

# THOUGHTLESS, NEEDLESS

DERYN MAIR THOMAS



*View from a train car in South India*

“Thoughtless is the man who buries his ideals, surrendering to the common fate.”

- The “Perfume” Saint, from *Autobiography of a Yogi*

Loneliness in India is a contradiction—one of many. It does not appear to occur naturally, though it can be found in the corners, in the shadows, in the dark. But it is not inherent to the culture. People live atop one another, under each other, tangled into webs of consciousness and existence. In some ways, the self becomes lost in the identity of the greater whole, in the land, and in the air and pollution. India is a land of contradictions. In a population of 1.2 billion people, I am able to find solitude; I am able to find myself.

India has a subtle way of illustrating the fact that a person’s concept of need is continually changing as based upon his or her perception of what is necessary and what is luxury, which is, in turn, determined by his or her understanding of the surrounding world. Life here is a constant enquiry into the nature of need and necessity and into why so many are bound to a need that is excessive.

Our packaged, Western happiness is a prime import to India. The West has come here in the form of McDonald’s, blue jeans, and technology, in Valentine’s Day, Hollywood films, and freedom. Technology, namely that of the cellphone, is my best example, in that it is so shockingly assaulting, so “in your face” all day, every day. These devices have evolved into a fifth appendage on people, sustaining mutated life via electronic communication and manipulated brain waves. I exaggerate because it is more noticeable in India than in the US, despite that same buzzing affliction—in the hands, in the ears, in the minds of every single piece and particle and person of the 1.2 billion population. The irony of it all becomes apparent when you find yourself face to face with advertisements for smartphones on billboards the size of buildings, on billboards painted on the sides of buildings, on homes. The homes of the 1.2 billion who live without clean water, without reliable electricity,

without guaranteed healthcare, sanitation, education—I could go on. In fact, I once noticed in the shell of a partially completed apartment building that someone had made a home by hanging tarpaulin for walls below a TV network satellite dish, which was lashed neatly to the outside of the muddy, matted bricks. This is not uncommon. People living in slums will have satellite dishes perched shamelessly atop their tents. Momentarily ignoring the practical questions that always arise in my mind upon seeing this (such as where the TV is and where the electricity is coming from), I acknowledge that there is something disturbingly perverse about the way technology is perceived in modern Indian society. It is not only being placed above arguably more important necessities, but being perceived as having greater importance than those things, which should be considered universal human rights: food and clean water. Embedded in this attitude is the acknowledgment that the elevation of

social status through material possession should be attended to before the elevation of health or quality of life.

Here my own experience with need has been two-fold by addressing the existence of need both inside and outside of myself. First, I have witnessed poverty more extreme than I have ever seen before. In this, and comparing my own context to it, I have become accustomed to a sort of relative theory. Need is relative. This is a fact of reality, but should it be? The state of existence here makes me wonder, at what points do needs become universal rights? Why in some places are they not? My experience is relative, to myself and to my time and space, but it is also universal since everyone is experiencing a relative moment of a common reality. All actions and thoughts are an expression of the same reality.

Secondly, I have experienced the slow release of desires within my own life here in India. Things that I once expected to be



*An almost empty street in Falaknuma, a suburb of Hyderabad*



*Rooftop in Hyderabad*

provided for me or available to me I have easily forgotten, proving only that I never needed them in the first place. I make do without. The more I acknowledge that I do not need, the happier I find myself. People here experience a different kind of living, of aliveness, of life. I have found that I, or “we” as a privileged Western community, have no right to define happiness because we are the least qualified to understand what it is. We sell happiness in packages—quantified, counted, and calculated—rather than truly understanding its presence.

Reject the unnecessary and you find a simpler way of life; a quieter, more peaceful way of interacting with the world. Such a way of living can only bring good out of people and into the world. It is not out of our control to change the shape of the future, and it is never out of our control to recognize that the way we are living is destructive and to redirect our misguided intentions. I recognized this here,

but each will have his own India, his own place that shows him the sky is real and leaves part of it resting quietly in his hands.

Within the last two months, my temporary home has had many things to say to me. It tells me that eventually I will return, which is truth in its most unanticipated form. India is an alluring blur of life, color, and truth. It is only the beginning for me, but I have encountered the universe in its finite existence. The universe is everywhere, in everything, spreading high and wide into the inconceivable smallness of this earth, stretching its infinite distance into each and every familiar and unfamiliar reality. Open your eyes wide enough, and the whole world will become yours. Beyond this, nothing is needed.

*Deryn Mair Thomas is a Philosophy major and International Studies minor, Class of 2014*