



# A Lot Can Happen Over Coffee

Kelsey Grab '12

## An Important Partnership of the 21st Century

*Bengaluru*. The South Indian city's name originally translates to "town of boiled beans." It was named after a dish a local woman served to the tired and hungry King Veera Ballala.<sup>1</sup> "Town of Boiled Beans" does not conjure images of an information technology capital. Indeed, my ticket for Lufthansa flight LH754 reads, "Destination: Bangalore." Yet, when I descend from the plane, a sign reads, "Welcome to Bengaluru." India, it seems to me, is having an identity crisis.

In 2005, the city changed its name from the anglicized "Bangalore" to its original Bengaluru. This has been seen as an effort to reclaim India's traditional identity.<sup>2</sup> Inside this brightly lit airport the smell of disinfectant and sanitizer mask the smell of the sweat dripping off the wilting bodies of travelers arriving here at 1 AM. The buildings outside this modern airport look like an abandoned ghost town.

Today, Bengaluru stands as the center for information technology (IT) growth in India and the world. This influx of modernity allows for a strange dichotomy to erupt on the streets. Thin women dressed in traditional Indian saris<sup>3</sup> walk alongside women dressed in tight jeans and tee shirts with Tommy Hilfiger logos. As an American college student who has not traveled much outside her own country, these contradictions make me curious.

The importance of understanding the path of Indian society has never been so crucial for Americans. During President Obama's whirlwind tour of India in November 2010, he discussed at length the ways the relationship between the United States and India will be an essential component of the

21<sup>st</sup> century. President Obama went as far as explicitly stating that his intention in coming to India was to build a bilateral partnership.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout my summer in India I spent a lot of time in a particular coffee shop within the city. An internship that I had hoped would teach me about life in India left me thirsty to learn more about the dichotomy between India's old and the new, between its forces of tradition and modernity. In Café Coffee Day, I was able to experience and observe the contrasts of Indian society. Here, I could see how this city is being reshaped by new media, music, food, and clothing, a modernism that brings with it materialism. Along with a new consumer culture, there has been a dramatic change in the way young people relate to one another. The increased visibility of consumerism is in stark contrast with the degree of poverty.

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1. As written in a piece on Bengaluru, "Garden City," *The Hindu*, June 6, 2004, <http://www.hindu.com/mag/2004/06/06/stories/2004060600520700.htm>.

2. An article discusses how they are going to their original name that the British changed, but how young people are not happy with the change, because it makes the city sound less modern. Nanjappa, Vicky. 2005. "Bangalore is Officially Bengaluru."

3. Saris are traditional women's wear which consist of a long piece of unstitched cloth worn on the body in a variety of styles, most commonly wrapped around the waist. For more information on saris and traditional Indian clothing see: Garcia, Carol Henderson. Carol E. Henderson. "Culture and Customs of India" Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport, CT, 2001. P116-119.

4. "Text of President Barack Obama's Address to India's Parliament," *The Times of India*, November 8, 2010 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Text-of-President-Barack-Obamas-address-to-Indias-parliament-/articleshow/6889675.cms>.

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## Coffee House Tradition and The Beginning of Western Influence

One of the first “traditional” Indian coffee shops was created to reject a new culture’s arrival into India. During the reign of the British Raj, coffee became a symbolic way of keeping Indian identity alive. In the 1940s the creation of India Coffee

▼ These shops, owned and maintained by the Indian co-operative societies, served as meeting places for political activism. Inside their walls revolts were planned over traditional Indian food and drink.

House by the Indian Coffee Board offered a place for Indian coffee to be sold and jobs to become available to Indian citizens. The government helped to create co-operative spaces for Indian coffee to be served the way that Indians still make it today, filtered with milk and sugar.<sup>5</sup>

These shops, owned and maintained by the Indian co-operative societies, served as meeting places for political activism.<sup>6</sup> Inside their walls revolts were planned over traditional Indian food and drink. They are still in existence, with waiters in time-honored military dress and feathered caps, distinctly traditional in their presentation and coffee production. Coffee shops were once a place where people revolted against foreign influence. Today, I sit in Café Coffee Day surrounded by a world that celebrates foreign goods.

The mainstream Indian market was not always this way. It was not until 1991 that the Indian government opened its marketplace to global trade.<sup>7</sup> The influx of foreign goods has created an ethos of consumption. Via printed advertisements, television, Internet, and other media,

Indian society has become a consumer nation, much like that of my American home. I think back to one of my own college courses taken at Brandeis University that discussed our desire for “stuff.”<sup>8</sup> The concept of a consumer culture is not new to me – I live in such a culture. To see this play out

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5. More information on the history of the India Coffee House can be found on their website, “India Coffee House – History” <http://www.indiancoffeehouse.com/history.php>.

6. This is discussed in an article on how Coffee House has changed over time and become less like its traditional place for meeting. “As steaming Cuppa Lost Flavour,” *The Times of India* October 21, 2010. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/As-steaming-cuppa-lost-flavour/articleshow/6783406.cms>.

7. Johnson, Kirk, “Globalization at the Crossroads of Tradition and Modernity in Rural India” *Sociological Bulletin*, 2005.

8. A great short clip titled “The Story of Stuff” discusses American consumer culture. To view it please see: [www.storyofstuff.com](http://www.storyofstuff.com).

here in India is unsettling. I respect and admire India for its historical tradition and cultural pride. The media influences and their consumerist agenda affirm some of the negative repercussions of bringing “modernism” into India.

## Facebook Events and Cosmo Models

The metal handle and glass door of Café Coffee Day reflect my pale Irish-American complexion. The shock of the cold air inside, compared to the Indian heat, sends a chill down my spine. The room is filled with sounds of coffee machines and chatter.

My eyes scan the room. Men and women consuming modern products surround me. A young man and young woman sit at a polished steel table where a Macbook Pro is the center of attention.

“Did you see that event that Shanti<sup>9</sup> made on Facebook for Anjali’s birthday?” the woman asks the man. “No, I haven’t been on yet today, the net is a mess at home.”

“I’ll show you, here.” The young woman points to the screen and immediately the two are discussing how they will get to the party.

“Let’s email Lankesh and see if we can get a ride with him,” the young man says to the woman. The two sip their coffee between clicking through pages online.

One of the lures of Café Coffee Day is its high-speed wireless Internet access, offering a consistent connection that may not otherwise be available. Electricity, never mind Internet access, is something that cannot be taken for granted in this city. Bengaluru relies on monsoon rains to power its nearby hydroelectric generators. The soil outside the coffee shop resembles red dinosaur scales, evidence of the summer monsoon that is unusually late.<sup>10</sup> This puts a strain on a power grid that is already over-capacity.<sup>11</sup> In this city the demand for electricity far exceeds the available output.<sup>12</sup> This is related to the demands of the many IT companies and a growing population in the city. Entire offices can be closed because of power outages, straining businesses.

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9. All names are pseudonyms.

10. “This monsoon, the state has not received enough rain that could roll the turbines at the various hydel power generations units” as quoted in the article, “Grim Power Situation in State” *Deccan Herald*, July 11, 2010, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/80882/grim-power-situation-state.html>.

11. Bengaluru is having such extreme issues with the power supply that they have recently begun a pilot project in controlling and alerting citizens of the city of their usage. This can be found in “Smart Grid will Monitor your Power Consumption” *The Times of India*, November 17, 2010.

12. This is discussed in numerous articles, including: “Power Shortage, Outage Persist” *The Times of India*, March 10, 2009. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/Bengaluru/Power-shortage-outages-persist/articleshow/4251426.cms>.

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“Hold on, this computer is taking forever,” the young woman replies as she impatiently taps at her keypad. I look at her Macbook Pro, admiring it for the modern marvel that it is. Her computer is a luxury even in my home. I think about when I bought my first laptop for college. I passed over the expensive Apple brand Macbooks for the Hewlett Packard that was on sale. Laptops are not exactly new technology, but their cost can be high. A Macbook Pro bought in India can easily cost double the US price. As she stares at the screen with irritated eyes, I feel frustrated. Back home the cost of consumer electronics bothers me, here the price is much higher. I know that there are many people both in India and in the US who would love to have a computer like hers. Her anger seems unfair with my knowledge of how few Indians have the luxury of owning a computer.

India has only 3.7 million personal computers.<sup>13</sup> With over a billion people, that number represents only three percent of the population. In 2003, 61 percent of all U.S. households had a computer.<sup>14</sup> This despite the fact that India has the largest number of software professionals outside of California.<sup>15</sup> The young woman's frustration with her laptop's inability to load her email reminds me of how my friends react back home. But here this woman is part of a small population that can afford such luxuries. She is a modern consumer.

Both her computer purchase and clothing style are atypical of the majority of Indians. Along the city streets which lead to the shop I see women dressed in dark blue and bright magenta saris, covered in gold jewelry with bindis<sup>16</sup> on their foreheads and supple black hair. The young woman I see inside the coffee shop with dark black eyeliner and thick mascara looks like she came straight out of a *Cosmopolitan* magazine ad. Her hair is curled into perfect swooping ringlets. In her fitted leather jacket over her tight red tank top she looks like she is headed to a nightclub. She wears tight jeans and a black belt with a large sparkling clasp. In her ears are simple silver studs. Her shiny patent leather

black heels catapult her small figure to height. From head to toe her Indian figure is plastered with “modern” style. She wears an outfit similar to something I would wear on a Friday night out in Boston. But this was just after lunch on a Wednesday, the middle of the typical workweek. She was poised to put on a fashion show while sipping her café mocha. I wonder what she was thinking as she got dressed. Is she trying to impress someone? Does she want to look “cool?” The impressive details in her outfit are of a style that had to be bought in an expensive retail store in one of the new gargantuan glass malls being built down the street. Her style was not purchased in a “common store.”

Uncomfortable with her steady stare, I look down at myself. It is no wonder she is curious about me, I look absolutely ridiculous here. In my modest pink tunic shirt and white cotton pants I try to emulate “India.” In this more traditional wear, my outsider status is even more apparent. Not only am I a white American, I am also obviously clueless about the socially acceptable style of dress in a store like Café Coffee Day.

Café Coffee Day sells a variety of products: from the usual coffee mugs and coffee beans to tee shirts with witty sayings and comics reminiscent of those I see back home in the United States. The displays are well lit and the packages are brightly colored screaming for attention, all reinforcing a consumer culture. Those privileged enough to enter this modern shop are encouraged to buy trinkets and other unnecessary goods. These goods reinforce their status and material desires.

I am also struck by the way the coffee is made inside this shop. The tall, thin Indian men who work behind the black marble counter are slaves to modern espresso machines. They run back and forth from the milk frother to the espresso maker, pouring the concoctions into large white porcelain mugs. The loud hums of the machines fill the air as customers wait impatiently for their coffee to be served. These machines are imported. Just as the jeans on the girls' legs do not belong to India, neither do these machines, more typical of European coffee shops. Is all this fancy, expensive equipment necessary to make a cup of coffee? The very technique to make coffee here seems to be a form of unnecessary material consumption.

I look at the way the young woman is dressed and think about how consumption is changing the face of the people inside this store. This concept is not unique to India. Peter Jackson's “Local Consumption Cultures in a Globalizing World” discusses the ways in which cultures around the world react to the influx of the modern consumption. He hypothesizes that “globalization is held accountable for the erosion of local

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13. “Telephones, Cellular Phones and Computers by Country: 2007” International Telecommunications Union, Geneva, Switzerland  
World Telecommunication Indicators, Marcus, Aaron. “Insights on Outsourcing” *Interactions*, July/August 2004, <http://delivery.acm.org/10.1145/1010000/1005270/p12-marcus.pdf?key1=1005270&key2=3856889821&coll=DL&dl=ACM&CFID=114315855&CFTOKEN=77157827>.

14. Bureau of the Census. “Households With a Computer and Internet Use: 1984 to 2007”

15. Washington, DC: Bureau of the Census, 2009. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/computer.html>. Accessed November 6, 2010.  
Marcus, Aaron. “Insights on Outsourcing” *Interactions*, July/August 2004, <http://delivery.acm.org/10.1145/1010000/1005270/p12-marcus.pdf?key1=1005270&key2=3856889821&coll=DL&dl=ACM&CFID=114315855&CFTOKEN=77157827>.

16. The term “bindi” refers to the decoration found in between the eyes of people in India. The symbol originally had religious connotations but has recently become a beauty icon. For more information on the history of the bindi, please see: Claus, Peter, Sarah Diamond and Margaret Ann Mills. 2003. *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia* New York, NY: Rutledge p99-101.

difference.”<sup>17</sup> As older women walk by the store window, dressed completely in saris and gold jewelry, people inside look increasingly dissimilar from their parent’s generation. Their attachment to modern goods such as computers and contemporary fashion point to a partial dismissal of traditional Indian culture.

### The White in the Room

A couple of white men walk into the store. They are dressed in pressed shirts and ties with leather briefcases in hand. Everyone pauses to stare at them. I hear their voices and immediately feel my toes wiggle – their accents are American! I watch them shuffle a few tables around to make space for their laptops, bags, and numerous papers. They continue to hold the gaze of everyone in the room. The pair proceed to rearrange the store while discussing the “new merger” they are hoping to “seal” this afternoon. I assume they’re part of Bengaluru’s growing expat population.<sup>18</sup>

Multinational companies are opening offices in India, especially here in Bengaluru,<sup>19</sup> where more than 250 U.S. companies have set up offices. Along with these international business professionals, foreign students are flocking to Bengaluru.<sup>20</sup> The city has become a hotbed of intelligence, catching the attention of the world, even earning the title “India’s Silicon Valley.”<sup>21</sup>

With this growing population of westerners comes the influence of their ideas and lifestyle. Between conversations about their business mergers the two men discuss American baseball teams and the best places to get “American Chinese food.” Westerners bring with them their own cultural identities: their pastimes, their food, their language, their material goods.

Western influence has had a multifaceted and many times controversial influence on India. In *Globalization and the Crossroads of Tradition and Modernity in Rural India*, Kirk Johnson cites an encounter in 1995 with a wall outside the

Department of Sociology at the University of Delhi that reads, “We don’t want Coke and MTV, we want jobs.”<sup>22</sup> This statement denouncing these American goods now offered in India points to the initial rejection of the goods, and recognition of what is necessary: jobs for the people.

Now that foreign companies have brought jobs with the influx of call centers and IT companies, it seems as though many Indians have come to appreciate foreign goods. In this coffee shop young people are seated in aircon<sup>23</sup> and drinking coffee from European coffee machines. Their large pocketbooks, laptops, and high heels point to a lifestyle that embraces materialism.

The windows are thick here. From inside this oasis one cannot hear the sounds of the traffic outside, the people begging for change and the young boy hawking newspapers. Each person seems completely content in his or her imported modern world of American and European brands.

### Making Spaces, Changing Relationships

My head sways to the hip-hop music overhead and my eyes stop at a couple in the corner. The two seem to be enacting a Bollywood romance scene as they gaze longingly at one another. They giggle and laugh, lightly brushing their bodies against one another, moving to music. The instances in which their bodies touch are only “accidental” in their occurrence and they immediately push away in their aftermath. Their physical contact is limited to these encounters. They sway in unison over their plate of chocolate cake.

There are plenty of reasons this young couple might be happy. They can afford to go out for coffee. They are well dressed. They are young. I imagine sitting in this shop with my boyfriend, as happy as they are – yet the life I come from is so different it would be impossible to compare.

My family has let me take my childhood “boyfriends” along to family events since I was 12. They do not find boys for me to date nor do they interfere with my relationships. We are a very physically affectionate family, often greeting one another with a hug. I go to a progressive college where there are no restrictions on male and female interactions in public or private areas.

Traditionally, Indian families are responsible for the creation of romantic relationships.<sup>24</sup> Many young Indians do not date, as the concept is understood in the west. Theirs is not

17. Jackson, Peter. “Local Consumption Cultures in a Globalizing World” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* Vol 29, No 2. June 2004. Pp 165-178.

18. “Americans Seeking Opportunities in India” Associated Press April 2, 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12098123/>.

19. In a recent *Seattle Times* article, the author discusses how the next phase of globalization is outsourcing IT jobs and resources to India. The article mentions that iconic companies such as IBM and Accenture have already done so. See: Wax, Emily “High Tech Jobs Next Phase of Outsourcing?” *Seattle Times* November 7, 2010, [http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2013373970\\_outsource08.html](http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2013373970_outsource08.html).

20. “Bangalore a Hot Destination for Foreign Students”, *The Times of India*, Aug 9, 2003. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/cms.dll/html/uncomp/articleshow?msid=122968>.

21. Narayana, M.R. “ICT Sector, Globalization and Economic Growth” *United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research*, July 2010.

22. Johnson, Kirk, “Globalization at the Crossroads of Tradition and Modernity in Rural India” *Sociological Bulletin*, 2005.

23. Indian slang term for air conditioning

24. The practice of arranged marriage is widely accepted and practiced in India.

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an individual choice, but one that involves the entire family. As such, there is no pressure to find romance.<sup>25</sup> Arranged marriages serve multiple purposes beyond the love felt between two people. These bonds are deeply connected to social status and systems of inheritance.<sup>26</sup>

In contemporary Indian society traditional marriages are changing. The influence of westernization has produced the concept of “love” or “choice” marriages. Although familial and economic issues once characterized western marriages,<sup>27</sup> today they are often based on individual choice. In *Importance of Marital Characteristics and Marital Satisfaction: A Comparison of Asian Indians in Arranged Marriages and Americans in Marriages of Choice* Jayamala Madathil states that “choice” marriages are characteristic of more individualistic societies. With the decision to marry outside of the traditional arrangement, Indians are producing more modern relationships.

I wonder how the two at the counter met. They do not hold hands. His arm is not around her waist. They have a distance between them that reminds me of the requirement to “leave room for the Holy Spirit!” imposed at my Catholic high school dances. If I were home I would equate these two with some of my more old-fashioned friends.

I overhear another young couple nearby. “Since our wedding we have had no time to be with one another alone,” the young woman says to her husband with a gentle firmness. The two are seated across from one another, each grasping a white porcelain coffee cup. “I wish to hold you all the time, but I cannot. It saddens me,” the young man replies, lowering his eyes. The woman, dressed in jeans and a modest tee shirt, looks to her husband and covers her head with thin fingers painted with intricate henna that I assume is from her wedding party. Her gaze locks on the plate of ice cream below her. Their hands fiddle with their coffee cups as they lean forward to whisper. Their soft words open smiles on their faces and brighten their eyes. As they clutch the coffee cups more tightly, their smiling eyes reach forward and their bodies move closer to each other, barely clinging to their seats.

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25. This is often considered a “pro” of arranged marriages. In an article in which an Indian girl who has traveled to the US for college discusses her arranged marriage, she states “more attention should be given to studies than boys.” Herschetal, Eric. “Indian Students Discuss Pros, Cons of Arranged Marriages” *The Daily Princetonian*, October 20, 2004, [www.dailyprincetonian.com/2004/10/20/11161](http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/2004/10/20/11161).

26. Information on weddings, inheritance and the tradition of dowry, another economic aspect of Indian marriages, can be found in Dalmia, Sonia, “The Institution of Dowry in India: Why it Continues to Prevail,” *The Journal of Developing Areas* Vol. 38, No. 2 (2005) 71-93.

27. This is found in many historical accounts of marriage in Western culture. For a brief outline of this see: Psychology Today. 2008. “Marriage, a History.” Last modified July 21. [www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200505/marriage-history](http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200505/marriage-history).

They entrance me. The pair nearly falls out of their seats as they discuss the funny moments of their wedding party: when she nearly tripped walking on stage, when he couldn’t hold in a laugh during a prayer. Their laughter fills the cold coffee shop, transforming it into a place of warmth and love.

At the door the wife says with a smile, “I’m happy we were able to talk here.”<sup>28</sup> I watch the two open the glass door and leave with a skip in their step, to go home on their motorcycle.

Their interaction makes me wonder if there is no place other than a coffee shop where a young couple can meet and discuss their lives. What is it like to have to head to the coffee shop to discuss private matters of the heart? The thought of being married yet not being able to hold my spouse upsets me. As the two depart my heart aches for them. These coffee shops create new spaces for many facets of Indian society. These stores are not just places for young “dating” to happen but also havens of privacy otherwise not available in India.

I take privacy for granted. In my experience living in Indian households the doors are often left open, locks are left unlatched and members of the household wander in and out as they please. The privacy “violations” I experience when I want to “journal” alone seem silly when I see this couple unable to embrace one another in their own home. It is strange to me that these people come to a coffee shop, an openly public space, for a sense of privacy.

Many travel guides discuss this issue, claiming that the lack of privacy is related to the volume of people in India.<sup>29</sup> While this seems valid, there are many layers to this issue beyond the size of India’s population. It is difficult for me, as an American, coming from an individualistic society, to

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28. I took record of conversations I overheard in a journal. This quote comes from July 8, 2010.

29. One such guide that discusses this is Max Moxon’s travel writing, [www.moxon.net/india/surviving\\_india.html](http://www.moxon.net/india/surviving_india.html).

▼ I wonder how the two at the counter met. They do not hold hands. His arm is not around her waist. They have a distance between them that reminds me of the requirement to “leave room for the Holy Spirit!” imposed at my Catholic high school dances.

understand the collective nature of Indian people.<sup>30</sup> Their collective nature often leads Indians to conform to societal expectations rather than seek their own individualistic desires. Respect for the community keeps these couples from their desired privacy.<sup>31</sup>

Café Coffee Day and places like it give young Indians a place to “hang out” – an entirely new concept. With these new places come new opportunities for social interaction. An Indian friend told me, “I never did anything more than go home after school to have dinner with my family. Now we go to Coffee Day.”<sup>32</sup> These meeting places fit a new niche in Indian culture. They offer a place for Indians to meet and work together that otherwise is unavailable. Where time traditionally was spent in the home, young people are finding places and spaces where they can be on their own. In many blogger communities Indians refer to Café Coffee Day as a place to hang out during their college years, where they can relax and enjoy themselves.<sup>33</sup> These places have become spaces for friendships and relationships to flourish in a natural and fun way.

Café Coffee Day offers its consumers pseudo-privacy in part because the majority of the population is between the ages of 20 and 29. A young man who meets his girlfriend in Café Coffee Day explains this idea: “You can get comfortably cozy because no one’s looking at you. These places are a boon for people in love.”<sup>34</sup> This concept of public spaces becoming private puzzles me, yet in this modern coffee shop it seems as though many non-traditional interactions can happen. Seated here with laptops open to Facebook, it is hard to imagine a world of tradition and privacy issues.

The couples that enter this modern coffee shop demonstrate difficulties associated with modernization. Similar to how an increased emphasis on material possessions alters Indian lifestyles, the longing for modern relationships expresses a movement towards new ways of thinking. The paradox of privacy found in public space exposes a conflict between tradition and this new way of life.

30. Kumaraguru, Ponnuramam, “Privacy in India: Attitudes and Awareness” *School of Computer Science, Carnegie Mellon University* 2005.

31. Sinha, Jai BP, “Collectivism Coexisting with Individualism: an Indian Scenario” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* January 29, 2004. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-839X.2001.00081.x/pdf>.

32. I took notes of conversations in a journal immediately after they occurred. This conversation was with Deepak on July 5, 2010.

33. One such blogger discusses how terrible the coffee is in Café Coffee Day and how these stores are mostly just “hang-out joints”. There are over thirty comments in response and discussion of this topic. “Coffee Shops or Hang-out Joints?” *A Wide Angle View of India*, October 19, 2007. <http://nitawriter.wordpress.com/2007/10/19/coffee-shops-or-hang-out-joints>.

34. “A Lot can Happen over Coffee” *The Times of India* June 9, 2006.

## Outside the Glass: The Mango Sale

Outside the glass door I am immediately reminded that I am not in Boston. The smell of tobacco, stale milk, and the inside of trashcans overwhelms me. This stench is muffled by the taste of rickshaw exhaust in the air. Black smog burns my eyes and stings my nose. I cough from the haze and realize that the air quality is not the only aspect that has changed since leaving Café Coffee Day; the people are different as well.

A young man stands across the street. His face reminds me of images I see on TV of people in war zones, sub-Saharan Africa, the victims of tsunamis and earthquakes. But this young man is living in Bengaluru, the IT capital of the modern world. Instead of name brand jeans, he wears only a torn loincloth and a turban-like towel to shield him from the heat. I look at him in dismay. Although here in Bengaluru there are fewer beggars than I had expected in India, his presence is no less impactful. His small hands are so unclean it seems as though dirt has seeped directly into his dry brown skin. He is probably one of the 456 million Indian people trying to survive on under \$1.25 a day.<sup>35</sup> Nearly half of the Indian population lives in poverty, as defined by the World Bank.<sup>36</sup>

I begin to question the experience I just had in Café Coffee Day. How is it that I could step outside that modern paradise into this? As I walk along the broken sidewalks I nearly trip over another man covered in dirt from the street, also wearing only a loincloth and with only a towel over his head to shield him from the heat. In one filthy hand he offers me a piece of freshly cut mango, while with the other hand he holds up four fingers, asking if I will buy it for four rupees.

The man speaks no English. He only motions to me with his hands, offering me something for a very small cost. One U.S. dollar is equivalent to about 45 rupees. His request is minimal, amounting to about 10 cents. The latte I just drank cost over 80 rupees – more than four times what most Indians have to live on for one day.<sup>37</sup> Other drinks involve elaborate ice coffees and ice cream mixtures that can cost over 100 rupees. This coffee is a luxury by Indian standards, especially considering that at the local coffee shop down the

35. This information is part of a new report written by the World Bank detailing how the number of people in poverty is probably higher than estimated.

“India- New Global Poverty Estimates” *The World Bank*, <http://go.worldbank.org/51QB30CFU0>.

36. The World Bank provides estimates for different areas of the world depending on costs of living. This number is based on costs from 2005. “Research: World Bank Updates Poverty Estimates for the Developing World,” *The World Bank*, <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/0,,contentMDK:21882162~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:469382,00.html>.

37. Eighty percent of Indians are living on less than twenty rupees a day. This article discusses the deplorable conditions of the Indian population “Nearly 80 percent of India Lives on Half Dollar a Day” Aug 10 2007, [www.reuters.com/article/idUSDEL218894](http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSDEL218894).

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street, a cup retails at about five rupees. Even in its cheapest form a cup of coffee can be a luxury for many Indians. I decline his mango offer. I have been told it is unsafe for my foreign stomach to eat food sold on the street.

Despite the squalor, modernization has trickled down to the poorest people. The man who was just begging me to purchase his fruit pulls a cell phone from his pocket and begins speaking quickly in Kannada.<sup>38</sup> Studies indicate that nearly 45 percent of the Indian population owns a cell phone. Even in rural India citizens have cell phones.<sup>39</sup> Yet most do not have sanitary toilets.<sup>40</sup> I found it paradoxical that people in the village have cell phones, yet do not have hygienic bathrooms. This lack of hygiene makes this world far from modern.

This paradox begins to explain itself when the cost of a cell phone is taken into account. For an individual in India, the cost of a cell phone is low, but the cost of building a toilet is beyond what most can afford. The cost of labor, materials and maintenance of a toilet is roughly 300 U.S. dollars, as cited in a UN report.<sup>41</sup> The cost of my Indian cell phone and SIM card were the equivalent of 20 U.S. dollars, and minutes on my phone to call within India cost only pennies. Cell phones can be bought even cheaper secondhand or through friends and family members. The price of the phone is minimal in relation to the cost of improving Indian infrastructure.

### The Next Step

Down the street I pass another Café Coffee Day. Seated outside is a poor woman looking similar to the two men I passed earlier. She is dressed in a stained sari, holding out a withered hand for change. I wonder why she is sitting outside, wilting in the heat of the city when there is air conditioning in the shop. I look inside and see young people crowded around small tables, laughing over coffee. I realize that Coffee Day is a world that this woman cannot enter.

The pain in her eyes seems greater than ever as I look at the people laughing inside the shop. It is probable that this woman does not own a Macbook Pro or designer heels. The push for modernization and technological advances has left some outside. This coffee shop accentuates the sharp divide between the rich and the poor. The clear windows look into a world that can be entered only by those with the money to afford the

luxuries inside. Those outside wait for the spare change of the wealthy elites. The boundaries have been defined.

I watch these interactions and think about how little I understand, but how familiar this seems. I cannot distance myself from the people inside the shop. Their desire to shut the door behind them to the issues their society faces is not unfamiliar to me. How often do I enter that modern world and shut the door to those in need outside? I am thousands of miles away from my home, but I can see in the faces of these beggars the reality of modernization everywhere.

This phenomenon of globalization can be seen on street corners throughout the world. Cultures and traditions may vary, but the reality of poverty is often the same. The beggar who sits outside a Starbucks in Boston is not very different from the one outside a Café Coffee Day in Bengaluru. We always have the option to keep walking, coffee cup in hand. Within our modern worlds of convenience we make attempts to shield ourselves from the reality of the dichotomy between the rich and poor. This dichotomy is created by the economic and social systems that modern citizens are a part of.

I look into the woman's dark eyes and feel a sense of guilt; her gaze paralyzes me. My L.L. Bean backpack suddenly feels unnecessarily heavy. A laptop, a few granola bars, and books on globalization weigh my body down. In one hand I hold a cup of coffee and in the other I hold a granola bar and a few rupees. I step forward to place the food and coins in the palm of her hand. I stand at the intersection of both of these worlds wondering, what is the next step? As consumers continue to look for the best technology to improve their lives, will there always be someone waiting outside the door for spare change?

Perhaps our next modern advancement should be less about the refinement of our cup of coffee and more to do with the five rupees this impoverished woman rattles in her hand.

▼ I watch these interactions and think about how little I understand, but how familiar this seems.

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38. This is the native language of Karnataka, of which Bengaluru is the capital.

39. During drives through local villages I often saw signs for the Indian phone companies Vodafone and Reliance.

40. "Greater Access to Cell Phones than Toilets in India" *Science Daily*, April 19, 2010 <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/04/100414122632.htm>.

41. "Greater Access to Cell Phones than Toilets in India," *United Nations University*, April 2010, [http://www.inweh.unu.edu/News/2010-04\\_UNU-INWEH\\_News-Release\\_Sanitation.pdf](http://www.inweh.unu.edu/News/2010-04_UNU-INWEH_News-Release_Sanitation.pdf).