

The Boy on the Train: An Indian Experience

The story I have to tell is not about my favorite trip, but about one small event that has changed the way I see the world.

From Delhi to Amritsar it was your typical Indian train -- dusty, too many people crammed onto the blue vinyl seats, the smell of *jalebis* and *chaat* permeating the air, and the call of the chai *wallahs* mixing with the sounds of the most recent Bollywood hit. As I sat trying to take in the sensory cacophony that is India, a disturbing addition joined the ensemble: a boy about my age, dressed in tattered rags, came into the train car. He proceeded to crawl along the filthy floor despite his ability to walk--an act of utmost desperation and self-degradation. When he finally arrived at my place asking for pocket change, all I wanted to do was help--I just didn't know how. Giving him a couple rupees would only provide the money necessary for his next meal, it would not help him rise off the floor and into dignity.

This young man was but one example of the many hollow eyes and begging hands I have seen throughout my travels. The devastation that hunger brings to the human body and soul is unbelievable. His hunger infuriated me.

My feelings were exacerbated by the overconsumption and waste typical of the developed world. Why could I open my refrigerator and consume my favorite snack, while a boy my age had to drag himself along the filthy floors of a Delhi train, counting on the pity of strangers for the rupees necessary to buy food that merely provided subsistence? It made no sense.

Now, after a few more years of education and serious reflection I see things differently. The anger has subsided and in its place reasoned thoughts have grown.

I do not claim to have an answer to this complex problem, but I have learned a great deal from the boy on the train. However much I wish that simply giving him the change in my pocket would help, I realize now that problems are not as easily solved as they initially appear; we cannot always alleviate the pain and suffering of hunger by simply handing out food or money. Although such little things may help superficially, we have to do much more if we truly want to make a difference in the world; we must strive for grander, more systemic solutions. This realization has had applications in all areas of my life--I now reflect more deeply about the problems I see around me, and take time to consider effective solutions. I also realize that I could have easily been born into that life--the only thing separating me from him, the seat from the floor, is chance.

I was able to learn these lessons and undergo such reflection only because I was given the opportunity to see the world in its beauty and its hardship. Travelling not only forces us to consider practical solutions from many perspectives, but also allows us to find our humanity.