and development is a growing threat to rocks as Hyderabad grows in stature as a home for tech companies, corporations, and the purchasing power of their employees.

Each month, the Society sponsors a rock walk to one of the rock formations around the city. In March, I joined the walk to an area north of Hyderabad. We met near a school and car-pooled to

the location. The rock walk agenda included two sites – one a natural formation atop a hill, and the other a mosque/dargah atop a nearby hill. We parked the cars at the base of the first hill, in front of a residential area. This wasn't the first time I'd been sight-seeing in someone's backyard. A few weeks prior, a friend at HMI rented a bus to take 20 people on a trip to Bidar in neighboring Karnataka state. On the way, we stopped to see some ancient Muslim tombs outside Hyderabad. These, too, were situated in what has become the back yard for a cluster of houses and tent colony (= neighborhood). The highlight of this set-up is the instant tour guides in the form of neighborhood boys hurrying ahead and walking alongside the occasional tourists. Considering the tourist visitors and neighborhood boys, the difference in our perception of these structures was unavoidable – we were travelers trying to locate someone's backyard in a travel book, a site so exceptional in our perspective that we'd make a special trip to see it; the neighborhood boys grew up on these sites, claiming home among centuries old tombs and 2500 million-year-old rocks.

After the neighborhood boys on the Society's rock walk shamed me by running down the same rocks that I struggled on all-fours to climb, we walked back to the car and drove up the road to the base of a larger hill, atop of which sits the Moulali Dargahh. Our driver, Frauke, a German ex-pat who is president of the society and has lived in Hyderabad for decades, parked her vehicle next to two other cars in a small corner cemetery. A few feet away, neighborhood residents dressed in black were hoisting poles with black flags in preparation for the next day's recognition of the 40th day of Muharram.

Muharram is the first month in the Islamic calendar. (Islamic and Hindu calendars are structured according to phases of the moon in contrast to the sun-basis of the January to December calendar.) For Shi'a Muslims, it is a month of grief because it was during Muharram in 680 C.E. that Imam Husain was martyred. Shi'a Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammed passed on authority to his son Ali before leaving earth, and that the authority has ever since been passed on to a living imam. (This is one of the main differences between Shi'a Muslims and Sunni Muslims. Though Sunnis do respect early Muslim leaders like Ali and Husain, they believe that Muhammad did not pass on ultimate authority to anyone and therefore that ultimate authority rests only with the original words and deeds of the Prophet himself.) Shi'a Muslims place more importance on the lives and deaths of the imams, and thus, for 40 days each year, celebrate Muharram as a month of mourning. A pamphlet about Muharram explains the purpose as such: "Muslims commemorate the memory [of Husain] . . . by arranging mourning ceremonies and processions, so that we may fortify ourselves to follow in his footsteps and seek guidance, inspiration, and truth." Husain is honored as a moral example of truthfulness who, in his life, was called upon to save his people from the oppressive rule of Yazid; Yazid threatened Husain with numerous assassination attempts. The legend of Husain's death claims that, during his pilgrimage to Mecca, Yazid's forces blocked Husain's access to the Euphrates River, leaving Husain, his relatives and companions to suffer days of hunger and thirst, during which many died. When Husain finally entered the battlefield, he was, according to the pamphlet, "mercilessly killed."

In Hyderabad, the main Muharram mourning procession occurs in the Old City. Throughout the parade, men process, shirtless, carrying whips and blades with which they cut themselves. Vehicles resembling "floats" carry ornately decorated elements that are symbolic for Muharram. Water tanks drive in the procession, releasing water and rose water on the processors and on-lookers. All along the route, different religious and community groups set up booths offering free drinking water. This element is also symbolic in its connection to the days of thirst preceding Husain's death. Special worship spaces called Ashurkanas are used as houses of mourning during the month of Muharram, a festival I had never before heard of but one whose significance is apparent even year

round in the Ashurkana buildings that stand empty until the next Muharram. Jaclyn, an American friend studying Persian at HMI, attended several mourning ceremonies, processions and rituals in women's homes during Muharram. Her online blog features stories and photos from Muharram and other photos from HMI and various trips in and around Hyderabad:
<http://www.travelblog.org/Bloggers/JAM/>

I hesitated to include this description of Muharram. Because of my lack of knowledge and the limitations of story-telling, I wonder how much I can say or not say to convey truths about Muharram and the people who celebrate it, especially because it includes the tradition of self-mutilation. My initial reaction to this element of Muharram is to feel disgust and judgment, but this was just an initial reaction. My intention with this newsletter is not to provoke such responses. While witnessing a brief portion of the Muharram procession, I also felt fascination and curiosity about what was obviously a powerful tradition for maintaining community, spiritual discipline, and faithful sacrifice. Living in India, working in an office with someone who participated in the procession, and regularly walking the same streets, I have the benefit of processing through my initial reactions within the cultural and social contexts in which these events occurred. For instance, in the context here I know that many Muslims would hesitate to identify with Shi'a or Sunni and prefer to think of all Muslims as, simply, "Muslim".

In the end, I am deciding to include the Muharram description at the risk of saying too much or too little, because if my goal with the newsletter is to share my experiences with you, then I must also share the risk. Living in a foreign culture reminds me that every day contains the risk of learning only enough to make inaccurate assumptions. At home, I am so familiar with my impressions of my surroundings, that I almost forget they are only impressions; or I know about a familiar event or community and forget that I still have much to learn. In India, each day confronts me with experiences, smells, tastes, sights that are unfamiliar enough for me to avoid thinking that I know enough to judge the situation. Consequently, I'm more likely to admit my questions and seek answers. I hope to return home with the same tendency and ask more questions of the familiar.

Last week, someone here asked me about Mormonism. I gave a few responses but eventually realized and confessed that I didn't know enough to answer even the most basic questions about this religion rooted in American soil and history. Yet, after a few minutes of Q&A during Muharram and reading a single pamphlet, I now know more about the Islamic month of mourning than about any practice of the Mormon Church.

Henry Martyn Institute emphasizes dialogue as a core approach to reconciliation and conflict resolution. Perhaps dialogue is so important because the exchange of questions confronts us with our own inability to answer. One approach to working with diverse people is to learn as much as we can about their culture, experience, and background. Perhaps even more important than looking for these answers is acknowledging the questions we've not yet asked and the ones we'll never be able to answer. Thank you for accepting the risk of reading stories from my perspective. I hope the words on these pages provoke more questions than answers.

Back to the hilltop Moulali dargah - a religious destination for many Muslims. Most dargahs are associated with the Sufi tradition and contain the buried remains of a Sufi saint who is the revered spiritual figure for that particular dargah. Moulali is an exception in that it does not contain buried remains but rather was built on the site of a miracle. According to the story, a Muslim princess experienced a recurring dream in which she saw Ali's handprint on the side of a mountain. After years of searching for the handprint, she finally came to the area north of Hyderabad, inquired

among locals about their knowledge of such a handprint, and found the image on a rock atop the hill where the dargah was later built.

Most of what I know about dargahs comes from Mauro, affectionately referred to as “Italian boy,” who came to HMI in January to do research for his dissertation on Sufi religious communities. Sufi religious practices involve the more mystical elements of Islam. Mauro says that sufism, and especially visiting dargahs, is an “in” thing to do for many Muslims. He says also that most of the people who worship at any particular dargah are “common” people, many uneducated, and mostly interested in the popular part of the faith. Sufi does not refer to the congregants, but rather to the very few persons who attain a level of spiritual discipline and wisdom within the Sufi tradition. Mauro’s insights helped me to consider the contrasts in any religion between the actual lifestyles of the religion’s followers and the characteristics that the followers claim to revere in a religious leader or deity.

I am quicker to notice such contrasts in a religion not my own. I wonder how obvious these distinctions are for non-Christians looking at the institutions and sects of Christianity. Who was it who said something to the effect of, “The greatest threat to the spread of Christianity is the lifestyles of many Christians.” While living in a community of faiths that I know little about, I find myself judging entire religions because of how a few of that religion’s adherents behave. For instance, two Hindu colleagues act unfairly and I connect that somehow to the value of Hinduism because those two colleagues are 20% of the Hindus with whom I’ve ever had an extensive conversation. In another example, there has been ongoing tension in the office between two staff, both of whom are Christian. Upon learning of this tense relationship, a friend, who claims to be atheist and has many negative feelings about the Church, said to me, “I’m surprised to know that two Christians can act this way toward each other.” Wow. I was surprised in two ways: 1) to know that this friend, with so many negative feelings towards the Church, expected good behavior from Christians; 2) to realize that the friend perceived the behavior of the two Christian staff as a reflection of their faith; and I was concerned to think that this encounter would further weaken the friend’s image of Christianity.

Why was I surprised when I react in much the same way? My reactions, though, are different for Christians versus persons of other religions. If a Christian colleague gossips, I question the person - “What kind of Christian is he?” If a Hindu colleague tells the same gossip, I am more likely to question the religion - “What kind of a religion is Hinduism?” The same tendency extends to cultures with which I am unfamiliar. I don’t know the last time I got annoyed by traffic on a drive from Indiana to Kansas and thought, “Arrrrhhhh, what is wrong with America?” I’m more likely to say, “What is wrong with the drivers today?” But every week for the last 7 months I’ve become frustrated with the entirety of India - a country of nearly a billion people, a civilization extending more than 4000 years - because the auto rickshaw driver never has change. Sometimes, living in India is like shining a spotlight on the absurdities of my own judgment. That said, I think we can learn a lot about a culture or a religion simply by examining how one or two people act. But what we learn about Hinduism is the same thing we learn about Christianity is the same we learn about Islam - that no religion has found a way to curb the weaknesses of all who claim its creeds as their own.

Now, where were we? Oh yes, at the Dargah. Well, it was quite a site, this dargah on the hill. And even more impressive was the site *from* the dargah - a view of Hyderabad in all its impressive expanse. From that height, we could see beyond the city and out into the Deccan landscape. There is no substitute for a bird’s eye view. I am reminded of the Zoom series of children’s books. Each book begins with a small image and each successive page zooms out on the image, from flame to

birthday candle to party scene to neighborhood, etc.. I stood atop that dargah feeling like I was on another planet made of endless rock formations and the Deccan plateau, a setting so foreign to how I orient myself in the world. I tried to connect with home, imagining myself as the subject of a camera, zooming out, placing Hyderabad within the Deccan, the Deccan within India, India within South Asia, and eventually exposing the hilltop dargah on the same world as Indiana. What was it like to travel the world before satellite images and popular photography, when travel meant trusting only words and sketches as proof that a place even existed or that, after arriving, you could get home again?

Thankfully, getting to the dargah was simplified by a nice long staircase. On the descent, I encountered another global connection. About halfway down the hill from Moulali sits a smaller shrine. I approached the structure, but not wanting to take off my shoes again, decided to observe from outside. A man who appeared to work there approached me upon hearing me ask someone else about the shrine. His name was Mohmed, and he explained that the shrine was dedicated to the grand daughter of Ali, but that the grave inside was not real but rather a replica of her actual grave. "Because they (Indian Muslims) cannot go all the way to her actual grave in Iraq, this shrine was built here." Iraq? Why was I surprised to hear this word? Iraq is a country of numerous holy sites for Muslims. It was, though, a surprise to hear "Iraq" in the context of spiritual pursuits rather than politics. Mohmed's comments eventually mentioned the U.S. military action in Iraq. (I must have been emitting non-American vibes that day because he was surprised later to learn that I was from the U.S.) But initially, Mohmed mentioned Iraq as a place of spiritual significance. Regardless of whether the U.S. ever became involved in Iraq, it would still be a country of many sacred spaces for millions of people who live far outside its boundaries and will never enter. "Iraq is a sacred place," I thought again. Of course, that's why, after the bombing of their shrine in Samarra, one religious group responded by inciting violence against the religious group they held responsible. Of course Iraq is a holy place. Every news story about Iraq mentions a religious component of the current situation. I knew this. So why did I react with surprise when Mohmed mentioned Iraq? I don't know the reason, but I presume it has something to do with me knowing Iraq only as a current event. Thinking back on that shrine halfway up the hill, a holy place replicating a holy place, I wonder what it would be like to visit a similar replica in the U.S., a space connecting visitors to Iraq as a place of religious and not political significance.

Commonwealth Games

Not that I expected Indians to be too interested in sporting events requiring ice and snow, but I was surprised by how little the Indian media covered the Winter Olympics. At the time, I did not realize they were preparing for a March event of far greater proportions in India – the Commonwealth Games. The Commonwealth is an organization of 53 nations committed to "peace, democracy and good governance," founded during the time when British colonies were gaining independence but still maintaining connection to the British empire. All Commonwealth countries, with one exception, are former British colonies. I knew of the Commonwealth but had not heard of the Commonwealth Games, hosted by a different member-country each year. Someone here asked me if the U.S. participated. I tried to explain that our break with the British was not the stuff international organizations are made of, not to mention that America's independence came long before the Commonwealth was established in 1926. But, technically, I think America's colonial past would qualify for Commonwealth membership. And surely the current U.S./British political alliance is one of the most significant partnerships for both countries. With the constant coverage of the Commonwealth Games in Indian media, I found it interesting to consider the existence of such a global political organization to which the U.S. is not a member. What could be more "American" than commitment to democracy, rule of law, and good governance? But how un-American to join

a global community established on the basis of allegiance to the crown of England. The Games and their popularity here prompted me to reconsider America as a post-colonial country and also to realize how much American history does not teach about the rest of Britain's empirical past, and how this past is part of the present for much of the world.

Another new year? Lessons in turmeric and creation.

March 30 is Ugadi, the telugu new year. I was a bit confused to learn that Hyderabad would be celebrating yet another New Year. I was certain we'd already celebrated 3 or 4. But, alas, this one was different. Ugadi is the Telugu new year. According to Wikipedia, "the festival marks the new year day for people who follow the southern Indian lunar calendar". India is a land of many calendars. On a daily calendar produced here, the page for each day is full of information about the moon, sun, and more to designate the significance of that particular day in the many calendars of India. Muslim and Hindu are just the beginning of these distinctions. While business and state function on the Roman Calendar, Hindus throughout India use a Hindu calendar, but Ugadi is celebrated according to the South Indian Telugu Hindu calendar. Initially thinking it to be a regional holiday, I asked Muslims and Christians why they do not celebrate Ugadi. A couple of the answers were vague, "We just don't celebrate". Another Christian explained that Ugadi is a Hindu festival celebrated by Hindus in the telugu-speaking region, but just because it is regional it is none-the-less Hindu. I'm not sure that there exists such thing as a secular holiday in India, with the possible exception of Republic Day or Gandhi's Birthday. Religion is everywhere and so much of what is termed "Indian" is rooted in ancient traditions developed from Hindu beliefs.

Ugadi is an office holiday at HMI. It fell during a week when Jim Stipe, a professional photographer, was staying on campus to photograph HMI people and events. We asked the cook, Anasuya, who often invites hostel residents to her home on holidays, if we could come to her Ugadi festivities and bring along Jim with his camera. She, of course, welcomed us. About noon on Thursday morning, we walked to her home in the village adjacent to HMI. This was the third or fourth festival I'd celebrated with Anasuya's family. The celebration involved a puja (or ritual of offering certain elements at an altar) and, of course, the special food. A typical Ugadi sweet is a chapati (like tortilla) with a filling of jaggery (unrefined sugar) and daal (lentil). It is an authentic Andhra Pradesh flavor. Another element present at many Hindu festivals is the placing of a bindi and stripes on the face. Using orange turmeric and a red powder, Anasuya's daughters proceeded around the room to put the appropriate marks on our faces - a stripe on both sides of the jaw and a bindi/dot between the eyes. They then scrubbed our feet with a turmeric and water mixture. Finally, a string soaked in turmeric and wrapped with a mango leaf was tied on the wrist. Women wear it on either the right or left wrist depending on their marriage status; for men, there is no wrist distinction between married and un-married.

These three practices - bindi, foot scrub, and wristband - are common Hindu rituals, as are the ingredients. Turmeric is widely used in India for medicinal, food, and other purposes. Its role in Indian tradition dates back over 4000 years. That's the case for many ingredients and elements that remain essential to the routines of India today. The neem tree is another. Somedays I feel like the answer to every fifth question has something to do with the neem tree.

A glance at the altar in Anasuya's house or the site of any Indian ritual is an introduction to generations upon generations upon generations of discovering the many functions of God's creation. I sometimes react to the sight of a Hindu altar - with flowers, incense, a deity, coconut - by thinking "how primitive," as if I'm comparing it to the golden calf worshipped by the Israelites in the desert. I must remind myself that each dish of colored spice, each petal of plant, each grain of rice earned its

place on that altar because, through these elements, 4000 years of humanity discovered the amazing possibilities of God's creation. 'Tis no golden calf or false deity worshipped in place of God. Rather, it is an attempt to appreciate the realities of God's creation - gifts which too often go unappreciated by attempts to technologically replicate the possibilities inherent in the ready-made nature around us.

Life in India is teaching me to seek out the many uses of any one thing. This lesson comes in part from the examples like turmeric and neem, but also because, as anyone returning from a developing economy will testify, people who have less material do more with it. When I think of Anasuya's house of two rooms (one of which is a kitchen), where she lives with her husband and 5 nearly adult children, I think of the American phrase "multipurpose room" and laugh at how, in the context of India, those words ring with redundancy.

In the last decade, American and European companies have tried to patent further research on the medicinal uses of turmeric and neem. After an appeal from the government of India, the U.S. patent office revoked a patent it had previously granted to the University of Mississippi for turmeric research. This situation conjures up ironic images of scientists wearing white coats in sterile labs, using million dollar equipment to improve upon discoveries made by generations of mothers and healers grinding seeds on dirt floors with attention to tradition. Perhaps there is an element of this in all industrial medicine which, in some way, is improving upon generations of tradition, almost like the parent who loosens the ketchup bottle enough so that the small child can take it off and feel like he did it all by himself. It seems that, no matter how much money goes into research, the greatest development will always be that someone thousands of years ago decided to pick up turmeric in the first place.

We finished our Ugadi visit with a glass of Ugadi Pachhadi, a drink unique to this festival. It is made of four elements: Neem flowers for bitterness, jaggery for sweetness, raw mango for vagaru (bland flavor), and tamarind juice for sour. The mixture symbolizes that life contains both pleasure and pain and the new year should be entered with preparation to accept both.

Connecting with home

The photographer mentioned in the Ugadi story, Jim Stipe, is a friend from the U.S.. We know each other through an organization called Bread for the World, where Jim worked as a regional organizer before moving with his wife to Islamabad in October. At a conference last summer, we learned of each other's plans to live in South Asia in the coming year. Jim is also a professional photographer. While his wife works for Catholic Relief Services in Pakistan, Jim has volunteered his photography services to several NGOs. After the New Year, he let me know that he was planning a trip to India and would like to do photos for interested organizations. I shared the message with the administrator at HMI and, before I knew, it, Jim was planning a trip to Hyderabad. It was a treat to welcome Jim to HMI and accompany him on photo shoots at HMI's community centres and other parts of Hyderabad, and learn from the fresh perspective of his camera lens. During Jim's 4-day visit, we shared more conversation than in our last 5 years of knowing each other. Reflecting on Jim's visit, and the box of letters and cards on my desk, and the daily receipt of e-mails, and the chance to write this newsletter, I am grateful for this year in India not only for the opportunity to connect with a foreign land, but also for the distance from home and the space it creates for connecting with home in ways I'd not imagined.