

Hello from Hyderabad...

2nd Edition, October 2005

Emma, what have you been up to?

Thanks again for asking. In October I spent many hours asking a similar question, “Emma, what *should* you be up to?” Assignments at work were light. I am by no means busy and dealing with unscheduled time is a daily challenge and opportunity. But I am learning the importance of being available. In October, being in the office without a demanding workload allowed me to contribute in the following ways: provide “daycare” for children of staff during a school holiday; spend a day at Sultan Shahi school (one of HMI’s community centres) leading activities with schoolchildren and accompanying the head teacher on home visits; read more about Henry Martyn; help one student revise a paper and help another plan research; teach friends how to read music. More directly related to work, I am co-coordinating a January workshop, creating a brochure for the Community Development projects, and periodically editing grant proposals, letters, and other documents.

The assets of an American (Part 1): “Hi. My name is Emma. I work as a native English speaker.”

As one of two native English speakers in the office, some days I feel like this is my most valuable asset to HMI. I mentioned editing grant proposals and letters. I have been asked to edit the library staff’s entries in the new computerized card catalogue. No, I’m not a grammar expert (as the newsletter reveals). Nor do I know much about grant writing. I just speak English. ‘Tis the gift of we who can call English our mother tongue. In an Indian grocery store I feel intellectually inferior for speaking only one language. But at work and school, the world is such that professionals with rich experience and diverse expertise risk being unappreciated simply because they misplace prepositions. Never mind that they speak, read, and write 4 languages, each of which uses a different alphabet.

This is neither good nor bad. It seems an inevitable consequence of an interconnected world that, for practical reasons, one language would be the primary language of power and exchange. There seems to be no reason to feel proud or guilty about speaking English, but rather to acknowledge that I am at home in the language of power and exchange and that most people are not; most of my colleagues spend their professional lives thinking in one language and translating those thoughts into English using a word processing program that doesn’t even offer the alphabet in which they learned to read. It is humbling to know that countless Indian university students *who grew up speaking English* invest in tutoring and resources in order to sound like me. India is teaching me to acknowledge the assets of being an American.

Another Saturday in Hyderabad

The ad in the paper said **“Concern India Foundation . . . exhibition cum sale by NGOs and artisans . . . October 22, 11:00 am, Sahiti Sravathi, Chikkadpally, Hyderabad.”** At 11am, Ruth, Anu, Teresa, and I sat out from the hostel. We walked 100 feet or so down the highway to a popular gathering spot for auto drivers. The first driver wanted 100 rupees. Knowing this far exceeded the proper charges, we responded with one of the most important words in Indian English – “Meter.” A second auto driver agreed to charge us by meter rather than an excessive flat rate. We agreed to “meter plus 10,” a typical extra charge for a fourth passenger.

Thirty minutes later we turned past the professional cricket stadium downtown and pulled up to the American Express store so Ruth could exchange her traveler’s checks. Having been at the same spot three weeks prior, Ruth and I turned to each other with puzzled looks. The American Express sign was replaced by a small notice on the glass door announcing that the business had ceased operation in early October. No signs suggested this during our previous visit.

Oh well. (Another important phrase while living in a foreign culture.) After an unsuccessful attempt at ATM, we crossed to a snack shop. Anu bought a Cadbury bar. Cadbury is the primary chocolate candy supplier in India.

Before catching another auto, we pulled out the newspaper ad. “Chikkadpally,” I practiced. An auto driver standing by his rickshaw seemed to recognize my articulation. We piled in and headed out. Hyderabad is a composite of areas like Chikkadpally. Abids, Nampally, and Banjara Hills are others. I don’t know whether these labels have any political relevance, but knowing the correct area is important for getting anywhere by public transport.

Our driver did not ask to what part of Chikkadpally we were going . . . until we were in the midst of the area. I tried to specify the location as printed in the newspaper “Sahiti Sravathi.” From several pedestrians he requested help to communicate with his 4 non-Telugu nor Hindi speaking passengers. We handed over the newspaper ad. Finally one pedestrian made motions resembling “turn around.” The driver turned around, drove into a side street, and dropped us off at . . . the library.

Knowing this wasn’t the place, we stepped inside and dropped off our bags at the bag check. Every public building, store, and tourist site in Hyderabad requires that bags be left at a baggage check. We didn’t make it far into the library before the bag check clerk insisted that we let him be our guide. Like a relay team, we handed off the newspaper ad once again. He recruited an assistant, told us to wait in the library, and set off down the street.

While we waited, a young man approached,

“Excuse me. Where are you from?”

“I am from U.S., Ruth is from U.K., Teresa from New Zealand, and Anu from South Africa.”

“I am Suresh.” Suresh and I spent the next few minutes discussing Hyderabad’s libraries, his studies in history at the university, his career goals (media and journalism). He wondered if I could understand his English. “Yes. It’s quite clear.” He looked pleased and explained that Indians benefit from talking with native-English speakers and watching English media.

The library clerk then returned, said “get bags” and gestured at us to follow. He and his assistant seemed confident. I assumed they had discovered our craft exhibition destination. One block down, left, right, through residential streets, then they stopped to talk with 4 men sitting outside a small stand selling kitchenware. The 6 men puzzled over the newspaper ad with occasional inputs from me and Teresa. Anu enjoyed a shell of coconut water (a common road-side purchase).

By this point we realized that the library clerks had no destination in mind despite the time they spent scouting a route. But what they lacked in destination, they made up for in determination. They motioned again and we followed. Three blocks later we were back at the intersection where the auto driver had first turned around. Apparently, the newspaper ad was not specific enough. Our volunteer navigators claimed to need more location information than that listed in the newspaper. Instead of trying to prolong the inevitable, we thanked them and walked on. Oh well. Ruth needed to buy a gift before returning to the hostel, so we set out by auto for the default shopping mecca – Big Bazaar department store.

Big Bazaar is in Abids. The shopping center offers 2 floors of clothing, accessory, and music stores, anchored by the 3-story Big Bazaar (1-Grocery, 2-household items, 3-clothing and cosmetics). Food Bazaar is one of Hyderabad’s largest grocery stores. Aside from the bulk sale of dry beans, nuts, and spices, the shelves offer no more packaged food than any one aisle at a typical U.S. supermarket. Accessibility of clothes, food, and housewares in one location is convenient, but shopping at Big Bazaar is exhausting. Every turn is crowded and staking a place in the long lines is easier said than done.

To get to Big Bazaar from Chikkadpally we took another auto. En route, the driver asked, “From which country?” I listed our homelands for the second time that day and joked, “You? From India?” He laughed. We also exchanged names. He was Ram. The next question surprised me.

“In America, your god is Jesus?”

“Yes, I believe in Jesus.”

“All of America, god is Jesus? No other gods?”

“Most Americans are Christian, but we have some Hindus and Muslims and other religions.”

“Oh. Here – many gods.” He pointed to the 8 stickers on his dashboard, each featuring a different Hindu manifestation of God in bright, fluorescent colors (such stickers are common décor in autos and buses).

Moments later we arrived at Big Bazaar. After paying Ram, the four of us agreed to part ways for shopping and reconvene in 30 minutes. I went in search of table tennis balls to replenish the hostel’s stock. After following directions to a sports store down the street, I entered the shop to find three teenage clerks eager to assist.

“Where from, Madam?” they asked.

“U.S.” We chatted. Eventually 2 other men walked in. I learned that the five were brothers working at the family sporting goods shop. At least two are studying in college. “Born in Hyderabad. School in Hyderabad. Business in Hyderabad.” The older brother asked if I had been to Ramaji Film City (in Hyderabad, quasi-Universal Studios). “No, but I plan to go.” I left with a business card and an offer to join their family on Sunday for a picnic to the zoo and Film City.

I still think about Ram's question in the auto, "Your god is Jesus?" And about the answer I didn't speak, and might have been unable to communicate. "Well, yes, my god is Jesus . . . and Creator and Holy Spirit. But he's not *my* god. He's your God, too. More importantly, we are God's creation." I cannot yet articulate the essence of his question, except to say that Ram asked of me what India asks of me – "Your god is who?" As I spend the next months considering this challenge, perhaps the answers will clarify the question.

(Later that afternoon, someone remarked, "So much for a cultural experience," referring to our failed attempt to find the craft fair. To the contrary, everything about the day was pure Hyderabad.)

Naqi's Kashmir: Home Sweet Home

Earthquake, militarization, life on the verge of conflict. How can life in Kashmir be about anything but survival? News coverage in the U.S. leaves me asking this question, with little room for the perspective of Naqi, a native of Ladakh in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. At HMI, he is studying for a post-graduate diploma in Conflict Resolution. He spent the last five years studying at Kashmir University in Srinagar City and says, "In five years, I saw not one single clash."

When asked about his home, Mohmad Naqi first mentions the geographic, physical, linguistic, and cultural diversities of its three regions - Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh. The state, called "Jammu and Kashmir" is named for its two most highly populated regions, which comprise six each of the total fourteen districts. Naqi's home is in a village of 40 families in the Kargil district of Ladakh, 20 km from the border with Pakistan.



Naqi with tailoring students
@ Community Center

Jammu is famous for Hindu temples. Kashmir is known for abundant lakes and luscious gardens built by Mughal emperors. Ladakh appeals to adventure tourists, with rock climbing, river rafting, snow, and ice sports (helped, no doubt, by the region's glacier). Inhabiting the largest region by area, the Ladakhi population is significantly smaller than Jammu or Kashmir. Because most of the land mass is uninhabitable, Ladakhis live predominantly in small villages in which 40 or 50 families reside in close proximity, separated by several km (5, 10, 25, 40) from the next village. The Kashmir landscape, as described by Naqi, because of its different terrain looks similar to the rural Midwest (U.S.), with more large towns, but neighbors in the same village often separated by entire farms or fields.

"Home" for Naqi means the village in which he grew up and the village to which he will return after education to marry and support his family. He recently completed a degree in physics at Kashmir University. His brother is currently studying for the same. Skeptical of physics job opportunities in a mountainous village, I ask Naqi if he and his brother will return to the village. "Of course," he says without hesitation. Naqi has decided to enter social work. That is his reason for studying conflict resolution at HMI. He will probably pursue a Masters in Social Work and work in the villages of Kargil. Regarding further study before beginning work, Naqi shares the proverb, "before you go to sleep you should travel a mile." His brother plans to teach at the college in Kargil town. Ladakh does not have a university, but residents can study pre-graduate courses at one of several colleges operated as branch campuses of Kashmir University.

As for marriage, Naqi expects his will come after he completes his studies. Both arranged and “love” marriages are accepted in his community. Husband and wife usually come from nearby villages, as custom is for the married woman to move in with the husband’s family. If, however, the wife’s parents had no son to care for them, it could be arranged for the married couple to live with the wife’s parents.

“Tell me about your name” always opens up an interesting conversation in India. Naqi’s full name is Mohmad Naqi. “Mohmad” reflects his religion – Islam. And “Naqi” is simply his personal name. His community does not use family names. Thus, when he marries, his wife will not change any part of her name because names do not reveal family connections. Naqi explains that this system reflects the absence of caste in his culture. The absence of caste is important to Naqi. In other parts of India, Hindu names reveal caste and other naming systems reveal family connections.

Language is one of the diversities within Jammu and Kashmir. The regional languages are Dogeri in Jammu, Kashmiri in Kashmir, and Ladakhi in Ladakh. The common language throughout the state is Urdu (sounds similar to Hindi, uses same written script as Arabic). Naqi relies on Urdu to communicate with Indians in Hyderabad (Urdu and Hindi are mutually understandable by speakers of one or the other language.) Naqi knew English before coming to HMI, but he is intentional about improving his English while here. In conversations and life at the hostel, Naqi seems to soak up every word and nuance to improve his command of the language.

Food in his region differs from food in Hyderabad. Without explaining recipes, Naqi mentioned waza – a style of serving a variety of meats in one meal. (Of course there is rice.) Goat, chicken, and sheep are common meats. Naqi tends to eat with a spoon rather than using his fingers like most Indians. When I ask if this is regional, he laughs and explains it as his personal choice. “The turmeric and other spices turn my fingers orange.”

In addition to diversity of food, language, and culture, Naqi’s physical presence reveals his homeland. Simply put, “We have difference facial structures,” he explains. Historically, Kashmiris are Aryan; Laddakhis are Mongolites. Related to this heritage is the religious make-up of Ladakh.- nearly half Muslim/half Buddhist. Within villages, religion is homogeneous. Naqi estimates there are 50 Christian families in all of Ladakh, “mostly in the towns.”

When asked about the important differences/stratifications in his culture, Naqi mentions “economic,” but even hesitates on this answer, adding that his culture does not have many who are very wealthy nor many who are very poor. “We don’t have beggars. We take care of each other.” Admitting they might appear to be poor, he adds, “We don’t feel we are poor. If we want to prepare special foods, or give a gift to neighbors . . . we can do it.” A loan might be necessary, he says, for buying a motorbike or car. Naqi’s family home has two levels. In the winter, the family stays on the ground floor, moving to the second level when the weather changes to summer. The shift from one floor to another is a celebration time in the village.

Another Kargili from Ladakh joined Naqi at the Semi-Annual workshop in September. At the sound of popular Indian music or watching a Bollywood film, both could sing along and identify the superstars of Indian celebrity. Naqi interacts confidently and warmly with Hyderabad women and children in HMI’s community centers. Yet, I ask Naqi if he feels somewhat like a foreigner being in the vastly different culture of Hyderabad and South India and he responds

“yes.” When asked further about his identity, Naqi explains, “In my region I am ‘Kargili,’ outside Ladakh I am ‘Ladakhi,’ here [in Hyderabad] I am ‘from Jammu and Kashmir.’” And what would he say if talking on the phone to someone who had never been to India? Naqi replies with a smile, “I would say, ‘You are welcome in India.’” Naqi’s village is 15 kilometers from Pakistan. He travelled four days by train to come to Hyderabad. An Indian, indeed.

Church

The first Indian church I entered was St. George’s Church, just down the street from Big Bazaar. Shobha, an HMI staff and hostel resident, is a regular and I joined her that first weekend in September. St. George’s is part of CSI, the Church of South India. Founded in 1947 after Indian independence, CSI has no “special victims unit” nor a Miami spin-off. No, this CSI represents the union of Anglican, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, and Reformed churches in South India. (Church of North India is a separate communion with separate history.) Geographically, the northernmost point of the CSI’s presence is just south of Mumbai/Bombay. I am still learning about CSI’s work and reputation in India. Website info: CSI (www.csichurch.com) and Church of North India (www.cnisynod.org).

Much of St. George’s English language worship is nearly identical to a “typical” Episcopal service in the U.S. or the U.K. (so I’m told by Ruth, HMI student and the daughter of 2 priests in the Church of England). I attended church there three times. Earlier in October, HMI participated in the Church’s Harvest Festival. Several students and hostel residents performed songs and provided cookies and cakes. St. George’s also offers a Sunday afternoon Northeast fellowship. This is a worship and fellowship community for persons from Northeast India who reside in Hyderabad, many of whom are students at universities here. One HMI student from Mizoram state referred to the leader of this group as “our chaplain in Hyderabad.” Geographically, the existence of a Northeast fellowship in Hyderabad is comparable to a church in Dallas having a separate fellowship for students from New York. The comparison points to the significant differences in culture and language between the regions of India.

On the third Sunday in October, I began attending Sunday service at a church in Shivarampally, the village adjacent to HMI’s property. I go with Rada (a cook at the hostel) her three children (Mamata, Madvi, and Yahdigiri), Anita (mentioned in September newsletter), Anita’s mother, and her baby sister Aarthy. The church meets at the pastor’s home. Pastor and his wife and two children live in a three room flat – main room, bedroom, kitchen. The home is in a small building with a store in the front and at least one other flat on the second story. 20 or so churchgoers gather each Sunday at 12 noon, sitting on a 8’ by 8’ floor mat. We usually arrive after the singing begins. The church is Pentecostal. As far as I can tell, singing is followed by prayer, scripture reading, and a sermon lasting 30-40 minutes. Offering is taken in a small plastic container (probably from restaurant carry-out), after which another woman leads prayer before we greet each other and depart. I say “as far as I can tell” because the entire service is in Telugu language, plus an occasional “hallelujah” or “praise God.” ‘Tis a spirit-filled challenge to listen for God without understanding a single word. Thankfully, Pastor usually announces the scripture passage in Telugu and English.

Ramzan in the City

The Muslim month of Ramzan (Urdu word for Ramadan) began here on October 6. The most visible expression of Ramzan is 30 days of fasting during which celebrants consume nothing

through their mouth from sunrise to sunset. This means no food or water. Some persons even go without lipstick or find alternatives to oral medicine. The newspaper features a column entitled “Everything you wanted to know about Ramzan” and occasionally addresses such questions as whether a person suffering from asthma can use an inhaler during Ramzan. The answers vary, but certainly there is a market for alternatives, with special attention to how persons with diabetes can participate in the fast.

Signs of Ramzan are everywhere. Fasting means fewer people at the lunch table, schoolchildren with less energy and more absences. But fasting is only half of Ramzan. The time from sundown to sunrise is full of prayer, celebration, and food. The day before Ramzan began, Haleem sellers appeared in mass, setting up shop on virtually every corner to sell the special Ramzan delicacy made of meat and wheat. Restaurants also advertise Ramzan specialties.

Sirens from a nearby mosque announce sundown each evening, usually around 5:50-6:00. In Old City, a predominantly Muslim area, fruit stands replenish their stocks in early afternoon; by 3pm shoppers fill the streets buying fresh fruits and dates for that evening’s iftar (breaking of the fast). It is a mouth-watering site – fruits displayed in every color, huge blocks of dates sold by the slice. When a group of American college students stayed at HMI for 3 days, we held a traditional iftar, sat facing each other on the floor in two lines with plates full of fruits, dates, and daal..

Families gather for iftar with prayers, intentionally not thinking about the food before them until the moment of sunset. One Muslim woman explained it as a “sign of our faithfulness.” One of fasting’s purposes is to facilitate more time, focus, and understanding of persons who do not have enough to eat. If a celebrant breaks fast due to illness or other reasons, they are called to make up for it by fasting after Ramzan and also to provide food to someone who is hungry.

The evenings are times for social gatherings, with families often going to friends’ home for iftar or going out for a meal. I was cautioned to allow more time for evening travel during Ramzan because traffic increases. Pizza Hut offers a special Ramzan deal - All you can eat pizza, garlic bread, and one scoop of vanilla ice cream for 125 rupees (less than \$3). Other businesses market to celebrants with special Ramzan sales. Ramzan significantly affects life for those who celebrate, but also for communities with large Muslim populations. After all, some effects are inevitable when nearly one third of a town's population stops eating lunch or breakfast for an entire month.

Not all Muslims strictly observe Ramzan fasting; not all persons who celebrate the festivities are Muslims. Often, Hindu and Muslim neighbors will share in each other’s celebrations. It would be difficult, in India, to be neighborly without somehow sharing religious celebrations. After 8 weeks in the country, I’ve come to learn that a year in India is measured in festivals – most lasting for days. The GfK Nop market research company recently released its report on the happiest countries in the world. India comes in 4th, behind Australia, USA, and Egypt. I can’t help but guess that India’s culture of celebration is both a cause and effect of this happiness. As for why Americans are so happy, I don’t know. But I realize now that celebration looks different in my culture, where we spend months looking forward to one-day holidays.

October 30, 2005

Today's newspaper headlines were unavoidable. "Serial blasts kill 70 persons in Delhi." "102 Die as floods wash away train in Andhra Pradesh." The graphic photos from 80 km south of Hyderabad especially affected Teresa, a short term intern at HMI whose train was still scheduled to leave Hyderabad station that night. There is debate about whether the train wreck can be called "man-made." Authorities described it as the worst train wreck in Andhra Pradesh in recent memory. Railway officials deny allegations of negligence, pointing instead to flash floods and the fact that another train had safely gone over this bridge 30 minutes prior to the accident. When Ruth and I accompanied Teresa to the train station that night, our auto barely avoided collision with a bus. After the fact, someone commented "Wasn't the bus driver at fault?"

I wonder if placing blame in India about a flooded railway is almost on par with questioning who is to blame in Hyderabad traffic. Of course, the train wreck is far more atypical than a traffic accident. But preventable tragedies on road and rail and because of rain seem to occur uncomfortably often. Most anyone here will tell you that corruption is at the root of the problem. Initially, when considering the abundance of tragedy here, I questioned the people, "What's wrong with them?" The inappropriateness of this question lies in the obvious absurdity of another question, "What is so right with me that such tragedies are not commonplace in my home?" Of course, I deserve no credit or blame for orderly traffic, fewer explosions, and predictable mass transit in America. So, who claims responsibility for the blast in Delhi, the train wreck in Andhra Pradesh, or the accidents in Hyderabad?

Living in India reminds me that assigning blame or credit is no replacement for acknowledging the systems we create and the circumstances we inhabit. The classic serenity prayer helps me in this endeavor, "God, grant me the grace to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." As for the systems and circumstances of India, I'm still learning. Hopefully, the questions I'm so quick to ask of this place will help me to ask better questions of myself and my home.

Anecdotes from October

Due to heavy rainfall, the Indian market suffered an onion shortage so significant that the Government allowed foreign onions into the market to ease the price increase. (According to one report, a similar onion crisis in 1998 affected one state's politics by costing the incumbent party the election.) In Amritsar in Punjab state near Pakistan, the owner of an electronics shop took advantage of the opportunity with a new marketing scheme: 10 kg of onions FREE with purchase of a television. Or is that one TV free with purchase of 10kg onions?

At mealtime, I often noticed several people drinking without touching their lips to the cup or drinking directly from the water pitcher. I asked about this. The reply? "Even if we did not grow up poor, many of our parents grew up in poor families that could not afford cups for everyone. So it is custom in many houses for everyone to drink from the same pitcher or cup." It also makes one less dish to wash. But who is counting?

A positive note about public transit in India. There's a lot of it!! Buses run frequently and fare is cheap by local standards. Riding a short distance can take a long while, but that's because of the slow traffic system in general and not because of any particular flaw in public transit. For foreigners with a stronger currency, autos are extremely cheap, too. There's nothing elitist or exclusive about public transit in Hyderabad. Even in the midst of pollution, that is refreshing.