

Glossy images of India stamped in my mind, no longer exist.

Was India much different than you had previously imagined? A colleague at PRIA asks me during our final good-bye dinner in New Delhi. A question so seemingly simple, but yet I struggled to find an answer. Yes, of course India was now much different to me than what I had previously imagined, but why? Or how? I found it hard to recall what I had previously India to be like, and as a result, found my answer.

I try to remember the glossy instagram images of India I had kept taped in my mind, like a collector, collecting images of places, people and things that I too wanted to “experience” one day, just as they were being experienced in these colorful photos of India that I had become so familiar with. Images of brightly colored doorways and arches, the Taj Mahal (sans the tourists), wandering, drifting through spice markets and tree lined streets, finding spirituality in the countless temples and celebrations in the streets, finding friendship, finding love.



(Googled image of Taj Mahal)

These images of post-India are mostly gone now, and I find it challenging to recall them, even the ones I have pinned or saved in my social media folders. These images no longer represent India in its wholeness to me, not even remotely, and it is precisely why, I struggled with answering how India was different to me now having been here, than before. Because before, I just simply had not been to India, and therefore, did not, and could not have had any legitimate grasp on what this incredible country would behold.

It is opportunities such as this internship and organizations like CAPI, that provided me with new images to add to my library, ones that are now filled with context, stories, struggles and emotions.

These are the real images of India, to me and to my experiences. This is why I believe it is so important for opportunities like this to exist, especially when working in policy development or social research. There is no possible way to ever adequately represent a culture, an issue or a solution that takes place in country you have never been. This is increasingly important in our world of social media, and how places are glamorized and presented, through filters and photoshop. By only knowing a place through images, we are missing so much information yet are often oblivious to this fact.

I am glad that I was not able to recall my previous thoughts on what India was going to be like, because that meant that my experiences had filled in a gap that was once filled with superficiality with now real life experiences, people and places.

I know that this will help me in moving forward on my academic and professional journey, with my eyes more open than before. Now when I see images on social media, I am able to dissect what is missing or what is not being shown a little better, I am able to question what the image is portraying, and potentially, how this is problematic for a country and even an entire culture, being reduced to a set of popular images.

So in conclusion, my advice to anyone reading would be, if you are interested in any social or global issues, the best way (and one of the only ways) to go about really understanding the depth and complexity of such issues is to go to the place where they exist. Wipe all googled images that you have stored in your mind, and replace them with names to faces and feelings of places, and I guess that is the overall beauty of what this opportunity has provided, and what experiential learning has to offer.



(My photo at the Taj Mahal, two women are posing to take an illusion photo of them holding the Taj. After watching them, one of their friends offered to take my photo doing the same thing. 2017)



(Me taking the same photo, a little off center. This was taken in early June, the heat was excruciating and the crowds were large, but everyone was kind and mesmerized by the beauty and grandeur of the Taj Mahal. 2017)

References

Image of Taj Mahal retrieved online:

<https://953dbb3e023d8d2081dc-a6ac47d7e9972b6bed5824eadfd0b772.ssl.cf3.rackcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/93431-004-910B716E.jpg>