

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL DIMENSIONS  
IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS:  
FINDINGS FROM EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING  
IN SOUTH INDIA

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors Committee of  
Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
May 2012

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my most sincere gratitude to Dr. Sandhya Rao for her guidance and encouragement throughout the thesis process. Her vibrant energy and passion for academia inspired me to persevere through to the end of this extensive project.

A special thank you also goes out to Mr. Varghees Cleatas, Shruthi Karakuchi, and the Vikasana staff for embracing me as a member of the Vikasana family during my time in South India. I would not have been able to conduct my research without their help in smoothing my transition to the rural, South Indian lifestyle.

And *danke schön*, Mom and Dad, for always encouraging me to follow my dreams, even when they beckoned me across the ocean, half a world away into the South Indian jungle.

This document was submitted on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this project to the bridge school children, my faithful companions during my time in India. The bliss they found in the everyday despite their difficult pasts taught me a lesson in gratitude and reminded me to take pleasure in the simplest of life's joys. Whether it was weaving necklaces from grass and flowers or jogging to the river for a morning yoga session, we always found a way to enjoy our time together. *Akka* will never forget you!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
DEDICATION.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	x
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Research Questions.....	2
Methodology.....	2
Significance.....	3
Organization of the Thesis.....	3
CHAPTER 1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF CROSS- CULTURAL INTERACTIONS AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF TODAY’S INTERCONNECTED WORLD.....	5
Early Explorations in the Orient.....	5
Early Explorations in India.....	7
Explorations in the New World.....	10
Connecting the Dots: The Emergence of an Interconnected Globe.....	13
India: A 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Economic Superpower.....	14
Historical and Contemporary Indo-U.S. Relations.....	16
Considering Culture in International Relations.....	21

Intercultural Communication as a Study.....	22
CHAPTER 2.AN INTRODUCTION OF VIKASANA AND THE CONTEXT OF MY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING JOURNEY.....	25
Vikasana.....	27
The Bridge School Program.....	28
CHAPTER 3. IDENTIFICATION AND APPLICATION OF CULTURAL DIMENSIONS TO MY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OBSERVATIONS OF THE SOUTH INDIAN CULTURE.....	31
Narrative-1 Shruthi’s Story: The State of Women in Rural South India.....	32
Narrative- 2 Creativity in the Classroom.....	40
Narrative- 3 Reflections amidst the Ruins of an Empire.....	44
Narrative- 4 Bengaluru: Explorations in India’s Silicon Valley.....	51
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	58
Findings.....	59
Cultural Dimensions Identified in the Narrative Episodes.....	60
Barriers to Intercultural Communication Identified in the Narrative Episodes....	64
Identified Similarities between the American and South Indian Cultures.....	66
The Role of Cultural Dimensions in International Relations.....	67
The Contributions of My Study.....	68
The Weaknesses of My Study.....	69
Recommendations.....	70

REFERENCES.....71

**ABSTRACT**

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL DIMENSIONS  
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May 2012

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Cultural dimensions are traits that can be used to characterize a culture for a better understanding of its *worldview*, the collective beliefs, attitudes, and values that influence a society's preferences. Cultural dimensions are particularly relevant in the context of today's interconnected world, where technological advances have connected influential societies like India and the United States. Drawing from the theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and Hofstede (2002) and Ziegahn's (2001) cultural dimensions, this study will analyze the *worldview* of the South Indian culture based upon my experiences obtained during a three-month internship with a non-governmental organization in rural South India. By comparing and contrasting the South Indian and American societal *worldviews* on a basis of identified dimensions, my research will

identify similarities and differences between the *worldviews* that might influence interactions between the societies. By applying cultural dimensions to the Indo-U.S. relationship, this thesis project will reveal the role of cultural dimensions in the broader spectrum of international relations.

## Introduction

Every world culture has a unique history. Every society has a story abound with significant characters and societal endeavor, with religious traditions and political strife. Each culture's tale distinguishes its people from all others in the world. And all cultures, whether ancient or just a few centuries old, share a foundation in humanity, in the *Homo sapiens* existence that is reason and emotion, triumph and struggle, love and despair. The many branches of human society are connected by their roots in a common species.

In the twenty first century there are more opportunities for exchange between cultures than ever before. Technological innovations have linked together societies throughout all parts of the globe, allowing us glimpses into cultural lifestyles different from and perhaps even similar to our own. The world market, an immense web of fiscal exchange and interdependency, predicts increasingly intimate relations between nations.

The new, flattened structure of the global economy has created opportunities for participation and collaboration to small groups and individuals in all parts of the world. In recent years, influential Asian nations such as India and China have risen to meet the demands of global consumerism. Understanding and upholding relationships between influential nations like the United States and emerging India is particularly vital, as these states' individual and shared choices will significantly affect the environment, global security, and the world market. But in order to maintain a relationship that is both amiable and productive, members of each society must have an understanding of their counterpart's culture.

The field of intercultural communication asserts that culture determines a society's worldview, the collective attitudes, beliefs, and values shaped by the culture's unique history. (Rogers, 1999) The worldview varies between cultures and thusly plays a direct role in exchanges between members of differing societies. Recognition of an individual society's worldview is pertinent in understanding its members' preferences and in preventing miscommunication during exchanges with other societies.

### **Research Questions:**

This study will attempt to answer the following questions:

- What is the role of cultural dimensions in international relations?
- What are some similarities and differences between the cultures of United States and India?

### **Methodology:**

This is an exploratory study based on my own observations of the South Indian culture attained during a three month internship with a rural, non-governmental organization, as well as my own upbringing in the United States. My personal research has a basis in experiential learning, the process of attaining information through observation and direct participation. Specifically, four narrative episodes that illustrate a broad spectrum of cultural dimension in India will be discussed.

This research is based on Ziegahn (Ziegahn, 2001) and Hofstede's (Hofstede, 2002) theories on cultural dimensions as well as the theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

**Significance:**

The study of Indian and American cultures is especially relevant in today's world, where members of the two societies collaborate on a daily basis. The nations' leaders converge to discuss environmental and political agendas, and the states' citizens collaborate to complete business transactions, design new products and technology, and exchange scholarly ideas in the context of academia. An analysis of the similarities and differences between the South Indian and American cultures will reveal how members of each society are uniquely affected by their culture's worldview. Understanding culture's role at the fundamental, interpersonal and societal levels can help us to promote clear communication between the states while forming decisions that will affect the world market and the global political scene. Very little research exists on this specific area of intercultural studies. This study will contribute toward a growing body of knowledge in this important field.

**Organization of the thesis:**

In order to analyze how culture affects a people's preferences, I will first discuss early, cultural interactions in the Orient and their effects on participating societies. I will then focus on India and the United States, analyzing foundational, cultural interactions within each country and tracing the history of international relations between the two states. Next, I will discuss the history of intercultural communication as a study and offer a few theories presenting cultural dimensions that help us characterize a culture in order to understand its preferences. I will then examine the South Indian society by providing examples of my experiences and comparing and contrasting it to that of the United States

using identified, cultural dimensions. I will conclude by analyzing the findings of my experiential learning and explaining how these contribute toward a better understanding of the role of cultural dimensions in international relations.

## **A Brief History of Cross-Cultural Interactions and the Significance of Culture in the Context of Today's Interconnected World**

### **Early Explorations in the Orient**

The history of cross-cultural interaction can be traced back thousands of years, long before the dawn of global interconnectivity through modern communication and transportation technologies, to a time when contact between cultural groups was limited to trade, war, and romantic encounters. Most societal interactions were restricted by geographic barriers and distance, but even these became surmountable to members of disparate societies hoping to attain goods and services that would improve the quality of life. (Rogers, p.4, 1999)

A byproduct of the modest silkworm, silk became an object of human desire around 3000 B.C. E. Regarded as the strongest of natural fibers, it was used to create choice clothing that was, for a few centuries, worn only by the Chinese nobility. The Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E. -220 C.E.) popularized international trade with the establishment of the Silk Road, a passage that began in China and extended into the deserts of Central Asia and parts of northern India, through Persia and into eastern Mediterranean ports, where goods were shipped to European ports in Venice and Genoa. (Rogers, 1999)

Silk Road travelers were exposed to a multitude of cultures and ideas. The teachings of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism spread via missionaries, who promoted their philosophies throughout most parts of Asia and into Europe. Tradesmen encountered societies never before approached by outsiders and shared their experiences back home, reporting fascinating tales of strange peoples from afar.

Communities along the Silk Road often adopted a skeptical, if not apprehensive view of foreigners. Alexander the Great and Attila the Hun expanded their territorial holdings through violent campaigns and embedded in victims' minds the idea that "the stranger was from a distant, different place and was, for that reason, to be feared." (Rogers, p.5, 1999) Such negative interactions inspired the earliest form of *xenophobia*, the fear or hatred of foreigners.

The Silk Road became one of the most renowned trade routes in the history of mankind. It embodied the novel notion of consumerism, channeling immense quantities and varieties of goods from Asia into Europe. The ideas that it facilitated throughout the world inspired the curious minds of many and laid the foundations for the future of cultural exploration.

One such inspired mind was that of Marco Polo, a Venetian tradesman who ventured to China with his father and uncle in 1275. He was appointed as a diplomat under Kublai Khan, emperor of the Yuan dynasty. Polo's service missions took him to most parts of China and into surrounding territories where he was exposed to a variety of cultures and ideas. He recorded his discoveries and dictated them to a prison-mate in Genoa years later.

The Travels of Marco Polo, published in France about a century after the explorer's death in 1324, describes Polo's fascination with eastern wonders, particularly the lustrous pearls, magnificent diamonds, and craftily constructed boats that, in the explorer's mind, characterized the Indian subcontinent. Within the book, Polo also discusses his impressions of Indian commerce, highlighting his observations of the Brahmans, who he described as "the best merchants in the world." (Shiffman, 2000)

The Travels of Marco Polo became the eyes with which Europe viewed the Far East until the nineteenth century. Perhaps more importantly, Polo's writings reinvigorated European interest in the Orient. (Rogers, 1999)

### **Early Explorations in India**

The Indian subcontinent with its advanced civilization dating back to 3300 B.C.E. has long been an epicenter of culture, a meeting point for the ideas, beliefs, and traditional practices of various societies from Asia and beyond. Its unique history of invasion, expansion, and interaction with other civilizations makes it a cultural hearth, and its society has long been distinguished by scholars for its unique state of unified diversity. (Kosambi, 1965)

The country's character has been woven together throughout millennia, a cultural quilt sewn predominantly from strands of Hinduism and Islam and patches of Christianity, decorated with Aryan seams and British stitching. Indeed, from its most ancient inhabitants to its contemporary citizens, the people who have lived upon the Indian subcontinent have shaped it into an anthropological masterpiece. Keeping the country's unique character in mind, it is easy to understand how foreign traders and other visitors became enthralled with India.

Tales from the Silk Road and writings from explorers like Marco Polo inspired trade and diplomatic campaigns from the West to the ancient land, which bewildered its visitors with cultural practices and religious traditions that were wholly its own. Upon reaching the Indian city of Calicut (today known as Kozhikode), Portuguese maritime explorer Vasco da Gama and his entourage were welcomed to the king's palace, where

they were served “the husks of a certain herb which is chewed by the people of [the] country because of its soothing effects and which they call *atambor*.” (Velho, 1898) *Atambor*, more widely known as the betel or areca-nut, continues to be regarded by many Indians for its medicinal properties today, which distinguishes it as an innate aspect of the subcontinent’s cultural history.

Vijayanagar, once located in the modern South Indian state of Karnataka, was cherished by its visitors as a hub of foreign intrigue. Established in AD 1336 by the first kings of the Vijayanagar Empire, Vijayanagar (today known as Hampi) became a center for commerce and a stronghold for the arts. (Gupta, 2010) Royal patronage of academia earned Vijayanagar its nickname, *Vidyanagar* (“city of education”). Visitors marveled at the city’s architecture, the grandiose palaces and temples that dotted its landscape. One of the capital’s most astounding architectural feats was its dam, which extended across the mighty Tungabhadra River and connected with a fifteen mile long aqueduct that carried water into the city. British magistrate Robert Sewell described the hydro complex as “one of the most remarkable irrigation works to be seen in India.” (Sewell, p. 52, 1900)

Vijayanagar was also noted for its openness to foreigners and their religious and philosophical ideas. The beloved warrior-king Krishnadeva Raya welcomed travelers and inhabitants of all racial and religious backgrounds, creating within the city a market of intercultural exchange. Not only did Vijayanagar put India on the map as a center for trade of unique, commercial goods, but it also created a welcoming environment for outsiders wishing to explore the riches of an ancient culture.

The British East India Company established in 1600 prized the subcontinent as a center for multinational trade. Kolkata (Calcutta), established by the Company in 1690,

became a center for international commerce that attracted a population as diverse as the goods that flowed through its ports. The collaboration of Asian and European ideas fostered flourishing efforts in the fields of history, geography, ethnology, biography, botany, and public education. (Kapil, 2011) Warren Hastings, appointed as the Bengali Governor General in 1772, believed that the Company had to understand the ways of its people if it hoped to establish governing precedence over the territory. “Every accumulation of knowledge,” he wrote, “and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state...”(Hastings, 1785)

The European fascination with the Orient played an integral role in the establishment of relations between Asia and the West. India, in particular, gained an immensity of attention due to the diverse goods and ideas it had to offer. Visitors were intrigued by the country’s ancient architecture and the expansive nature of its culture. While some foreigners settled in the East, others returned home to share stories of their encounters abroad. Many Europeans were intimidated by travelers’ tales, but some were inspired by the prospect of profit and exploration in lands afar and decided to embark upon an adventure of their own. (Rogers, 1999)

## **Explorations in the New World**

Christopher Columbus is often accredited as the founder of the Americas, the man who discovered the other side of the globe. Columbus' voyages did indeed open Europe's eyes to the New World and its commercial and colonial potentials, but they were by no means the first to reach American shores. Some scholars argue that the New World's first inhabitants arrived around 11,000 BCE by way of Alaska, the Bering Strait, and Siberia. Intercultural contact between New World societies and European populaces was initiated by the Norse, who occupied Greenland between AD 986 and 1500. (Diamond, 1999) However, their impact upon the Native American population was little to none, so "for practical purposes the collision of advanced Old World and New World societies began abruptly in A.D. 1492."(Diamond, p. 67, 1999)

A native Italian sailor, Christopher Columbus was fascinated with European accounts of the Far East. He was particularly inspired by Marco Polo's writings, which, along with other travel reports, led Columbus to conclude that Asia wasn't as remote and distant as popular belief would have it. Inspired by a passion for adventure and the prospect of attaining wealth and glory, he resolved to locate a westward maritime route to the Far East. While Columbus never discovered the elusive route to Asia, his explorations opened the window to the West, and the Americas became the new frontier for European nations seeking wealth and influence in an increasingly imperialistic era. (Christopher Columbus," 2012)

The years following Columbus' expeditions saw an astounding increase of European involvement with the New World and a concurring collision of cultures. The Columbian Exchange, a complex trading network established between the New and Old

Worlds, offered patrons in the Eastern Hemisphere goods they had never before heard of. Crops such as sweet potatoes, maize, chili peppers, and tomatoes made their debut appearance in Europe and Asia, and tobacco, another product of the New World, became so popular that many countries used it as a substitute for currency. (Nunn & Qian, 2010) European nations held a particular fondness towards New World goods, as was evidenced by the establishment of colonies explicitly for the cultivation and exportation of sought-after American produce.

But the influx of European interest in the Americas was less than beneficial to indigenous populations. European settlers and domesticated animals brought with them a variety of diseases that were particularly detrimental to previously isolated natives. (Nunn and Qian, 2010) Furthermore, many Europeans had difficulty likening themselves to indigenous Americans, who they believed to be atheistic and anarchistic. Italian sailor Giovanni da Verrazzano reached the North American Carolina coast in 1524 and, although he had minimal contact with the natives, concluded that they were a people of “no religion and that they live[d] in absolute freedom, and that everything they [did] proceed[ed] from ignorance. . . . ” (Paper, 2012)

Religious differences and land disputes with indigenous populaces united European colonies, which typically shared religious views and governing philosophies. The New England Confederation established in 1643 united British settlers in Massachusetts, Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven against the common Native American threat. (New England Confederation, 2012)

Not all Europeans viewed the New World as an opportunity for European expansionism. Ross (2010) argued that “curiosity is evidence that Europeans had interests

other than enslaving native populations and stealing their wealth when they came to America. What seem to be simple binary oppositions between civility and barbarity, ignorance, or evil, in the propaganda that buoyed explorers and colonists often have deeper roots in the pursuit of knowledge.”(Ross, 2010) Fulke Greville wrote about his friend Philip Sydney’s intrigue with the Americas in the 1580s, and he noted that, along with the opportunity to expand the Christian faith, America provided “for the curious a fruitful womb of innovation.” (Greville, 1907)

The New World of today contrasts greatly from that of half a millennium ago. Nations have been formed out of colonial empires, and emigrants from around the globe now populate them. The United States of America hosts a particularly diverse populace constituted by citizens from all parts of the world. As was the case in Calcutta, India, the emergence of cultures, the collaboration of varied beliefs and ideas contributed to the United States’ innovative abilities, resulting in its ascent as a world superpower.

The United States experienced its most rapid period of growth at the beginning of the twentieth century. The nation’s populace saw rapid increases in life expectancy rates, alongside an overall improvement in standards of living. (Summers, 2010) Over the past century, the U.S. has dominated the global political and economic scene with its involvement in major wars, social development schemes, and commercial trade.

The choices made by this influential nation’s leaders will have powerful effects on global politics, the world economy, and the natural environment. Therefore, it is important to study and assess the United States’ interactions with other countries (in particular those nations also possessing global influence) in order to maintain global security and promote amiable, international relations between world leaders.

## **Connecting the Dots: The Emergence of an Interconnected Globe**

The pioneers of the Silk Road and the New World voyagers inspired generations of global travel that led to the intertwining of national political regimes, economies, and cultures. The development of communication and transportation technologies has further enhanced international relations to create one massive, global society.

According to Nandan Nilekani, former CEO of Indian software development firm Infosys Technologies Limited, the introduction of the Internet played an integral role in connecting societies once separated by geographical distance. “Broadband connectivity around the world...created a platform where intellectual work, intellectual capital could be delivered from anywhere...and this gave a whole new degree of freedom to the way we do work.” (Friedman, p. 7, 2005) Today, this freedom allows governments and businesses to collaborate with political regimes and industries on the other side of the world.

The current era of international collaboration, referred to by Thomas Friedman as Globalization 3.0, is defined by international cooperation between individuals and the emergence of horizontal collaborative business structures. (Friedman, 2005) The international economy of today has a flattened structure that welcomes individual and small group participation. The organization of the current global market differentiates it from the world economy of former eras, which possessed a top-down, hierarchical structure that enabled the monarchical schemes of mega corporations.

The restructuring of the international economy is a result of key political events, companies, and innovations that have contributed to the evolution of global communication. According to Friedman, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 not only

liberated the oppressed populaces of the Soviet Empire, but it also represented the decline of the authoritarian economic model and the introduction of an international, free market system. The successive introduction of Netscape, the world's first web browser in 1995 laid the foundation for online open source networks and work flow software, which enabled companies to export digital tasks to offices around the globe. (Friedman, 2005)

I will now discuss the technological and economic developments that prompted India's metamorphosis into an influential member of the global market. Then I will examine the relationship between the United States and India, which offers a prime example of how international relations have developed with technology. It is important to study relations between influential countries like India and the United States, nations whose individual and joint decisions determine the current and future state of international political and economic affairs.

### **India: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Economic Superpower**

India gained its independence from the British Empire on August 15, 1947. The country became a republic with the introduction of its constitution on January 26, 1950. Although it intermittently relinquished power to other parties, the new government under the command of the Congress Party maintained a firm grip on the national economy for the next half century, controlling most major commercial and service industries. In 1991 the Party introduced a series of economic reforms that allowed for increased privatization and the ascension of a middle class. (Rao, 2002) The liberalization of domestic industry opened India to unprecedented economic possibilities amidst the dawning of the twenty first century.

India experienced rapid economic growth following the government reforms of the nineties. Between 1990 and 1999, the value of its commercial and service trade industries doubled and tripled, respectively. Increased participation in the international market tripled India's commercial trade and service import values between 1999 and 2005, and the value of its service exports quadrupled during the same span of time. (Martin & Kronstadt, 2007)

The liberalization movement also encouraged the diffusion of Internet access across India, providing a platform for entrepreneurs such as N.R. Narayana Murthy, founder and former CEO of Infosys Technologies Limited, one of many software firms that have established India as a leader in the world of cyber ingenuity. Bangalore, the capital of the southern state of Karnataka, is home to around 25 percent of India's software engineers and hosts facilities of international technology firms such as IBM, Motorola, Texas Instruments, and Hewlett-Packard, earning the city its title of "India's Silicon Valley". (Rao, 2002)

The extraordinary economic growth experienced by the subcontinent was due not only to the liberalization of the economy, but to the subsequent internationalization of domestic industry made possible by the globe-flattening factors mentioned in the previous section.

India's economic ascent can be viewed by other developing nations as inspiration for internationalizing domestic industries. The emergence of developing world markets such as India's will be "the biggest story from our era... an event that ranks only with the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution and that... represents far more change for far more people, taking place far more rapidly. It will change literally everything, from

cultural patterns to the location of the major theaters of history to conceptions of human freedom to the ways in which nations interact and cooperate or compete.” (Summers, 2010)

### **Historical and Contemporary Indo-U.S. Relations**

*“The world that the United States wants to see, the world that India want to see, is a world of increasing integrations, is a world of increasing prosperity, is a world of tolerance, is a world at peace, is a world where prosperity comes from the bottom up, is a world where respect for individuals is a paramount value. That is why I expect our partnership to be so crucial to the history of the next generation and to the next century.”*  
(Summers, 2010)

In a 2010 address to the U.S.-India Business Council, former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence H. Summers declared India and the United States, to be two influential “nations committed to international cooperation in a shrinking world [that] have every reason to affiliate and to partner closely.” (Summers, 2010) Summers’ words emphasize the need for these countries to maintain positive relations if the global market and international society are to prosper.

Prior to gaining its sovereignty in 1947, India was rarely a topic in White House discussions, and American citizens knew little to nothing of the distant, very foreign land. The British government discouraged relations between the two populaces, fearing that its Indian subjects might be inspired by the rebelliousness that pried its former American colonies from imperial rule. After gaining its independence, India embarked on a mission to establish positive relations with the U.S., a country that it regarded for its democratic ideals. However, these efforts were stunted with the end of World War II and the adoption of differing diplomatic stances towards communist nations. India’s refusal to

join U.S.-sponsored military alliances and America's support of Pakistan in the battle for Kashmir only widened the communication gap. (Kumar, 2009)

A number of developmental efforts from the United States inspired an era of cordial Indo-U.S. relations. During the presidential term of Lyndon B. Johnson, the U.S. shipped large quantities of grain to a drought-stricken India and in 1973 it liquidated two-third of India's massive debt in exchange for wheat. Bill Clinton (elected in 1992) and his presidential successor, George W. Bush (elected in 2001) made positive relations with the up-and-coming India a priority and cooperation between the nations has steadily increased since. (Kumar, 2009)

In the twenty first century, Indo-U.S. relations are stronger than they've ever been, extending across political, economic, and social spheres. Trade between the world's two largest democracies has increased substantially since the liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s. The subcontinent's rapidly developing commercial industry has gotten the attention of major American firms, which have made concrete investments in the Indian economy. The United States is the chief patron of India's booming information-technology outsourcing industry, establishing offices abroad in cities like Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley. (Kamdar, 2007)

According to the 2006 CRS Report for Congress, the trade of commercial goods between the countries has developed substantially. Between 2000 and 2005, bilateral merchandise exchange increased by an astounding ninety percent. Aircraft, electrical machinery, and medical instruments were among the top five American commodities imported by India in 2006. Conversely, jewelry and apparel constituted the U.S.'s primary imports from India. The service exchange market has seen even greater

developments, with trade increasing by one hundred thirty percent during the same five year span. The total worth of Indo-U.S. service exchange grew from 4.4 U.S. billion in 2000 to 10.2 billion in 2005. (Martin and Kronstadt, 2007)

But the mass exchange of goods and services comes with a cost: as two of the world's largest energy consumers, the United States and India must keep consumption and pollution levels in check. Furthermore, the rising demand of commercial goods in India, a nation with around 1.2 billion citizens will threaten the availability of already scant resources, affecting not only the United States (which will be forced to establish more proportionate levels of consumption) but the entire world. According to Mira Kamdar, a Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute, "India must...invent a market-based model of equitable, sustainable development. If India succeeds, we will all win. If, as the world's largest non-Western democracy and open society, it fails, then we will all lose. What happens during the next 60 years of India's independence will be crucial not only to its own future but to all of ours." (Kamdar, 2007)

But despite a seemingly bleak outlook, hope is on the horizon: the governments of both nations are dedicated to meeting the world's rising energy demands, and doing so in a responsible, sustainable manner. In 2010 Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and U.S. President Barack Obama introduced the U.S.-India Partnership to Advance Clean Energy (PACE), an agreement that promotes the development of and access to carbon-conscious energy sources like solar energy and advanced biofuels. PACE efforts have produced encouraging results thus far, including the signing of an accord that will establish a Joint Clean Energy Research and Development Center, along with two pacts ensuring joint facilitation in the deployment of newly developed clean energy

technologies. Furthermore, PACE aims to commercialize innovative energy sources in order to promote the transition to a low -carbon economy. (The White House, 2010)

In July of 2011 Indian Minister of External Affairs S.M. Krishna and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met to discuss climate change and the establishment of a clean energy economy. The meeting confirmed Indo-U.S. commitment to maintaining mutual energy security and to establish an economy that will create jobs and promote investment. The 2009 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the United States' Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and India's Ministry of Environment and Forests establishes a framework for cooperation. Indo-U.S. compliance with the MOU will play a determining role in the nations' success or failure in reaching the aforementioned goals. (U.S. Department of State, 2011)

Indo-U.S. relations have developed substantially over the past few decades. The strengthening of political and economic ties between the two countries has led to the intermingling of two, culturally diverse societies. More than 2.2 million Indians inhabit the United States and these numbers are bound to keep growing. With average household incomes of up to \$70,000, Indian-Americans constitute one of the most affluent immigrant groups, and they have become an increasingly influential lobbying group in U.S. politics. (Kamdar, 2007)

American universities have become a top choice for Indian nationals looking to study abroad. In fact, Indians make up the second largest international student group, about 14 percent of the U.S. international student populace. (Kumar, 2011) A number of these scholars have made remarkable advances in the world of academia, particularly in the field of computer science. Sabeer Bhatia, a former student at the California Institute

of Technology, founded of Hotmail, the world's first free email service. Indian-born alumni of Stanford University created Junglee Corporation, an online commerce firm that was eventually purchased by Amazon.com. (Rao, 2002)

The United States has few qualms regarding the influx of Indian intellect, as it reflects positively upon the reputations of universities that host high achievers. In April of 2007, former U.S. Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes and a group of American university presidents visited the sub-continent with praise of Indian international students. Hughes vowed to find a way to simplify the foreign study visa acquisition process for Indian students wishing to pursue academia in the United States. (Kumar, 2009)

The international student exchange has two sides. India is currently the 14<sup>th</sup> most popular destination for American students seeking a college education abroad. Although it is nowhere near the total of Indian scholars in the U.S., the number of American students in India is growing rapidly. 3,884 U.S. nationals attended Indian universities during the 2009-2010 school year, 44.4 percent more than the previous school year.

Dr. John E. Dooley, Vice President of Virginia Tech noted a general naivety amongst American college students in regards to twenty first century India. They just don't know about the subcontinent's current developmental progress. "U.S. students need to visit India and interact with universities...to prepare themselves to see the global market place." (Kumar, 2011)

U.S. Consulate General Information Officer Anand Krishna said that low tuition rates play a large part in attracting American students to the subcontinent, but scholars are beginning to recognize the quality of an Indian university education. Krishna

optimistically noted, “the fact that they are looking at schools in India now is important” (The Economic Times, 2011) particularly in the context of contemporary Indo-U.S. relations, which are stronger than ever before.

Over the past few decades, the American and Indian cultures have converged due to the internationalization of the economy and the intertwining of political regimes. The two societies have been brought even closer together due to technological improvements that have flattened the globe, normalizing business and social interactions that traverse the globe. However, as is evidenced by the past, cross-cultural interactions won’t always yield peaceful results. Techniques from the field of intercultural communication, a study which considers how a culture’s unique character affects its members’ preferences, might be employed in order to promote peaceful, prosperous Indo-U.S. relations.

### **Considering Culture in International Relations**

Considering culture’s influence on individual and societal preferences can prevent misunderstanding between interacting parties of differing cultural backgrounds. (Inoue, 2007) Culture affects how a society functions and is a determinant of the choices its members make. Therefore, it is important to study culture so that we might understand the preferences of a society’s leaders. The consideration of culture is especially relevant in today’s interconnected world, where members of differing societies interact on a daily basis.

## **Intercultural Communication as a Study**

According to Rogers, “the study of intercultural communication can help us step back from our habitual ways of viewing the world and open our eyes to the influences that have constructed our ways of thinking.” (Rogers, p. 2, 1999) In order to discern forces that influence a culture’s preferences, the context in which a culture has established itself must be considered. The society’s history, in particular, must be examined, as it “chronicles the events that contour...character and determine the direction of its cultural flow.” (Rogers, p. 1, 1999) For example, societies that have experienced an imperial presence in the past likely adopted elements of the imposing foreign culture, such as food, dress, or language.

Studying another culture’s general *worldview*, its collective attitudes, beliefs, and values can help nations to predict and understand the choices made by a society’s leaders. Consideration of a societal *worldview* can also help resolve any misunderstandings within daily interaction, such as that between an exchange student and his professor or a tourist and the restaurant waitress. (Rogers, 1999)

Intercultural communication gained popularity as a study in the United States following a series of failed, post-World War II development projects in Third World countries. While diplomats received linguistic training, they were in no way prepared to interact with people possessing a different *worldview*. Edward Hall, an anthropologist at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute responded to diplomats’ needs by teaching them how to exchange messages across cultures. (Rogers, 1999) Integral to Hall’s training methodology was the nonpartisan approach to cultural differences that it promoted. Hall believed that service officers who attained a nonjudgmental, anthropological research

perspective towards cultural characteristics were better equipped for communicating with members of a society different from their own. (Inoue, 2007)

The field of intercultural communication has expanded since Hall's foundational research in the 1950s. The study has become increasingly popular with advances in technology and subsequent connectivity of the global populace, and a number of scholars have contributed new theories to the field. Theories discussing cultural dimensions (traits that help us characterize a culture to better understand its worldview) are particularly relevant in the context of today's interconnected world.

Ziegahn (2001) notes the role of cultural dimensions in drawing distinctions between cultures. The dimensions she identifies are: *individualism* (values the autonomy of an individual) versus *collectivism* (values group endeavor and accord); *mono-chronic time* (embraces time as a concrete entity that can be saved or wasted) versus *poly-chronic time* (advocates the completion of transactions over adhering to preset schedules); *egalitarianism* (promotes fairness and equal opportunities for everyone) versus *hierarchy* (perhaps more prevalent in collectivistic cultures; used in identifying differences and inequalities and for promoting communication through the recognition of social levels); *action* (values efficiency, getting down to business) versus *being orientation* (values holistic understanding of concepts through discussion and an appreciation for the present); *change* (accepts and adapts to new theories, technologies, etc.) versus *tradition* (believes that history teaches lessons that can be helpful in the present and the future); *communication styles* (determined by cultural variables like nationality, ethnicity, gender, and race); and *power imbalances* (stratify cultures by disparities in political and economic power). (Ziegahn, 2001)

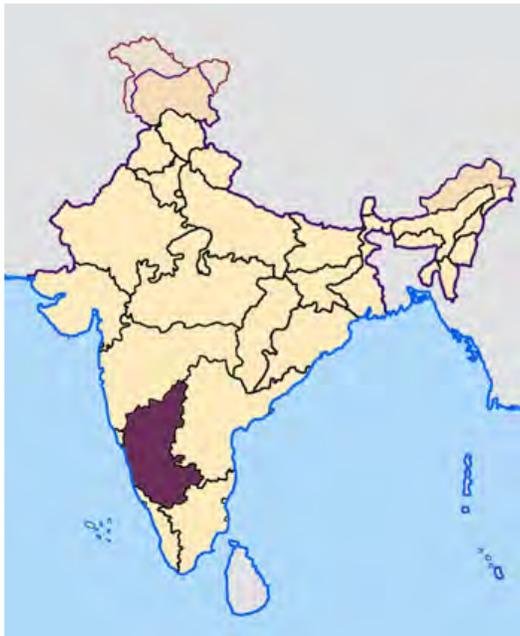
Hofstede (2002) created his value dimensions model for characterizing cultures based upon the general lifestyle of a given society. The five dimensions are: identity, hierarchy, gender, truth, and value. Similar to Ziegahn's concepts, each dimension can be identified by two characteristic extremes (i.e. identity: collectivism versus individualism). Cultures can be aligned with an extreme characteristic from either pole or along the spectrum of traits between poles.

Shah (2004) contributed to the field of intercultural communication by identifying six potential barriers to the exchange of messages across cultures. The assumption of similarities; language differences and lack of cultural knowledge; misinterpretation of nonverbal messages; preconceptions and stereotypes; the tendency to evaluate; and high anxiety in the face of the unknown can act as barriers to clean, competent intercultural communication. (Shah, 2004)

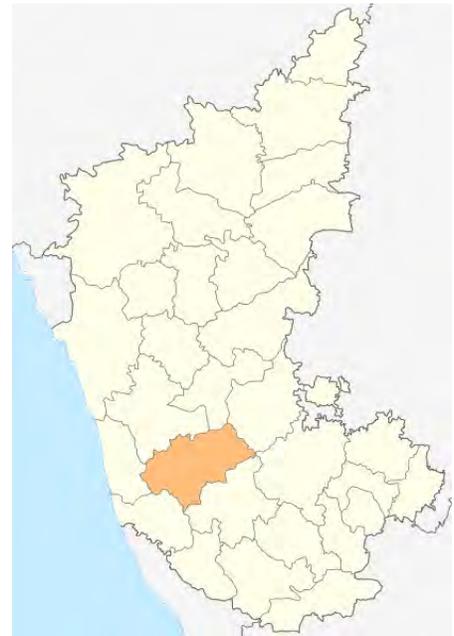
The themes and concepts presented in Ziegahn's and Hofstede's theories help define those characteristics that influence the way a culture's members communicate with each other as well as with members of other societies. Shah's barriers emphasize the importance of maintaining awareness and impartiality while evaluating a culture. By characterizing a culture using Ziegahn's and Hofstede's traits, we might gain a better understanding of how its people relate to the world. Shah's barriers act as reminders of how easily miscommunication (or no communication) can take place in the context of cross-cultural mingling.

## **An Introduction of Vikasana and the Context of my Experiential Learning Journey**

Chikmagalur District, Karnataka is an emerald green wonderland, a jungle of tropical plants and trees boasting vibrant flowers and exotic fruits alluring to any foreigner. A drive through the winding hills around Chikmagalur city reveals countless coffee plantations, tucked away behind towering, wooden gates. Crops hailing from the district's lush landscape distinguish it from other regions of the state. Coffee beans, areca nuts, and bananas, in particular, thrive amidst the tropical settings. However, Chikmagalur's blessed, fertile soil might also be considered a curse. Child labor practices run rampant in the area, particularly in the agricultural quarters.



□ State of Karnataka, India  
(Halo Backwaters, 2009)



□ Chikmagalur District, Karnataka  
(Government of Karnataka, 2005)



□ A lone villager observes Chikmagalur District's lush, green terrain from a hillside near Vikasana headquarters (Ahrendt, 2011)

In 2005, more than 3.5 million Karnatakan children were reported to be illegally employed (Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2006). The Government of India is aware of and has made an effort to eradicate child labor in its country. The subcontinent's Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, ratified in 1986, forbids the employment of children (persons under the age of 14) in identified hazardous occupations, including but not limited to automobile repair, detergent manufacturing, and carpet weaving. The act also serves as a watchdog in non-hazardous occupational areas, ensuring that young workers are not mistreated (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2011). Such legislation provides hope, but its implementation cannot exist without enforcement by local governments.

As an intern with a non-governmental organization (NGO) in rural Karnataka, I had the chance to observe and be a part of a grassroots movement to eradicate child labor and rehabilitate its victims. Promoting childhood education as a solution, Vikasana has established itself as a powerhouse in Chikmagalur's battle against child labor. The Bridge School Program, a key aspect of the organization's Child Development Program, is a revolutionary methodology that is improving the lives of some of India's most downtrodden youth.

### **Vikasana**

Vikasana is an Indian non-governmental organization (NGO) that was established in 1988 with a mission of developing rural communities in Chikmagalur District, Karnataka. Since its inception, Vikasana has expanded to envelop development projects in 480 different slums and villages within Chikmagalur, Shimoga, Davangere, and Hassan Districts. The organization has grown internally as well; although it consisted of only a small group of members at the time of its founding, Vikasana is now powered by 33 full-time staff and countless volunteers.

One of the most renowned NGOs in Karnataka, Vikasana has made a name for itself in numerous project areas, including female empowerment, HIV/AIDS awareness campaigning, and sustainable agriculture. The organization even houses an *ayurvedic* medicine unit, which teaches the value of maintaining health and well-being through an all-natural diet and a thoughtful lifestyle. In order to promote community development, Vikasana established a system of female Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Community Activity Groups (*sanghas*), which encourage entrepreneurship and autonomy amongst

their members. The organization also handpicked special field staff members to develop and implement community activities in their home villages.

Since its inception nearly a quarter of a century ago, Vikasana has received statewide recognition for its humanitarian work. The Karnatak government presented it the “Kittur Ranichennamma” award (2004) and the state’s Women and Child Development Department (1995) and Ecology Department (1999) named the organization “Best Implementor of Projects” (Vikasana, 2011).

### **The Bridge School Program**

The NGO’s Bridge School Program plays a key role in rehabilitating young workers and school drop-outs. Its operating principles assert that education is liberation from a life of desperation, deprivation, and exploitation. Therefore, the need for bridge school students to attain a formal education is central to Vikasana’s rehabilitation methodology. The current director of the Centre for Child Rights and Development, Thomas Jeyaraj, would likely approve of Vikasana’s technique. He noted that “unless all children are sent to school compulsorily, and receive good quality education within the schools, it will be impossible to retrieve them from labour.” (The Hindu, 2011)

Students from all bridge schools attend local government schools during the daytime and complete homework, play games, and participate in cultural programs at their respective hostels each night. The bridge schools (also referred to by Vikasana staff as hostels) provide a stable home environment for the children, who have likely come from empty houses and long days alone or sweltering afternoons slaving under the South Indian sun. “The children should be happy- that’s why I’m running the bridge school[s],”

said Mr. Varghee Cleatas, program director and co-founder of Vikasana. (Cleatas, 2011) Clearly, Vikasana believes that if the children feel safe and loved, they will begin to value themselves and realize their potential. This self-confidence is the key to unlock the door to a much happier future.

A foundational component of the bridge school curriculum, the cultural program unit offers a unique opportunity to students to express themselves through creative means. The largest of the bridge schools, the Chatanahalli hostel hosts several cultural events each year, inviting the talents of all bridge school students and the audience of foreign guests and local dignitaries. Each performance boasts the speaking, singing, acting, and dancing abilities of children who were once appreciated not for their hearts or their heads, but for their working hands. Exposure to traditional, creative activities seems to stimulate the students, awakening their minds to the possibilities that lie at their bare feet.

Aside from creative, cultural activities, the bridge school curriculum offers courses that promote each student's physical health, socialization, and occupational skills. Daily yoga and meditation practice strengthens the body and calms the mind of each child, preparing them for the school day, which can be quite challenging for students who once roamed the village unattended.



Girls from the Gallihalli Bridge School perform “kollattam”, a traditional South Indian dance at a school cultural program.

(Ahrendt, 2011)

Most students attend nearby government schools for six hours a day, Monday through Friday. According to the Karnataka state school syllabus, attendees will study Kannada (the local language), Hindi (the national language), English, Mathematics, Earth and Social sciences, and cultural practices (holidays, sports, religious events, etc.). Bridge school teachers supplement this curriculum with computer coaching, general knowledge quiz games, and creative writing and drawing classes (Vikasana Organization, 2010).

As an intern with Vikasana organization in the fall of 2011, I was given the unique opportunity to witness and participate in the bridge school rehabilitation process. After being accepted for an internship position through the American sponsor organization, ASHA for Education, I traveled to Chikmagalur District, to the village of Duglapura. When it came to my role at the ASHA bridge school, I was an English teacher, but more importantly, I was a parent for the hostel’s 18 residents.

## **Identification and Application of Cultural Dimensions to My Experiential Learning Observations of the South Indian Culture**

This portion of my research draws from Ziegahn (2001) and Hofstede's (2002) cultural dimensions, as well as the experiential learning theory, which suggests that one can gain an understanding of a subject through observation, reflection, and interaction. (Kolb, 1984) This chapter presents a collection of narratives illustrating four significant experiences obtained during my stay in India. Each of the episodes contains one or more cultural dimensions that I found to be useful in characterizing the South Indian culture. By identifying relevant dimensions and applying them to my observations of the South Indian culture, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the society's worldview.

The following dimensions are present in the narratives:

- Change vs. Tradition (Ziegahn, 2001)
- Collectivism vs. Individualism (Ziegahn, 2001)/ Identity (Hofstede, 2002)
- Egalitarianism vs. Hierarchy (Ziegahn, 2001)/ Hierarchy (Hofstede, 2002)

Shah's (2004) barriers to intercultural communication, although not explicitly denoted within the episodes, are relevant to each of my experiences. The barriers identified within the narratives did not necessarily inhibit my interactions with locals, but they had the potential of doing so in the context of each episode. These barriers present themselves in the narratives as potential sources of miscommunication:

- Assumption of similarities
- Language differences and lack of culture knowledge
- Preconceptions and stereotypes
- High anxiety in the face of the unknown

## **Following are the four narratives based on my experience in South India**

### **Narrative-1**

#### **Shruthi's Story: The State of Women in Rural, South India**

I awoke to the smell of frying vegetables. Wafting waves of garlic and curry permeated the warm, hostel air, drawing me out of my bed and into my squishy house socks. I stepped out into the long, narrow hallway that constituted the bridge school's kitchen, dining room, and boys' sleeping quarters. Two of the hostel's oldest girls sat together on the cool, tile floor, peeling onions and laughing at one another as tears provoked by the pungent vegetable odors streamed down their faces. Beside them, Auntie, the school's resident cook, sat perched on a tiny, wooden stool, kneading a thick ball of *chapati* dough with flour-coated fingers.

"Namaskara," I said.

The old woman and her cooking assistants looked up from their work and smiled.

"Good morning, *Akka!*"

I passed through the common room and greeted more children as they completed their morning chores, scooting around on the floor, wishing away dirt and dust with torn cotton rags.

I found Shruthi in the office room, bent over a stack of case study reports she'd spread across the floor. Her long, charcoal hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail that wrapped around her right shoulder and hung over her chest, observing her as she worked.

"Namaskara," I said with a grin as I leaned against the doorframe. Shruthi looked up from the armada of manila folders, and her dark, brown eyes softened as they met mine.

“Good morning, *chinnu*. Did you sleep well?”

I was amazed by the proficiency with which she spoke English, a language she’d studied in grade school and for a few short years in college. I also had a hard time believing that Shruthi, with her great, curious eyes and her robust, crystal smile had lived all of the twenty five years she said she had. Shruthi, whose name means “sound” in the local language of Kannada, has a laugh as bold and authentic as a seven-year-old child’s. Perhaps her youthful qualities are what make her the heroine of all the hostel children.

Shruthi grew up in a village seven kilometers from our hostel in Duglapura. Karakuchi is a modestly sized township buried deep in the jungle, a collection of stone and concrete houses belonging to the resident rickshaw drivers, musicians, doctors and farmers. Shruthi’s parents are among many who work the land for their living, and they are fortunate enough to own several acreage plots of coconut trees and sugarcane, a by-product of which is the traditionally-cherished sweetener, *jaggery*.

According to Shruthi, her family is in the middle of the lower socio-economic class bracket, which means that, while nutritious meals and a fuzzy yet functioning television signal are daily facets of the household lifestyle, such luxuries are the products of persistent toil.

Her family practices Hinduism and maintains a traditionally conservative view on marriage practices and the female’s role as a member of the household. Shruthi’s mother cleans the home and helps her father in the fields, and when she cooks a meal (which she does three times daily), she waits for the family to finish eating before she begins.

Shruthi’s older sister, who teaches courses at a college a half hour’s drive away, has just entered the marriage process and is waiting for her parents to choose a candidate

worthy of her hand. According to traditional practices, her parents will lead a rigorous search for the man they deem to be the perfect husband for their daughter. The marriage must bestow honor on each of the parties' families, and the dowry offered by the woman's household must be accepted by the family of her potential companion.

Shruthi earned her master's degree in social work and began working for Vikasana as a bridge school teacher and mentor to foreign volunteers, her established posts for the past two years and still today. Shruthi was assigned to guide me through my transition into life in rural India. When I arrived, she taught me my first words in Kannada, I showed her pictures of my homeland, and we quickly became friends.

I entered the office and sat down next to the swatch of folders. I looked at Shruthi's face and noticed upon it an expression of empty discontent; the bright smile that usually adorned it was nowhere to be found.

"Is something the matter?," I asked, placing a hand upon her back.

Shruthi frowned at me, then nodded. "I am not feeling so happy today, *Akka*."

We decided that a walk around the village might soothe her woes, so after a hearty breakfast of *palya* and *chapati* and waving the last of the children off to school, we set out into the South Indian morning.



A smiling Shruthi  
(Ahrendt, 2011)

We locked the hostel gate and began to make our way along the beaten, asphalt path to the village. Startled by the sound of our footsteps, a congregation of tiny, lime-colored parrots burst from a nearby treetop and dispersed into the sky, its collective, rapid wing flaps reaching in all directions like the arms of an exploding firework.

I watched as the birds disappeared inside a shaded patch of areca nut trees, then turned to my friend and asked what was bothering her. Shruthi said that she was frustrated with her parents. While visiting home a few days before, she unveiled her desire to move to Bangalore, a modern metropolis where she would have bountiful opportunities to further her education and attain a higher-paying job. Not wanting their youngest daughter to venture so far from home, especially without a husband, Shruthi's parents denied her proposal almost immediately.

It was difficult for me to put myself in Shruthi's place. What a strange concept, I thought: a twenty five year old woman who's still so heavily influenced by her parents.

But I reminded myself that such was the norm: in traditional, rural South Indian families, the words and wishes of *amma* and *appa* are yielded to without reserve. A daughter, in particular, is expected to obey her parents, as she often lives with them and represents them in the village until they have found her a husband.

I asked Shruthi what she thought about getting married, perhaps sometime in the near future. She stopped walking and knelt down to pluck a bright, yellow flower from the earth. She fingered its soft petals thoughtfully and said, “Many girls my age are so happy to cook all day, to clean all day. I can do these things, and I do them for my family, but I want to think more, I want to use my brain. Maybe my husband will want to live in the city, too! But I won’t know until my parents find him.”

The moisture from the night’s rain had evaporated and the mid-morning sun beat down on our backs. Shruthi wrapped her sky blue shawl over her head to block the hot rays. When I didn’t do the same, she reached over and put her hand on top of my blonde-haired head. “Oyuhhh! You are so lucky with this golden hair- mine gets so hot!”

We walked together hand-in-hand, our bare feet in step on the bumpy village path. We passed a lone, pink lotus perched atop the silver village lake, and on the opposite shore we could make out the colorful tower of a temple. The cooling shade of a few, gracious mango trees ushered us along a row of colorful, stone houses. The homes were simple in structure but their bright turquoise exteriors were embellished with finely carved om signs that lent them a modestly hallowed presence.

In front of one of the houses sat five women. Surrounding them were mountains of areca nuts and piles of empty shells. I waved at the group, and they motioned at us to join them.

Shruthi and I greeted the ladies as we sat down on the smooth cement porch. They spoke in hushed whispers and giggled as we approached- the villagers enjoyed any opportunity to get a close look at the resident foreigner. We watched the youngest member of the group as she picked up a single areca nut and pushed it against a stationary blade until its shell popped off. Her work seemed effortless, but her toned arm muscles had likely grown used to the continual exertion. She flung the empty casings to the side and popped the nut into a woven, bamboo basket. Shruthi said that areca nuts are an extremely valuable cash crop in this district.

A large number of rural women devote their days to agricultural work, as it guarantees a modest profit and food for the family. However, many women work in shops and tend the family tea stalls, and those who attain a higher education after completing grade school have access to government jobs as nurses, policewomen, and politicians.

I sat, cross-legged next to a crumbling pile of areca nuts and pondered what my job might be if I were a village girl. But the booming, high-pitched laughter of the women around me jerked my mind back into the present. The women's jesting and general amiability reflected their comfort with one another. Although their work necessitated continual productivity, the women embraced their hours on the clock as precious moments to spend with dear friends.

It seems that, whether they are sipping tea at a stall with an old friend or exchanging the latest village gossip with co-workers in the paddy fields, rural, South Indian women seem to enjoy any opportunity to interact with loved ones.



The areca nut ladies pause  
for a photo.  
(Ahrendt, 2011)

Shruthi and I waved farewell to the areca gals and began our trek back to the hostel. As we descended the hill leading away from the village, Shruthi clapped a hand on my shoulder and pulled me to a stop.

She looked me in the eyes, smiled gently and quietly said, “I think that you are very strong. You have come to India by yourself to live in a village with people you don’t know, and you are only twenty-one years old. I wish that I could do things like this, also.”

With these words I turned to face my friend. I explained that my parents had always encouraged my self-reliance. The American culture, which differs from that of South India in its promotion of independence, likely influenced my decision to journey solo. While most Americans my age wouldn't freely venture into the South Indian jungle, many have traveled alone through one of many, widely available programs for studying, working, and volunteering abroad. I said that, if her parents allowed it, I would search for a grant that would get Shruthi to America.

She suddenly bellowed with laughter, then patted me on the back and said that I was talking like a crazy person. A village girl could never get a scholarship to go to America. I squeezed her hand and gave her a wink.

“Anything’s possible- sometimes you’ve just got to make it happen yourself.”

## **Narrative-2**

### **Creativity in the Classroom**

My primary purpose as an intern with Vikasana's Child Development Program was to be a teacher, friend, and in many ways, a parent to the Duglapura hostel residents. I assisted Auntie, the bridge school cook and Philomina, our resident teacher in guiding the eighteen, seven to twelve-year –old children through their morning chores and in completing their homework assignments. I spent many an afternoon under the shade of coconut trees, running back and forth between invisible bases as the kids hit fly balls with a cricket bat as big as their bodies.

And even when I wasn't interacting with the children, I observed them as they drew pictures of one another and crafted necklaces from delicate flowers and freshly plucked strands of grass. I quickly learned that the bridge school students had a passionate sense of creativity, and I thought I might introduce this element into the classroom.

“English Art”, the title I gave my teaching methodology, was an immediate success. Stationed at the chalkboard, I drew a variety of animals and objects and labeled them with their English names. The children sketched the pictures and traced the foreign letters, which appeared edgy and strict when compared to the flowing calligraphy of their native language, Kannada.

One evening the children gathered in the common room, laid their notebooks down in front of them and sprawled their tiny bodies across the cool, black tile. It was six o' clock and time for “English Art”. Eager eyes watched me as I stood on my tip-toes and ran my hand along the highest tier of the rusty bookshelf, combing its surface for treasure. I plucked a nubby chalk piece from its hiding place and set it on the dust board

tray. A wave of approving chatter arose, then quickly receded as I approached the bookshelf once more, this time pulling down a bright, yellow box. Positioning myself in the center of the room, I squatted down and gazed into the row of coffee-colored eyes before me. A smile on my face, I lowered the box of crayons to the ground as the room erupted with applause.

It appeared to be a lucky day: the electricity had awakened from its sporadic slumber and since there was energy for the taking I ran and fetched my laptop. The children had come to love this Westerner's staple, this newfangled device that made dance parties and movie nights a highlight of hostel life. And they were delighted to see it in my arms then. They sharpened their drawing pencils and awaited the beginning of a musical *mélange* that would guide us through an academic art expedition.

I pushed the scrubby chalk piece against the board and began to draw, illustrating and labeling an odd array of vehicles, plants, clothing, and silverware- everyday articles of the English vocabulary. Pausing to let the children catch up, I looked around the large, simple common room. Its cream-colored walls were adorned with alphabet posters, maps of the Indian subcontinent, and misplaced, dark tan smears, likely products of a painting mishap. A rickety bookshelf, fade-marked blackboard, and creaky teacher's desk were the room's only amenities. It was no *rajah's* palace, but the little hunched figures on the floor didn't seem to mind. They were absorbed in a world of color and words and music.

The scene reminded me of a class I taught in the United States. As part of a course at my university, I spent five months with a first grade class discussing and practicing techniques used by some of the literary world's most beloved poets. My class and I

discussed the classical works of writers like William Shakespeare, and each child created his or her own piece in the style of the day's poet.

An inspiring collective of energized intelligence, my American bunch amazed me with its talent. Despite their newness to the world of writing, the students adapted to the various stylistic techniques to produce poems that were impressive and wholly original. I loved my kiddos' creations, but what I loved most was watching them create.

When they wrote, the children were in their own worlds. The classroom was silent except for the soothing music playing from the stereo and the sound of two dozen tiny hands scribbling away at notebook paper. Before long the scrawling would resign, and the students, having completed the written portion of their assignment, would commence with the second part of my challenge. I asked the children to pair their poems with a picture, a hand-drawn expression of the words that they had written. I floated around the room as they drew, observing the magnificent little minds at work. When the students were finished, I collected their writings and – with the permission of their respective authors- read each poem aloud. Each child was proud of his or her unique creation, and they all seemed to revel in the fact that everyone had succeeded.



Bridge school children play with their latest creation- a hand-crafted puppet. (Ahrendt, 2011)

As I watched the Indian students crafting their English art, I realized how similar the children of two disparate cultures can be. The communal creativity that consumed my American children had overcome the Duglapura gang. Bodies glued to the floor as they scribbled, it was apparent that these children acquired the same sense of Zen that the American students did while writing and illustrating their poetry.

Students from both cultures seemed to respond positively to creative assignments, particularly when they had music to listen to while they worked. While both groups were united in their artistic efforts, at the individual level, students from each class seemed to enjoy a learning experience that allowed for personal exploration through creative expression. After conducting a few poetry and English Art lessons using creative methodology, I noticed a renewed interest in learning and increased classroom participation from students in both cultural groups.

Furthermore, while most American classrooms are bedecked and bedazzled with the latest technological flair, the students who frequent them are no more or less intelligent than the Indian village kids who are elated with the prospect of a new pencil. The ability to symbolize thoughts in words is an inborn characteristic of all normally developed human beings. The splendors of the *Homo sapiens* biology seem to withstand the influence of culture and environment. (Bowman, 1994) Perhaps creativity, which transcends the boundaries of cultures, is a gift intrinsic to the human nature.

### **Narrative-3**

#### **Reflections amidst the Ruins of an Empire**

I awoke to the sunshine after a long night in the Vikasana van. The morning breeze was cool and refreshing, and I slid open a squeaky window to let it flow through my hair. It took some time for my eyes to adjust, but soon I could make out the children's sleepy faces, which appeared as travel-washed as I felt. Noticing that we were awake, Gopi the smiley Vikasana driver said that we'd finally reached our destination. Suddenly the bumpy, seven-hour night journey seemed further away than my stiff neck would believe.

The big, white van crept up the back of a steep hill, slowing nearly to a stop at the summit. If any of the boys were still slumbering, they were shaken awake by the collective gasp that lauded through the air as we received the first glimpse of our destination. The residents of Vikasana's only all-boy hostel shoved their tiny faces against the windows as if to try and get a better view. I chuckled and hopelessly followed suit.

Rolling hills carpeted with green jungle sprawled in all directions. Giant, pink boulders embellished the emerald landscape like rough-edged rubies and the rising sun painted the sky with liquid gold. As we crept deeper into the valley we could see the ancient ruins of the Vijayanagar Empire and the sacred, Hindu pilgrimage paths that enshrined the area in the heart of Indian history. And scattered amongst the ruins of an ancient era were the modest homes and shops of Hampi, the village built atop Vijayanagar's former capital city. The area, I was told, is cherished by Indian citizens of all religious backgrounds. Its historical attributes impressed the rest of the world, too: in

1986 the collective ruins of Vijayanagar were recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. (UNESCO, 2011)

The boys piled out of the van and onto the dusty, gravel parking lot. A woman with kind, almond-shaped eyes directed them into a line for a head count and behavioral brief. One boy squeaked at the sight of nearby stalls peddling plastic water guns and neon-colored, movie star sunglasses, and soon the whole group was squirming about on bare feet. I secured my camera and water bottle in my backpack and slammed the van door shut just as the teacher concluded her list of disciplinary dos and don'ts, releasing the boys to scour the stalls for ten cent kicks. But their shopping trip was short-lived: Gopi motioned us onwards towards the town where we would meet with our tour-guide for the day.

We ambled through the Hampi bazaar, a long passage with stalls and vendors lining either side. Gusts of sweet incense guided us along, and as I looked around I began to see how tourists might spend hours on this kilometer long lane, delighting in the hunt for antique treasures and trinkets of the modern fashion. Some of South India's finest flavors wafted through my nose, nearly veering my feet off course towards a line of family-owned booths and restaurants. Statues of Hindu gods and goddesses quietly observed us as we walked, and I received bright smiles and nods from the boys when I identified one of them as the monkey god, Hanuman.

The broad walkway ushered us to the feet of the mighty Virupaksha Temple. We purchased the appropriate coconut and young banana offerings for temple *puja* at a nearby stall and became instant targets for the pocket-perusing muzzles of the tiny, resident bovine. We gathered around Gopi, who stood just under the temple's *gopuram*,

the threshold to the inner sanctum that reminded me of an intricately iced layer cake. A man with a broad, toothless smile approached our group and shook hands with Gopi, then presented him with a small rectangle of laminated paper, what I assumed to be his occupational credentials, before introducing himself as our tour-guide.



□ The magnificent, towering *gopuram* of Virupaksha Temple greets spiritual pilgrims and curious travelers alike. (Ahrendt, 2011)

We entered the temple grounds and were welcomed by the resident doorman, a giant silver elephant with intricate, red, yellow, and white powder designs on her forehead. The children and I lay a few, humble bananas at the mighty creature's feet, and she blessed us with the ring of a bell and a gentle pat on our heads with her trunk. Revived and invigorated for the day's explorations, we waved a friendly farewell and approached the first of many, cave-like prayer rooms.

Inside, I was pleasantly surprised to see a barefoot, fair-skinned foreigner kneeling before a temple priest for a holy water blessing and powder *bindi*, the symbolic, decorative dot worn in the middle of the forehead. I looked down at my own bare feet, cracked and calloused from weeks of unaccustomed nakedness and remembered that I wasn't an Indian girl. But the time I'd spent in the village made me feel like one. I stopped just outside of the first prayer room to examine a hand-painted tree chart illustrating the lineage of the Vijayanagar dynasty. Noticing my intrigue the tour-guide pulled the rest of the group to my side. Smiling his proudest, gummy grin, he said that in order to truly appreciate Hampi as a historical masterpiece, one must understand the past of its people. And then he wove for us the ancient and enthralling tale of the Vijayanagar Empire.

The Vijayanagar Empire, he explained, is considered one of the greatest realms of medieval India. At its finest times expanding across parts of modern Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, the mighty kingdom created a monopoly of the south. Established in the mid-fourteenth century AD, the dynasty's capital city of Vijayanagar

played host to a number of the country's finest rulers, and it represented the cultural and commercial headquarters of the Hindu south during its period of reign.

He said that Emperor Krishnadeva Raya is known as a defender of his people and is regarded in India to this day for his open-mindedness towards persons of all ethnic and religious backgrounds, his promotion of the formal education system, and his support of the creative arts. Those words echoed in my mind- those traits and the cultural icon who possessed them would likely be embraced in the United States just as they are in India. Many Americans, not unlike their South Indian counterparts, value ethnic and religious tolerance. Simply a difference of time and place, I thought.

With a proud puff of his chest and a friendly grin, the tour-guide said that the Virupaksha temple, the sacred ground where we stood, was built in honor of Lord Virupaksha, the empire's main deity. The temple is believed to have been built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, making it one of the oldest functioning places of worship in India today. (Hampi.in, 2011) Although some Vijayanagar kings accepted persons of all religious backgrounds into the capital's gates, the dynasty was renowned as the defender of Hinduism in the south.

We concluded our tour of the Virupaksha temple and, with a final wave to our elephant friend, strove out into the hectic bazaar scene. We backtracked along the dusty path, past the pleading salesman's calls of "Hey! You! *Ba!* Come!" and into the parking lot where we piled into the van for a brief feet reprieve. A short drive brought us to the base of a winding trail that hinted at our next destination, Hemakuta Hill. The steep ascent would have unsettled my ten-year-old self, but the stubby-toed Lost Boys (as I called the bridge school gang) galloped up the rocky hillside like mountain goats.

A rotund, stone *Ganesha* idol greeted us halfway up the hill, and our tour-guide said that the statue was yet another symbol of the Vijayanagar Empire's devotion to Hinduism. According to the *Ramayana*, one of Hinduism's sacred texts, the region that housed Vijayanagar's capital was once called Kishkindha, the realm of the monkeys under the rule of Vanar kings Valli and Sugriva.

Taking refuge from a merciless Valli, Sugriva and his counterpart Hanuman settled in the caves of Matanga Hill. From their hiding place in the hill the two spotted the flying chariot of Ravana, the ruler of Lanka. Ravana had kidnapped the beloved wife of Prince Ram, Sita, who threw her jewels from the carriage as it passed over Kishkindha. When Ram arrived at the scene, Hanuman gave him the jewelry he had collected. Ram murdered Valli, placing Sugriva on the throne, and Hanuman left for Lanka to retrieve the princess. (Vālmiki Rāmāyana, 2011) This and many other tales paint the religious history of the region. The décor of the later established Vijayanagar displayed the citizens' pride in their spiritual roots, a pride that echoed in the words of our tour-guide.

Looking around me, I realized that we'd entered the realm of the pink granite giants. The fist-sized boulders I'd seen from the van were actually twenty feet tall, sparkling strawberries upon which clamored an abundance of frizz-furred monkeys that inquisitively observed my every step. The children waved their forefingers at the primates, shouting, "*Manga!* Monkey!" and before I knew it I was thwarting the boys' attempts to pick a fight with their new friends.

A ten minute trek brought us to Hemakuta Hill, another site cherished by locals and foreigners alike. According to our guide, the hill provides the setting for a number of

small temples and monuments, and it is frequented at dawn and dusk when tourists and residents gather to watch the dramatic sun rise and set over the Hampi horizon.

I perched myself atop a granite pedestal overlooking Hampi's surroundings. I watched the children as they loped about the beloved, granite grounds and thought of myself as a little girl, rough-housing with my older brother in front of the *Alamo*, a symbol of Texan culture and independence. And I realized that, despite a difference in the degree of ruins and rubble, historical sites in India and in my home country hold the same significance for their respective countrymen. Embraced by its countrymen for the meaning it embodied, the area that hosts Hampi is an integral part of Indian imperial, commercial, religious, and cross-cultural histories. Recalling what the guide had said about Krishnadeva Raya, I recognized how a culture's values are embodied by its sacred sites and acclaimed characters. Humbled by the simple significance of this notion, and indeed, a bit worn from the day's adventure, I leaned back against the warm, granite slab and watched the Indian sun set over the ruins of an empire.



□ A local resident enjoys Hampi's beautiful, natural scenery.  
(Ahrendt, 2011)

#### **Narrative-4**

#### **Bengaluru: Explorations in India's Silicon Valley**

I couldn't help but smile as I watched Eriko emerge from the mass of people scuttling about the Bangalore City Station. Her soft, brown eyes met mine and we exchanged waves before sliding off our over-sized backpacks and embracing one another. I had met my Japanese friend just a few weeks before, when she visited Vikasana's headquarters in Tarikere (about 6 kilometers from Duglapura) to learn about management issues in non-governmental organizations. We hit it off pretty quickly- within 10 minutes of meeting one another we sat together on my yoga mat, practicing the meditation techniques Eriko had learned in northern India. We spent a few days together, working on our Kannada with Vikasana students and exploring historical sites around Chikmagalur district before Eriko returned to her host NGO in southern Karnataka. We had exchanged contact information and made plans to meet again before leaving for our home countries. A few phone calls and two train tickets later, we were reunited in Karnataka's capital city, the ancient yet modernized Bangalore.

The city's roots trace deep into the depths of Indian history. An ancient myth tells of an old woman who, having nothing else to offer, served bean pulses to a hungry king who'd lost his way. The area where the incident occurred became known as *Bendha KaaLu*, meaning "boiled beans" in Kannada, Karnataka's state language. Over time, the name transformed into *Bendha KaaLu Ooru* ("town of boiled beans") and eventually into Bengaluru ("Bangalore"), the city's title today.

The foundation for modern Bangalore city was established in 1537 when the feudal lord Kempegowda claimed the land he viewed as sacred with the construction of a mud fort. Bangalore exchanged hands a number of times over the centuries that followed,

and with each new ruler arose new infrastructure and new purpose for the city. (Discover Bangalore, 2011)

The British Empire influenced the institution of several technological facilities including a railway and telegraph system. (Discover Bangalore, 2011) After India gained independence in 1947, the government established several high technology industries and many of these, such as Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, Bharat Electronics Limited and Bharat Earth Movers Limited were set up in Bangalore. The city became the headquarters of the national Department of Space with the foundation of the Indian Space Research Organisation in June 1972. (Gopalan College of Engineering and Management, 2010)

The Indian government's liberalization of the economy in the nineties laid the foundation for Bangalore's explosion into the twenty first century as a technological powerhouse, and today it plays host to a number of international firms like Texas Instruments and Microsoft, earning it recognition as India's Silicon Valley.

Reunited and ready to explore the South Indian metropolis, my Japanese friend and I left the train station to grab a bite to eat. After having a delicious lunch of *palak paneer* and stuffed *naan* at a nearby restaurant, Eriko and I hailed a rickshaw and headed for Mahatma Gandhi (M.G.) Road, where we would meet Melinda, the cousin of one of my Indian-American college friends back home in Texas and our hostess for the week in Bangalore. The rickshaw rumbled to a stop in front of a busy M.G. Road and we hopped out, loaded our bags onto our backs, paid our driver Rs. 50 (about \$1) and set off down the crowded, concrete path.

The bustling scene before us was a far cry from the humble settings of Duglapura. Towering, sleek buildings replaced the frilly palm trees that I'd grown accustomed to in

the village. The sandal stalls and discount bazaars that I awaited were actually Nike stores and shopping malls. Everywhere I looked I saw traces of the United States and the Western world. Caucasian faces, among many others, surfaced in the crowd. I cried out “Texas!” at the sight of a cowboy hat – a symbol of my native state- and received a “Yee-haww!” in reply. An oversized McDonald’s soared above the sidewalk. Its customers munched merrily on Maharaja Macs and Double McVeggie burgers and through tinted glass windows they watched the Pizza Hut patrons in the building across the street.

Hoping to escape the concrete heat, Eriko and I retreated into Café Coffee Day, a popular South Indian café chain. We ordered our drinks and seated ourselves in a booth by the window. I stirred the layer of froth atop my latte (the first I’d had in a month) and watched the sea of people below, churning every which way in pursuit of handbags, movie tickets, produce and more. I had to remind myself that I was still in India.

Bangalore, at least the parts of it I’d seen so far, was like an American city, dappled with elements of the ancient and exotic. Temples from millennia ago lined the busy, downtown streets, and stalls selling star fruit from nearby, jungle villages sat sandwiched between souvenir shops and mobile phone stores. But it couldn’t have been this way for long- the Internet revolution in the 1990s and the concurring influx of Western businesses meant that more and more foreigners were visiting Bangalore and bringing with them their lifestyle, Western *worldviews*, and currencies. Many Bangalore natives ventured abroad in pursuit of a Western education or a career abroad, only to return home with ideas that would shape their hometown. Eriko and I sat for a time, sipping our coffee and discussing the city’s amazing journey, until the ring of my cell phone signaled Melinda’s arrival.

Parked in the middle of the busy, one-way street, hazard lights flashing, was a compact, silver Sedan. A young woman with long, dark hair wearing black, modish sunglasses hopped out of the driver's seat and waved us down. We scurried across the road, threw our bags in the tiny vehicle's trunk, and hopped in before being consumed by the busy street traffic.

A mélange of Indian and American pop music played on the radio as we introduced ourselves. Melinda was unlike any Indian girl I'd met in the village. Rather than a *sari* or *salwar kameez*, the traditional garb typical of rural women, Melinda wore a tight-fitting blouse with blue jeans and a pair of leather sandals. She spoke English with a slight accent, but she used slang words and phrases like "dude" and "chill out," typical assets of the young American vocabulary. I was amazed to learn that these terms had traveled so far- most likely through American media and film- and that they were adopted by the emerging generation of middle and upper-class residents.

The tiny car pulled to a stop in a clean, modest neighborhood tucked away from the city hub-bub on a quiet side street. We dodged a few meandering rickshaws and crossed the street to Melinda's house, a three-story townhome which she shared with her parents and older brother. Assu, the family matriarch greeted us at the door. The retired math teacher-turned-piano instructor warmly embraced us in her arms and welcomed us into her home. She beckoned us to the kitchen for refreshments, and we gratefully released our backpacks to the floor and followed her upstairs.

Looking around the room, I saw familiar and indeed unanticipated household amenities. A widescreen television was the centerpiece of a living room furnished with long, squishy sofas, a puffy, plush easy chair, and a polished wood-grain piano. Assu

hurriedly swept a dust pile from the tile floor before inviting us to sit at a broad, intricately carved table set for tea. We sank into polished, wooden chairs as she grabbed a china pitcher of milk from the fridge and slid into the seat across from Eriko. We heard a rumbling from the stairwell above us, and soon Melinda appeared and joined us. And so we sat together for the next hour, ambassadors of our respective cultures, steeped in conversation about our homelands.

Eriko and I declared that Bangalore wasn't much different from cities in Japan or the United States. The stores and amenities it hosted mirrored those of a typical, modern metropolis. But we were curious: how did the locals live their daily lives in the ancient yet modernized Bangalore? What activities might the city have to offer for its citizens, particularly young adults such as ourselves? Melinda smiled and said we'd just have to find out.

We awoke the next morning and journeyed a few blocks away for coffee at The French Loaf. Inside the café, we seated ourselves in dark oak armchairs gathered around a matching table. Paintings of the Eifel Tower and lavender fields hung upon pastel, cream-colored walls, and soft, glowing lights hung over the line of glisteningly perfect pastries at the counter. I had visited a number of bistros like this in Europe and in American cities like Austin and San Francisco, but I never expected to find éclairs and air conditioning under the same roof in India.

We spent the rest of the day exploring Melinda's Bangalore. We picked up a few new reads at Crossword, a shopping mall bookstore that reminded me of Barnes & Nobles, and we enjoyed a German lunch at the Max Mueller Café, an extension of the German culture Goethe Institute. We walked along a jogging track carved around a

manmade lake in Melinda's neighborhood before visiting Maxx, a clothing store with modern styles similar to those offered by H&M and Forever 21.

In the evening our hostess departed for her work as a film audio editor. As we waved her off, I couldn't help but contrast Melinda with my friend, Shruthi, whose traditionalist, collectivist background starkly contrasted from Melinda's rearing in a change-driven, individualistic environment. I wondered how Shruthi's lifestyle might differ if she, too, had been raised in the urban metropolis.

We ended our expedition at Café Pascucci, where we indulged in Mediterranean salads with feta cheese and olives. I was shocked when an Indian man at a table nearby approached me and introduced himself as a native Texan- he had grown up in my mother's hometown of Abilene and, wanting to return to his roots, he journeyed to Bangalore to open his software company. And I was once more reminded of how small the world really is.

That night, Eriko and I discussed the day's activities. We concluded once more that Bangalore and its middle and upper-class residents really aren't too different from westernized countries and their citizens. As an American, I felt quite comfortable venturing about the Indian city that offered many an opportunity for English exchange. While it maintains its own ancient, cultural attributes, Bangalore has adopted a number of modern elements that has established it as a unique, hybrid metropolis.

After Melinda returned home from work, the three of us lay sprawled across her bed, watching the nineties American cult classic, "Ten Things I Hate About You." A warm breeze entered through the window, and the office buildings visible downtown glistened like jewels under the moonlight. Five hours away, the stars shone bright over a

sleeping Duglapura. And on the other side of the Earth, the sun welcomed the United States into the day.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of cultural dimensions in international relations and to identify similarities and differences between the Indian and American cultures using identified dimensions. Throughout the thesis I have explored culture's role in shaping a society's preferences. To create a foundation for my study, I discussed early cultural interactions in the Orient and their effects on participating societies. I examined the United States and India, analyzing foundational, cultural interactions within each country and discussing a brief history of the states' interactions with one another. I discussed the foundations of intercultural communication and outlined a few theories from the field that are relevant to my study. Drawing from Ziegahn (2001) and Hofstede's (2002) theories on cultural dimensions and Shah's barriers to intercultural communication (2004), I applied select dimensions and barriers to my own, experiential learning experiences gained during my three month stay in South India. To explore the role that cultural dimensions play within international relations, I compared and contrasted the South Indian and United States societies based upon the identified cultural dimensions.

I will now discuss the findings of my research. I will begin by discussing the cultural dimensions and barriers within each narrative piece and how they contributed to my analysis of the South Indian culture. I will then assess the similarities and differences between the South Indian and United States societies and explain how, by comparing and

contrasting cultures based upon cultural dimensions, we can gain a better understanding of the role of cultural dimensions in international relations.

## **Findings**

As was earlier discussed, cultural dimensions can be used to distinguish a culture's *worldview*, its collective attitudes, beliefs, and values. In order to show how cultural dimensions are useful in characterizing the South Indian culture, I drew from Ziegahn's and Hofstede's theories to identify cultural dimensions relevant to the topics presented by each episode. I also matched some of Shah's barriers to intercultural communication with the narrative topics in order to promote the consideration of culture within cross-cultural interactions.

The cultural dimensions I identified within the narratives were:

- Change vs. Tradition (Ziegahn, 2001)
- Collectivism vs. Individualism (Ziegahn, 2001)/ Identity (Hofstede, 2002)
- Egalitarianism vs. Hierarchy (Ziegahn, 2001)/ Hierarchy (Hofstede, 2002)

The barriers to intercultural communication (Shah, 2004) identified were:

- Assumption of similarities
- Language differences and lack of cultural knowledge
- Preconceptions and stereotypes
- High anxiety in the face of the unknown

## **Cultural Dimensions Identified in the Narrative Episodes**

### **“Change versus Tradition”**

Ziegahn’s “Change versus Tradition” dimension asserts that a change-driven society easily accepts and adapts to new theories and technologies, while a tradition-driven society believes that history offers valuable lessons still relevant today and therefore embraces traditional ideas and practices.

I encountered the “Change versus Tradition” dimension on a daily basis while living in India. To emphasize the significance of this dimension, I embedded it into each of the narrative pieces. “Beyond Culture: Creativity in the Classroom” portrayed the rural, South Indian society as generally traditional but willing to adapt to change. The fact that the students were learning English in their government schools shows that the culture has embraced something new- a language other than Kannada, the mother tongue of Karnataka.

“Shruthi’s Story: The State of Women in Rural, South India”, on the other hand, portrays the rural, South Indian society as traditionalist. The female roles and marriage practices discussed in “Shruthi’s Story” find their origins deep in Indian societal history, and they are still embraced by many village women today. Similarly, Shruthi’s strict adherence to her parents’ wishes reflect the hierarchical structure that rural, South Indian society has possessed since ancient times.

“Reflections amidst the Ruins of an Empire” also portrays the rural, South Indian culture as traditionalist. The episode discusses how Hampi and the surrounding area provided the setting for a story described in the *Ramayana*, one of India’s two great epics believed to have been written more than 2300 years ago. Hampi’s lingering significance

as one of India's most sacred, Hindu pilgrimage sites reveals the traditionalist nature of rural, South Indian society.

In contrast to this, "Bengaluru: Exploring India's Silicon Valley" illustrated the urban, South Indian society's openness to change. The influx of foreign visitors and ideas following the liberalization of the Indian economy influenced great changes within the urban center, and –as is made apparent by the presence of foreign companies and modern amenities within the city- the society embraced these changes whole-heartedly.

Bangalore's role as a hub of software innovation also reveals the urban, South Indian society's readiness to accept and adapt to change.

The four episodes portray the South Indian culture as both tradition-driven and change-driven. However, I would like to distinguish between the urban, South Indian society and the rural, South Indian society. The urban culture has been exposed to a number of Western ideas and innovations due to increased global interconnectivity. This explains its embracement of change and newness.

In contrast to this, the rural, South Indian culture has remained mostly hidden away from Western exposure, with the exception of ideas portrayed by film and other media on the internet. However, Internet access is limited to the few who are wealthy enough to purchase a computer or phone with a wireless plan, or those willing to pay precious rupees for sit-down access at an Internet cafe.

As can be concluded from "Beyond Culture", the fact that Vikasana's bridge schools provide training in the English language signifies the rural society's willingness to embrace something new, but this does not outweigh the evidence of the culture's traditionalist nature portrayed in "Shruthi's Story" and "Reflections".

The American society is characterized by its passion for innovation. While it does recognize traditional holidays and significant historical events, the American culture tends to value change and adaptation through innovation, which identifies it as a change-driven society.

### **“Collectivism versus Individualism” and “Identity”**

Ziegahn’s “Collectivism versus Individualism” and Hofstede’s “Identity” dimensions characterize a culture as individualistic (the society values the freedom and autonomy of the individual) or collectivistic (the society values group endeavor and harmony). The overlapping dimensions can be identified in my narrative piece entitled “Shruthi’s Story”. Within the episode, I described to my friend the factors that encouraged my lone voyage to India. I noted how my American culture, which embraces individual independence, influenced my decision to explore a foreign land by myself. Shruthi was intrigued by this, as her rural South Indian culture promotes group effort in order to fulfill the needs of the family, the village, and the greater society. Also notable is the identity difference between Shruthi and Melinda, my dear friend and a main character in the narrative entitled, “Bengaluru.” The two, native South Indian women have been raised in starkly contrasting environments (Shruthi in a rural village and Melinda in a modern metropolis influenced by Western ideas), and this is reflected in their different identities- Shruthi as collectivistic and Melinda as individualistic. When applied to my observations, “Collectivism versus Individualism” and “Identity” dimensions characterize the rural, South Indian society as collectivistic and the United States society as individualistic.

### **“Egalitarianism versus Hierarchy” and “Hierarchy”**

The next pair of applicable, overlapping dimensions are Ziegahn’s “Egalitarianism versus Hierarchy” and Hofstede’s “Hierarchy”. Both dimensions measure the influence that certain groups or individuals have over other members of society based upon the roles assigned to them by historical, religious, or other factors. Egalitarian cultures promote equal influence and opportunities for all citizens, while hierarchical cultures organize the society by classes distinguished by their varying levels of influence over other classes.

I used these dimensions in the episode “Shruthi’s Story” to classify the rural, South Indian culture as egalitarian or hierarchical. The episode discusses how both children and adults living in Shruthi’s society are expected to fulfill the wishes of their parents, even if they no longer reside in the family home. In rural, South India, parents are viewed as authoritative figures whose opinions should be not only be considered, but yielded to unquestioningly. Children and adults who do not respect the wishes of their parents are considered dishonorable. The assignment of parental roles and influence as discussed in “Shruthi’s Story” illustrates the hierarchical quality of the rural, South Indian culture.

While the bureaucratic structures of its government and economy are in many ways hierarchical, the American culture tends to value the presence of equal opportunities for all members of society over the allotment of influence to assigned classes. The American society, then, is egalitarian.

## **Barriers to Intercultural Communication Identified in the Narrative Episodes**

### **“Assumption of Similarities”**

The assumption of similarities presented itself as a potential barrier in “Shruthi’s Story”. Although the American culture is primarily egalitarian, some parents practice rigid control over their children’s activities. Had I assumed that Shruthi’s parents, who disallowed her from moving to the distant city, were simply strict, I might have concluded that Shruthi’s culture was egalitarian like my own, that it was focused on equal opportunities for all rather than the organization of society based on hierarchical classes. This false belief would have distorted my understanding of the culture’s hierarchical worldview and might have negatively affected my interactions with rural villagers.

My observations of Western influence discussed in “Bengaluru” could have easily led me to believe that Bangalore, which hosts numerous foreign companies and modern amenities, is exactly like any Western metropolis. This assumption would have withheld me from exploring Bangalore’s archaic facets, the qualities that make it a uniquely hybrid, ancient yet modern city.

### **“Language Differences and Lack of Cultural Knowledge”**

I could have easily experienced communication difficulties due to language differences and a lack of cultural knowledge, on my part and that of the South Indians with whom I interacted. While language differences didn’t present me with any problems in Bangalore, where most shopkeepers and rickshaw drivers speak at least some English, I could have run into problems in the rural locales described in the remaining narratives.

Duglapura and Hampi primarily play host to speakers of Kannada, the language of Karnataka state, and other South Indian languages that I do not speak. Because of these language differences, daily activities such as riding the bus and buying produce in the village could have easily become complicated undertakings. Had I not utilized my “English Art” teaching methodology as described in “Beyond Culture”, language differences could have made teaching English to village children a daunting and nearly impossible task.

A lack of cultural knowledge could have made my transition into the rural, South Indian culture quite difficult. For example, had I not known that conservative clothing, covering the shapelier areas of the female body, is the norm for rural women, I might have worn something considered by the locals to be revealing, which would have likely warranted me with unwanted stares and perhaps even chastisement from the villagers.

### **“Preconceptions and Stereotypes”**

Media and the film industry sometimes India as a nation of slums, a country defined by poverty and human rights violations. Had I entered any of the narrative experiences believing these ideas to be true, I wouldn’t have been able to open-mindedly observe the humanitarian accomplishments of the Indian government and non-governmental organizations like Vikasana, and I might have underestimated the state of contentedness with which the most impoverished citizens live their simple lives.

I could have had the preconception that bridge school students (former child laborers, orphans, and abandoned children) would not possess the intellectual abilities allowing them to participate in academic studies. This false notion would have drastically

changed my experiences as recorded in “Beyond Culture”. In fact, this preconception would have made me an ineffective teacher for the children whose minds are fully capable despite their difficult pasts.

### **“High Anxiety in the Face of the Unknown”**

Fearing the unknown can greatly detract from one’s openness to cultural exploration. In fact, the fear of the unknown, along with certain negative preconceptions about the Indian society, prevents many Americans from traveling to South India. This is truly unfortunate, because the South Indian culture, as evidenced in each of the narrative episodes, possesses a rich history and a multitude of intriguing ideas and perspectives. The fear of the unknown is one of the strongest barriers to intercultural communication between citizens of the United States and India. It seems sensible, then, that skeptical Indians and Americans learn about one another’s cultures and respective worldviews if they hope to establish connections with a cultural counterpart.

### **Identified Similarities between the American and South Indian Cultures**

By comparing the American and South Indian societies using the above-mentioned dimensions, I discovered a number of similarities existing between the two cultures. In the narrative entitled “Creativity in the Classroom” I drew several connections between my observations of South Indian students and American children at work in the classroom. Both groups of students maintained a strong focus on their assignments when music accompanied their efforts and when individuals were allowed to get in their “zone”. Background beats, it seems, helped children from both cultures find

their own rhythm for independent, creative assignments. Although not universally practiced, making space for creativity and arts in the classroom can promote a personal learning experience for children regardless of their cultural background.

My research also revealed a few, shared values between the American and South Indian cultures. As discussed in “Reflections”, Krishnadeva Raya became a beloved figure in Indian history because of his religious and cultural tolerance towards Vijayanagar’s visitors. The characterizing traits that distinguish Krishnadeva Raya to Indian citizens still today are also valued by most Americans, whose nation is founded on a basis of cultural acceptance and religious freedom. Furthermore, both American and Indian societies celebrate historical sites and significant characters who have shaped the history of their respective countries and worldviews.

### **The Role of Cultural Dimensions in International Relations**

As was discussed in the previous section, cultural dimensions can be used to characterize a culture to gain a better understanding of its worldview. According to Rogers, understanding a culture’s worldview increases the likelihood of experiencing clear communication with members of that society. (Rogers, 1999)

This idea is wholly relevant to the field of international relations. In establishing and maintaining cross-cultural relationships, members of interacting societies must consider the role that culture plays in shaping their counterpart’s attitudes, beliefs, and values. If culture is not taken into consideration, the likelihood of miscommunication to occur is significantly increased. Misunderstandings within international relations,

especially those between influential nations can result in devastating consequences that may affect the entire world.

To explore the role of cultural dimensions in international relations, I analyzed the South Indian culture using identified dimensions. I then compared and contrasted the South Indian society with that of the United States on a basis of the same dimensions. By assessing the similarities and differences between the two societies using cultural dimensions, I discovered how cultural dimensions can be used to initiate and maintain international relations with a foundation in cultural understanding. Interacting societies that are able to understand one another's worldviews will experience less miscommunication than those that ignore the unique worldviews that culture influences. Furthermore, if influential, interacting countries such as the United States and India can accept and embrace one another's worldviews as identified by cultural dimensions, international relations between these states are much more likely to be positive and productive in character and promote peaceful interactions across the globe.

### **The Contributions of My Study**

My research contributed to the fields of intercultural communication and international relations by identifying and analyzing cultural dimensions within my experiential learning observations of the South India culture.

Those interested in traveling to South India for study, employment, or pleasure might consider the character of rural and urban South Indian societies as portrayed by my analysis in order to attain a foundational understanding of both cultures. The study also discusses the inner-workings of an Indian, rurally-based non-governmental organization,

and this may be of special relevance to those pursuing humanitarian work in developing nations. Having prior knowledge of the South Indian worldview (as provided by this study) will help American travelers to overcome the barriers to intercultural communication as identified by Shah. (Shah, 2004)

This study is particularly significant because more Americans are visiting Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley, and other parts of South India than ever before due to India's ascension as a technology hub. However, the study has lasting value because of its theoretical basis in understanding cultural dimensions. Although my research is qualitative, and therefore subjective in nature, this approach provided an in-depth understanding of the South Indian culture.

### **Weaknesses of my Study**

The fact that I characterized the South Indian culture based upon my own, experiential learning observations yields my research as qualitative, and as is the case with qualitative studies, it lacks the objectivity possessed by quantitative studies.

My research was also narrow in scope. In order to show the role of cultural dimensions in characterizing a society, I analyzed the South Indian culture on the basis of identified dimensions. My experiential learning observations were limited to the South Indian state of Karnataka. Traveling to other parts of India would have allowed me to have an increased understanding of the Indian society as a whole.

## Recommendations

More comparative studies between the U.S. and India could increase our knowledge of the cultures' shared and individual traits. Qualitative studies might be expanded to other parts of India or conducting using dimensions other than those selected for my research. Furthermore, the use of different methodologies such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys might create more in-depth knowledge in the field. Similar studies conducted from a different perspective (for example, an Indian's experiential learning observations and analysis of the American culture) would broaden our understanding of the worldview's influence on individual and societal points of view.



□ Children from the Duglapura Bridge School  
(Ahrendt, 2011)

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