What Mumbai Taught Me

Until I journeyed to Mumbai, I don't think I understood the meaning of the word indescribable. I was formerly convinced that the cliché of describing an experience as indescribable merely existed because individuals were too lazy, too busy, or too tired to accurately articulate their thoughts. Presently, while I could certainly go into great detail and describe specific components of living in Mumbai, this would be a moot point. Mumbai is indescribable not because of its blaring noise, intense stares, deep colors, exploding flavors and unmistakable smells. It is indescribable because the sensory overload to which one is subjected in almost every aspect of their daily life in the city simply doesn't allow for the formation of a complete picture in one's memory. By necessity, one's mind tends to focus in on one facet of the city. Whether it be the woman's richly embroidered turquoise sari who is sitting next to you on the train, the feeling of a hot breeze whipping your hair into your mouth when strolling by the Arabian Sea, or the burst of warm honey that fills ones mouth when taking their first bite of freshly prepared Gulab Jamun, I left Mumbai with a set of distinct snapshots in my mind, of which the edges are blurred and constantly in motion. More than anything else, the gift that this overwhelming city gave to me was forcing me to accept the fact that I was out of control- that it was inconceivable for me to remember or understand everything that I wanted to- and that that was perfectly okay.
Moreover, my newly acquired skill of being able to remain calm in situations that are anything but developed in large part due to my colleagues and work environment at Mumbai Mobile Creches. For one, the amazing group of women I worked with all possessed the remarkable ability to remain completely composed in situations that would normally have afforded me great deals of stress and frustration at home. Contrary to what I was used to, my co-workers and superiors at MMC expected that if things could go wrong, they would go wrong and that there would often be no rhyme or reason to any of the infamous Indian chaos. An experience that epitomizes this quality is when I relayed my story of how it took me three different rickshaw drivers and over an hour to reach a post office only 5 kilometers away, only to be told to leave what I was sending and come back the following evening because they had not printed enough forms. To this tale my supervisor simply replied, “Oh, yes well, that’s India”, giggled lightheartedly, and carried on with our conversation.

Additionally, I cannot discount my weekly Friday meetings with my direct supervisor and the NGO’s CEO as being partly responsible for developing my adaptability to new and fast-paced environments. Starting on the second week of my job, each Friday afternoon I had to sit for a discussion of all my finalized work as well as an explanation of my upcoming tasks with my superiors. Naively assuming that the CEO was far too preoccupied to look at my work in any amount of great detail and that the meeting would not last more than a half hour, I was caught off guard at our first conference when she proceeded to ask me about the methodology I used during each component of my research work, my decision to use certain vocabulary words in donor e-mails, went off onto a tangent explaining the modern system of arranged marriages in India, and listed about
fifteen different new tasks for me to complete the following week. The meeting took about
two and a half hours; needless to say I was sure to be on high alert every Friday afternoon.

As follows, (and as contradictory as it may sound), I feel that living and working in
the anarchic environment of Mumbai ultimately left me a calmer and more harmonious
individual. Although not until the very end of my trip, I finally learned to distance myself
from my surroundings and to focus on things that were purely in my control. This enabled
me to have a fresh perspective on analyzing data and coming up with innovative research
projects for MMC, write a large amount of donor correspondence without sounding
repetitive, learn new skills such as using MailChimp and Photoshop, and most importantly
to forge connections with many amazing people along the way. Returning to my studies
and my work from India, I feel more confident in my ability to adapt to new environments,
and new cultures and to retain a professional yet friendly demeanor at all times. I feel that I
learned a great deal about what I do and do not desire as an upcoming professional. Most
importantly, I feel more ready than ever to accept the challenge of navigating new
surroundings, knowing that I always must expect the unexpected and roll with the
punches.