

Dear Fellows,

When my fellowship year ended, I experienced a profound sense of loss, and tried desperately to hold onto something that I couldn't quite define. I tried to package the feelings the year evoked, afraid that I would lose them if I didn't. But the harder I tried to exert control over the inexplicable, the more quickly the sentiments receded, like sand slipping between my fingers.

This deep sense of loss - the intense longing for what "was," for relationships, for community, for a sense of purpose - was based on the assumption that these things existed in their purest form only in India. I associated physical inhabitation of a particular place with these ideals, and didn't realize that what I was yearning for was not finite or external, but rather, internal.

So, that's where I am now - searching, building, discovering. Slowly dissolving the false boundaries I've built around ideas, people, and places. (Re)defining my notion of "community." (Re)negotiating relationships. (Re)building modes of purposeful living. It's a continual process of learning, unlearning, and re-learning, of searching for the spirit of my existence, and understanding myself in relation to others.

Just as I was not alone in this journey, neither are you. I hope that as you listen to the individual voices of alumni in this handbook, you will begin to see how their stories are also your own. For these stories weren't born in isolation - they are intimately intertwined, not only with those that preceded them, but also with those that will follow, including yours.

Ultimately, no matter where you are, remember that the spirit of these stories will remain with (in) you.

With Love in Service,

Prerna Srivastava, on behalf of Indicorps Staff
23 July 2008

The Invitation

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living
I want to know what you ache for
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool
for love
for your dreams
for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon...
I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow
if you have been opened by life's betrayals
or have become shrivelled and closed
from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain
mine or your own
without moving to hide it
or fade it
or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy
mine or your own
if you can dance with wildness
and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your
fingers and toes
without cautioning us to
be careful
be realistic
to remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me
is true.

I want to know if you can
disappoint another
to be true to yourself.

If you can bear the accusation of betrayal
and not betray your own soul.
If you can be faithless
and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see Beauty
even when it is not pretty
every day.

And if you can source your own life
from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure
yours and mine
and still stand on the edge of the lake
and shout to the silver of the full moon,
"Yes."

It doesn't interest me
to know where you live or how much money you have.
I want to know if you can get up
after a night of grief and despair
weary and bruised to the bone
and do what needs to be done
to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you know
or how you came to be here.
I want to know if you will stand
in the center of the fire
with me
and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom
you have studied.
I want to know what sustains you
from the inside
when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone
with yourself
and if you truly like the company you keep
in the empty moments.

Journal Entry In a Pit of Self-Reflection

This might not make much sense, its even more incoherent then usual, I apologise, I seemed to have caught a cold or something, I only manage a couple of hours sleep a night, meaning I walk around in the day in a caffeine induced delirium – actually its not that bad, but actually sometimes it is.

As I write this I have four days left at Hunnarsh ā l ā , a couple days in Ahmedabad and then in Surat, then I'm flying away. Already I'm preparing to change worlds, to put away my slippers and put on my socks and boots. I'll change my name from 'Prashant' to 'Prash'.

As I slip from one world to another, what can I do but put India into a little box, in the corner of my bedroom. Let India become once more fading photo's and memory. Can I carry Pinky, Hussain and Shantaben with me? Their weight here is heavy enough, and in England they would grow heavier still.

So I do what architects do best - I'm drawing little lines around things and building walls. This is the past, that is the future. Here is a neat boundary around India, and a neat boundary round England. This is an adventure, that is real life. Like an architect, I try to find order and patterns, I draw lines around things and name them, this is the bedroom (used for sleeping), separate from the store (used for storing) and this India (used for service, and doing the right thing), and this is England (used for earning money, and slumping in front of the tele) This sentence has ended, I'm penning in the full stop, preparing to start a new sentence.

But, it isn't so, these lines are drawn only to make it easier for me. Drawn in my defense, so that I need not face the contradictions, '...look you see...its ok... that was then, this is now...that was India, this is England....look see, the line, the line...there's a line...'

4k is there a line, Regardless of whether I'm called 'Prashant' or 'Prash', Maceo will still play in the mud, Bhavesh will still hang out outside the diners, asking for food. Regardless of whether its I'm sitting on a couch in Leicester or a katala in Bhuj, the authorities will still stall, turning a blind eye to its responsibilities to the poor. They'll still sell them Bhujia's at the stall, people will still crowd round under its tin roof when it rains. Regardless of where I am, Ganga and Jamani will be married off and still sort through rubbish tips. Hirji will still be working day in day out to sort GIDC out.

The past still is. There will never be a world where slavery didn't exist, where untouchability didn't exist, there will never be a world where the Gujarat massacres didn't happen, where mothers didn't see baby's heads smashed open on concrete walls, where it rained so hard that my bones became sodden, where Shantaben buried her face in the sand and cried for 1 hour solid cause I shouted at her, these all happened and they continue, there is no sudden end, no full stop, just one long sentence not even any comma's where one word just continues intothenextuntilthereisonlyonewordthepastthepresentthefutureuntouchabilitydiscriminationpovertydeath. Just because I board a plane and fly a couple of miles it doesn't mean that this no longer happened, or continues to happen. So how do I carry this back to England with me? What do I do....?

Khudah Jaane.....

If we admit that the boundaries between India and England are simply a figment of our struggle to order things, and a completed history and past are similarly constructs formed from this struggle. If we can admit that the boundary between us and them are also part of our attempts to make sense of this crazy ass lil lopsided planet, then where does that leave us?

'...if you have come to help me then you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound with mine then let us work together...' – lila Watson

It leaves us with the fact that the only difference between myself and Devbhai is the accident of birth. It means admitting that I'm not living a life of dignity because Devbhai isn't, and he isn't living a life of dignity because I ain't. It means that no matter how jubilant the party outside, it will never be the truth until the little kid in the damp basement joins it....

So what I'm trying to say, is that this isn't the end of anything or the start of something new, this is simply another day, and tomorrow will be another, India is a lil island on the 3rd planet from the sun, and so is England. It means I will be the same person here and now, as I will be there and tomorrow. I don't need to take India, or all the people I have met to England, because it and they are there already, or more accurately India is England, and the people I met in India are the people I will meet in England....does that make any sense...

Prashant Solanky
Indicorps Fellow, August 2005-2007

Short Essay
To India and Back: A Personal Journey

Dusk. The ethereal flow of the Ganges. An old lady standing knee deep in the water. Swirls of water playing at her feet. She is singing softly with eyes closed. Soft devotional tears flow down her cheek.

Ask what I did last year and you'll gather that I was in India.

Laughter, at the Gandhi Ashram – tinkling laughter of childhood – 200 faces of innocence and eagerness embedded in my mind forever.

Probe further and you would know that I worked at the Gandhi Ashram, marketing handicrafts made by children from the slums.

Reaching through the honking and bustling and finding places of stillness and reverence.

As a Bay Area resident for 10 years, the tug of the all powerful Silicon Valley dollar was strong. But something about the purported mission of Indicorps - 'service for the soul' -had an almost romantic appeal. It sounded like a good idea to serve the country of my origin, learn from it, immerse in it. So I embarked on a one year journey – a year that now stands out as the definitive catalyst of a lifelong transformation.

When I left I was ill-equipped in more ways than one. For one thing – too much baggage. There was no room to lug around the obligatory two suitcases full of 'stuff' that every Indian must take. The physical baggage, I shed quickly. The other kind was difficult. "Look, listen and learn!", the coordinators of the fellowship urged when we arrived in India. The purported mission of the program was to contribute our energies to the development of India. So we descended with notions of grandeur. But when one meets people like Ishwar Patel, recipient of the prestigious Bharat Ratna award, frontline worker of rural India, dive into a pit of feces to clean it and send a message to the villagers, what remains but to discard these notions aside and dive in alongside?

I met numerous other inspiring individuals along the way, from the artist Jagat Sukhadia who pours his heart into the craft he teaches children to the visionary president Abdul Kalam. Meeting these people, I have come to believe that India doesn't need help - to paraphrase Vivekananda, it 'is the help of the world'. The reason is that people in India, the woman on the Ganges and the child in the slum have something in common that is powerful and inexplicable. They believe. Fervently. Unreasonably. Endearingly. And this faith moves mountains.

A hundred thousand kites color the sky. Thousands of people on the roof of their homes, hopping easily from terrace to terrace. The spirit of the nation soars like the kites.

This experience is undoubtedly a spiritual journey. India reveals herself as a reflection of the philosophy that she gave birth too. The infinite play of shape shifting realities, richly textured plurality, plays itself out to the logical extreme in this country. But the same nation that variegates, confounds and distorts any one reality is equipped to transcend its own illusions. Ultimately, something about India enables me to make peace with all that is India.

And now, I return home, once again, ill equipped. Home! To the Bay Area. After one year away what shall I expect? I stare blankly out of the car. Windows rolled up. To shield us from intimacy. Cars whizz by. I know I am expected to celebrate this crossing of cultures, this grand melting pot. But my eyes are open wider and I am cynical.

In business-school I struggle to connect my recent experiences, with what I learn in the books. I learn that the US is clearly a great nation, unparallel in GDP, GNP, and any other acronym you care to compare. And we stumble all over ourselves trying to get a piece of that GDP pie – frantic job searches, writing and rewriting that resume to be perfect, dashing – and innocuous. What about connections? What about community? Is there a place you can go to learn about that? Does this great nation suffer from too much distance? Why are we afraid to show up at our friend's home without calling first? Why don't children in the park hang onto my neck or swing on my arms like a banyan tree? And why does no train or bus commute in the US ever turn into an animated, ridiculous conversation with every passenger tossing in a comment or two – half-hearted smiles and reluctant glances are the best we can do here. We complain loudly and obnoxiously when our hosts in India feed us beyond capacity. Now, we find, no one notices or cares when we skip a meal. The loss is ours.

One frequently hears about the power of east meets west, perhaps neglecting in the process, the risk of the immigration experience. Hasty and eager as we are to blend with our host country, do we leave behind more than we intend to? Holding on to dogma, to rituals and an occasional Diwali dinner, we claim Indianness, the one we remember from our brief years in India, or perhaps from what our parents told us. Yet we can barely speak to our parents or grandparents in our own tongue. Many things are wrong with this picture. But time is on our side. For endlessly, patiently, the Ganga flows on, awaiting our return.

Rish Sanghvi
Indicorps Fellow, 2002-2003

Journal Entry
On Standing Tall

This world is torrential. You can barely even look up before you have to squeeze your eyes shut and scrunch up your shoulders, bracing yourself for the onslaught of tragedy, inhumanity, and ugliness. Indicorps and the chance to be working to better this world make it all feel a little less scary and enveloping. Make you feel like maybe you don't have to just scrunch up and brace yourself- you can take the offensive. When you're in an environment like that, with swirling, endless energy from surrounding hearts, minds, and communities, it's almost a no-brainer: of course i will devote every ounce of my being to this. of course we will change this world.

then you go home.

and it's not that you don't think that anymore. somewhere tucked away, you still know you can (and will) change the world. but you find yourself "having" to go to Wal-mart to save time and money on shopping, you "need" that IKEA dresser drawer because pulling your clothes out of a suitcase every morning would be too transient, you "want" to live in a clean and safe neighborhood which ends up meaning you seldom come face to face with the true challenge of a life lived. And it gets harder.

I'm in a public health masters program and we talk about doing good and saving lives every day. This helps me remember. Not everyone is built to rally the troops and protest on capitol hill every weekend. Not everyone will find peace or purpose by serving meals at a homeless shelter. But I like to think that anyone who spent time with the Indicorps family, has their own way of standing tall, and the confidence to do it.

Anjali Dotson
Indicorps Fellow, August 2006-2007

Short Essay

Neither Producer nor Consumer: Reflections of a Returned Citizen

It's been a month and a half since I've returned from India and I am finally able to see reality with some sort of clarity. The flash floods of emotions, the glamorized memories of my experience, the wistful longing for people and roles are starting to find their appropriate places. The passage of time soothes them into everyday constants that cease to cause turmoil.

What has replaced the emotion induced by memory is an ability to discern the choices of roles I can play. Having consciously chosen my role each day in India has empowered me to know what that means. Over the last two years, I proved to myself that, in fact, I am capable of living based on a higher ideal, simpler life and more enlightened version of identity. The next struggle, though, is to fit that into a context of "normal." It was easy to be focused solely on giving, adding value, creating opportunities and making change, while in India for that express purpose. However, the equation changes with the times – or so we think.

At Indicorps, we talk a lot about being producers rather than consumers in our transactional world. So much of our self-reflective energy goes into pushing ourselves to give more, demand more of ourselves, seek newer and more just and compassionate ways to create rather than consume. In America, though, as I imagine is the case in anyone's home country, I am neither producer nor consumer. Rather, I am simply a citizen, a part of the system that functions, part of the wheel that turns both for and because of me. While there is great beauty to participating in a mature (relatively speaking) democracy, being a citizen has great potential to eliminate a certain deliberateness that characterized so many of our lives while we were in India. While in India, we possessed such a heightened awareness of our purpose, of our missions, that we constantly made choices towards or sometimes against, but always with the goal in view. We thought about every single thing we ate, knew exactly what happened to our trash and made spending decisions accordingly. We lived in the background of other people's realities in ways that were far enough out of our comfort zones to make us consistently aware of ourselves and our actions. Our lives were open books, not only to others, but often for the first time, to ourselves.

Back in our home countries, "real life" sets in and our best selves are often rationalized into being our practical selves. We understand why we should avoid plastic, but we have such rare opportunities to go grocery shopping that we deal with it. We wish to live simply, but convenience and efficiency become core values to contend with. We wish to take time to explore ourselves, our worlds, our existence, but it is a Friday night and we "should" go out.

It is now that many of us are put to the test. Our character as citizens is what will reveal the ways in which we are changed. As changemakers, how will we interact with our democratic options? Will we push ourselves to embody the ideals of giving or will we simply accept that we have done our part during our Indicorps experiences?

I teach in the inner-cities of one of the most violent cities in America; there are few professions, experiences or missions that can keep one more aware of purpose and justice. I spend many hours of my day, engaged and interacting with children. I have an intense and rigorous opportunity to continue giving. Still I find myself caught off guard during those moments of clarity, shocked when I see how many weeks have passed since I last wrote in my journal, had a conversation with someone on my way to work, went out of my way to make someone's life a little better, or was humbled by the compassion and magnanimity of the community I live in. It is all too easy to revert back to a less mindful state of being.

Living well as a volunteer is one particular challenge, a challenge that each of us takes on when we come to India. However, embodying principles of compassion and selflessness as citizens, maintaining awareness from within our zones of relative comfort, from the places in

which we lay roots, get attached and have lived for so long, that is a whole new challenge. It is this that I am excited to take on headfirst.

For me, this means making my life my message and ensuring that the newest generation of youth is equally committed to character, community and citizenship. At work, it means infusing responsibility into social studies lessons, running a service and leadership course and embodying principle in my relationships with my students. In my personal life, it is demanding from myself the best, mandating myself to action, not entitlement. It is easy in a country of systems to have high expectations from the world but to feel justified in contributing very little. To erase the entitlement, to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship, to build loyalty to a great good over just your own – these are the principles that striving to “produce, rather than consume” taught me. It is now time to step it up.

Archana Patel
Indicorps Staff, 2005-2007

Email Exchange On Service

Maybe this isn't the sort of response you wanted when you asked this question (i.e., philosophical versus practical). But i have been thinking a lot about service lately and what it means to live a life of service. This was triggered by discomfort with my "new" life and Jayeshbhai's video on Karmatube.

So, what i am going to do is throw back some questions your way:

- How do moments of service play into a life of service? i ask this because i don't know. is service something that i can do once a week? once a year? everyday? every nanosecond?
- Is service an activity or lifestyle or philosophy, or some combination of the same?
- Is it service enough to be good to my fellow man? or is that too passive?
- How do i define service in a way that allows me to use my talents (whatever they may be, and however limited) for best effect?

In the end, i am probably over-thinking all of this. But that is what happens when you are always surrounded by people in silence. (Weird, have you ever found this? I am better at being introspective when I can see someone there rather than being alone.)

I like the idea, but my concern with this is the personal worry I have with my current "service" - am I just doing it so I can say I am doing service? Is it providing an easy out for me, kind of like buying eco-friendly packaging excuses me from acting more seriously about the environment? I dunno. I know that isn't your intention, but these are my own insecurities.

Intrinsic Meanings

As a first year graduate student, I required to enroll in a teaching colloquium with all my peers, and we were discussing our philosophy on teaching. Our facilitator had asked us to share the key word that defined our teaching, and everyone else suggested good words like organized, context-driven, current, etc. And then, I stepped in with "humility," something I have always valued but my year in India taught me even more about. I almost didn't, just because of how different everyone else's words were. People started laughing. But, it was the weirdest thing--I was not offended or hurt at all. Then, the woman leading the discussion (an official teaching expert with the university) looked at me oddly and asked me to explain what I meant. I told her that for me, it means that everyone brings his or her own unique contribution to the table--a contribution that is equally valuable as your own. She attempted to rephrase this: "So, you mean, you should assume you don't know everything because science is always changing?" Everyone else nodded at this, and I struggled--because, no, that is not what I had meant. But, the class had already moved on. And I realized then this is why returning to America had been so hard: because exemplifying values like service and humility is easy when you are surrounded by people who remind you what these words mean.

However, defining and cherishing these values when you feel alone--now, that is a challenge. But a worthwhile one that has tested and continues to test the numerous lessons I learned in India.

**Sonal Singhal
Indicorps Fellow, August 2006-2007**

Short Essay Stepping Out of Line

And I am up.

I don't think I can completely blame the jetlag, because, well frankly, my mind has been racing at unprecedented speeds ever since I set my eyes on the New York City skyline and with this much brain activity (not to mention my pounding heart) who could possibly achieve a true dream state. I cannot believe I am sitting in my room, in my house, in New Jersey. It's raining outside. Not because it is the rainy season, but because here it rains when the clouds become full. The peace and quiet is almost noise to me after five months of India's soundtrack of blaring horns, disgruntled animals, and shouting people. I wonder if it were raining as such in India if I would even be able to hear it.

I just came across pictures of my former life: the pre-August, pre-orientation, pre-Indicorps, pre-India life. It all seems so distant and foreign (ironically) that I am questioning if it were ever real; the people, the mindsets, the relationships. I just don't know these people anymore; not how I believed I once did. More accurately, however, I believe that these people may find that they do not know me anymore. That is only fair seeing as I barely recognize myself when I look in the mirror.

I retired (temporarily) the Nike sports watch for my favorite maroon Kenneth Cole creation. I was disappointed at first because it appeared that the watch batteries had died. And then I remembered stopping the watch before I left as to preserve the battery life; just before I took this insane journey to India, I literally stopped time in America. Five minutes ago I restarted this same time and now I am staring down the edges of two hands that only knew me and my time as it once was. It is as though one's place, their physical and mental location, dictate their time as much as the actual seconds and minutes do. So it is as though life in America stood still for the five months that I went off hiking mountains, learning languages, riding buses, and finding a capacity in myself that I had previously doubted existed. And then with all this new perspective and experience—that is like Pee Wee Herman's secret word for the year—I am supposed to move with this previous life and try to explain to inquiring minds what I have learned.

Up until now, life has chronologically built one year upon the next: high school to college, college to job, but job to random-inexplicable-year-doing-development-work-in-a-place-I-call-“the homeland”, that does not follow the line. So instead, it is like I am currently standing outside of this lifeline and watching it progress without me. At some given point I'll hop back on this destined course and resume my position in the world of right angles, round circles, and perfect squares. But I suppose this deviation of route will have given me a knowledge that others will see but cannot attain. Like being the birthday girl who found out about the surprise party weeks ago but never said a word. Why spoil everyone else's fun?

And while my urge is to say I am lost, perhaps, in fact, I am finding the crevices of one of life's oddest understandings: the notion of living life for life and not for some unidentified, but ominously present, existence of a destination. Prove to myself that I can push boxes, move what is more like worlds than nations, and make reality in any ol' place I see fit. And in the downtime, live. Stop the watch's movement. Step out of the line, and let my crooked course be the muse and entertainment for the others who have never looked far enough down the road to realize that said destination moves at the same pace one walks and attempting to reach the goal is like someone searching for the corner in a circular room.

I was once talking to someone, who I suppose I consider wise, about life and specifically love. He was once very much in love with a girl. He asked her why it was that she had chosen him. And as the story goes, she told him that there was a quality about him that made it seem like

he just knew something that everyone else did not; something the rest of the world just missed. Now I believe I understand that.

Stepping away from the beaten path lets me see something only distance can reveal. I now know something that others just do not see. That I believe I will hold on to as my secret between life and me. I suppose it is a bit selfish to not want to share this bit of knowledge with the world, but some secrets are like dark chocolate—you cannot possibly do justice to its delectable nature by trying to explain it. One must taste it for his or herself to understand its subtleties.

Naeema Ginwala
Indicorps Fellow, August 2004-2005

Journal Entry
5 December 2007

i don't know how it's possible, but i'm housing some of the most bizarre contradictions right now.

i feel more powerful than i've ever felt in my life. more passionate. more purposeful. more full of incredible potential. there seem to be so many possibilities for the future, so many things that i CAN do that i never thought i could do before. how could i NOT feel that way when i brought women and girls together in a context where i didn't know the language, the culture, or the people? how could i NOT feel that way when i scaled mountains that look intimidating even from the comfort of a plane? how could i NOT feel that way when i left everything and everybody that made me feel secure behind, and took the biggest risk of my life in order to find myself? how could i NOT feel that way when i looked fear in the face?

BUT at the same time, in the short term, i feel ineffectual. devoid of purpose. fearful. nauseated. somehow, the knowledge that i CAN be something larger than myself makes me so scared that i feel immobilized. i'm afraid i'll fail, and none of this will be worth it in the end. it almost feels like the pre-indicorps prerna, the indicorps prerna, and the post-indicorps prerna are three different people. i feel like i'm a lukewarm compromise between the prerna's that preceded me, a more confused version that's too scared to take even small steps despite knowledge of her own potential and power.

for the first time in my life, i have a clear vision of what i want to do, who i want to be, and how i want to live my life. i haven't sculpted the contours of the vision yet, but i can see its outline. i can say with confidence that i've never felt more charged with purpose than when i was in the community with my girls. picking up trash. picketing through the village. chanting slogans. watching them speak up for the first time in front of people. i've never felt my heart feel so incredibly full. never. i've never wanted to stay up every single night just to find ways to be more effective. i can say all those things because i felt them with an intensity unparalleled by anything i've ever experienced in my life.

BUT at the same time, i'm so incredibly scared of this vision. just the knowledge that this is what will make my life meaningful is crippling. i'm scared because i know it won't be easy. i'm scared because i have no idea how i'll make my dream into a reality. i'm scared because i think i'll fail myself and not go through with it. i'm scared because i know i'll consider myself a complete and utter failure if i end up not going through with this. the things that i thought were perfectly acceptable career paths before no longer seem acceptable. i'm grateful that i can see myself more clearly now, but the knowledge is simultaneously liberating and painful. maybe the parallel is a stupid one, but it's like finding out that you have super powers, but knowing that your life will never be the same because of that knowledge. either you fulfill your potential and fight the world's evils, or you sit back and pretend nothing ever happened, and hate yourself every second for it. either you fail people around you or you fail yourself.

i feel like i'm part of a community that's so much larger than me. i have a community of women and girls in malpor and kharia that i love. i'm connected to an incredible indicorps alum network that feels passionate about the same things that i do, and actually wants to effect change in profound ways. i'm connected to an organization that does incredible grassroots level work, and met people through the organization that i connected with on such an unbelievably deep level. i have a boyfriend that has the same set of values as me, and sees service as the fundamental fabric that binds humanity.

BUT at the same time, i feel so alone. to a large degree, i feel like i've estranged myself from most of my friends from home. conversations that used to excite me in the past now bore me. i find that i'm so much more different from my friends than i originally thought. the friends that i'm close to through indicorps are all in india. my family doesn't understand me. the alum that are here are all too busy. life here is too busy, and people are too caught up with themselves. it makes me feel like i've come back to find that my social network has undergone a huge upheaval, and all i can manage are the skeletal remains of my past friendships. or maybe i'm too caught up with myself? scary.

i think many of these apparent contradictions will resolve themselves with time. i know what i need to do is appreciate the "not knowing" aspect of this stage of my life, and just ride the wave without being overwhelmed by the chaos it wreaks on my life. i should feel charged, not debilitated by these contradictions, but somehow, things don't play out that way in reality. things just seem so complicated when i want so desperately for them to be simple.

none of this is easy. nobody said it would be. but i also know that this internal struggle is what makes living more meaningful, regardless of how painful it seems right now, and will be for a while. i can't imagine it being any other way. i can't imagine calling anything else living except this. i can't imagine living my life with the knowledge that i didn't even try to conquer my dreams because it was just too painful.

Prerna Srivastava
Indicorps Fellow, August 2006–2007,
Staff 2008

Various Thoughts

Building Community

Prior to Indicorps, I hadn't really ever connected with the broader Indian-American community. Since coming back I've tried to find more ways of connecting, with marginal success. I was also eager to set down real local community roots—big brother programs, mentoring, local politics, etc. Unfortunately, even now, two years on, my plans regarding work and residence are still too fluid to do that effectively. I started out being extremely socially active with a peer group, but after a while it seemed that it was more of a distraction than anything else. Coming to terms with this situation, and forming more targeted social groups, has been a continual struggle.

(Re)negotiating Relationships

Renegotiating my relationship with my girlfriend and my closest family was my biggest challenge. Coming back from Indicorps and straight into a new and demanding job, I didn't have nearly as much travel time as I would have liked. And even when I was able to spend time with folks, I had to recognize that not everyone was—or wanted to be—as spartan as I'd grown to be. It was really hard not to see the lives around me as shallow and purposeless. Asking directly about motivations, and re-centering my behavior to support my own, was helpful.

Seeking Clarity of Purpose

The feeling of purpose and action was so pure in Indicorps that returning and losing much of it often left me puzzled, if not actually distressed. Questions I had to answer included: what were my new set of tools, and how could they be used in new and unique ways? How can I stay connected to the work back in India, and still maximize the opportunities for good work here? How can I talk about what I've done and what I want to do in ways that make it relevant for local folks?

Kohl Gill
Indicorps Fellow, August 2005-2006

Every fellow's situation is different, so their post-fellowship experience will always be unique. Some might go back to graduate school, some might go back to their former job, some might stay in India for a few months to a year or some might decide to take some time off from life. But, you don't necessarily have to have your next move lined up or figured out before you get back to the US, so don't freak out if you are absolutely directionless. Don't pass this up as a viable option. The time off once you are back home will allow you to digest the fellowship experience in reference to your life, your past life experiences and figure out what you need to do next professionally, socially, personally, etc. so can use the fellowship experience to take your life in a new direction or take that next step. I feel the time really allowed me to figure out how to incorporate some of the things I learned in India into my life in the US, as this can sometimes be a tricky thing to do. You don't get large transition periods similar to this in life, so don't be afraid to take time off to let them sink in and make a sustained impact on your life.

Once you get back, take things in baby steps...some changes make take a month, some a year, but just enjoy the process and take it slowly.

Rohan Jasani
Indicorps Fellow, January 2007-2008

Dear India,

It has been almost three months since I left your bustling streets, colorful cloths, dusty air, and bare-bottomed babies. When I left I was happy. I had survived the loneliness of being in a place I could not call home, the frustration of working on a project people did not seem to care about, the rickshaw rides with ten people crammed into a vehicle that wouldn't start, the floods, the crazy *kakas* (or uncles as we called every male elder), and the guilt I felt at seeing so many people in need. I thought by leaving I would rid myself of all of these things. And when I returned I tried to. But I could not easily accept the four-laned highways, the five-star hotel-like Barnes and Nobles in every neighborhood, the green lawns, and the Fendi purses. I thought I would feel so much better being back home, where I could talk with people who speak my own language, and use toilet paper again. And I do for the most part. But every time I see a picture of you, or hear something about you on the news, I remember your spirit and warmth, your relaxed easy-going nature, and your innocent love of anyone who steps foot on your soil. And I feel to be still with you.

Before I came to live with you I didn't know about all of this. I knew about Indian hospitality, yes. But I did not know that a newlywed couple could walk through Gujarat with nothing but each other for two months, and not only survive on the food and shelter provided by villagers with next to nothing, but also make lifelong bonds with them. I never knew I would be able to communicate and connect better with your people in a language I didn't know than in English to Americans.

I knew about your poverty and slums. But I never saw you as a developing country, as a country still plagued by simple problems like toilets, even in your major cities. Children crapping on bridges and women squatting in abandoned trails.

I knew you were my motherland. But I never realized why that was important to me. I still can't articulate it. I do know now though that I have my own connection with you, my own place in your soul, not just because of my parents, but because I have experienced your trains, coconut trees, and deserts myself. I have massaged your feet, inquired about your ayurveda, and worn your traditional sari of my own volition. Not by my mother's proddings.

I knew of your technology and service boom and large-scale development plans. But I did not know about your *khadi* (handspun cotton), solar power, *gobar* (cow dung) houses, and intricately carved temples - the small grassroots successes that define you and will lead you to a development of your making.

These things of which I did not know is how I would like to remember you- my own inside view into you, not judged by other opinions- just what I saw and experienced.

Priya Shashidharan
Indicorps Fellow, 2004-2005

Email Exchange The Inner Core

It's been interesting being back here. All that was expected to happen did indeed occur – being asked to share random stories at dinner parties, not really knowing what to say to the question "How was India?", feeling like I'm not wearing enough clothes for the amount of sun and heat around (where's my dupatta again?).

Mentally, I knew things would be different. Of course, you take the right-side escalator instead of the left one, the light switch flips up instead of down, you don't need a geezer to make the water hot, people aren't throwing their trash onto the streets, the traffic signals are there to be followed, there are no wandering animals other than the occasional squirrel or bird. Of course people will be speaking in thick American accents everywhere you go, and there will not just be brown folks going to and fro. People go to work and stores open by 9am rather than 11am, there aren't chai breaks throughout the day, and when people do take a break for coffee, the cups are 4 times the size of that which you get in India. Everyone has a washer and a dryer, not to mention a machine that washes your dishes.

After Mom and Dad picked me up from the airport, we stopped at Wal-Mart to get a few things (my flight came in 4 hours early). I felt like I was in a museum. I wandered up and down every aisle just to see all that was available. You could do an anthropological study on societies just by going to their places of purchase. Do you realize that we have a whole aisle dedicated to bread?! You really can have anything you want – it just comes in a can or a frozen food package. No wonder people from abroad stare at our supermarkets with awe. I kept thinking about how mesmerized the women from Kachchh were when they visited Pantaloon's (a department store in Ahmedabad). Look out, World. Here comes Wal-Mart.

I suppose the same happens when people from the States go to places abroad – there's a separate store for everything – you buy your milk and dairy at one place, your fruit at another, and your vegetables at yet another. Most of the time, they are either larries/tents on the street or small shops with open facades.

I guess neither world is fully startling, it's just interesting to see the differences in the ways that people live and to think that I come from this other world marked by a very different kind of consumerism.

Every now and again, I feel an interesting yearning for India. Simple things like the constant close proximity of family (and the expanded definitions of family, including Indicorps, Manav Sadhna, VA folks, etc), camels on the road pulling larris/carts with each elegant step they take, the congested buses or crazy driving on the roads (is Prakash around?), random hungama at every corner – bharaats, garbas, antakshrees, pujas, the street kids coming up to your auto asking for money but instead the transaction results in you gaining their name and a smile. The ever-changing landscape of farmers, jholawallahs, fields of mustard, rice paddies, sunflowers, buffalos and monkeys. Then there are the deeper things like the pervading hospitality and generosity of the land – the recognition that your energy is the same as my energy is the same as the energy of all those around us, thus we are all tied to one another.

It is interesting to think what makes the two places so distinct. Jared Diamond in "Guns, Germs and Steel" begins to try to answer this in a more historical manner and highlights the origins of various differences, but I suppose being back reminds me that places may look and seem physically different, but in the end, people remain the same at their cores. There's goodness everywhere. It's been nice to remind myself of that.

**Anjali Adukia
Indicorps Staff, 2004-2005**

Journal Entry In Flux

In coming back to the US, I found my adjustment to be turbulent and complicated. In fact, I never felt this way when I moved to India - I remember having almost no adjustment period in falling into my work and life in India. Of course the project was difficult and I struggled with feeling productive and useful but it wasn't an adjustment to the life in India. When I came back to the US it was different. There was suddenly a life I had to fit back into and I had no idea how to do it. Admittedly, there were a lot of reasons for my often turbulent adjustment period, some related to Indicorps and some not.

One of the most striking changes when I got back was my voluntary desire to cut myself off from the world socially. I met the standard obligations, of course, but I was never excited about doing the things and seeing the people that I loved. I stopped the activities that had always made me feel alive in NYC. Suddenly, I became a recluse and it seemed completely normal and even necessary to me. I preferred my own company to any one else's and had little or no desire to put myself in new situations or make new friends - surprising when you are in an academic environment. It became a new aspect of my life and the truth is that I didn't even realize what I was doing - how I was starving my soul until 6 or 8 months later. But the minute I started to figure things out, I left for India again!

It's been about 11 months since I came back from the fellowship and in retrospect I can see that I have swung like a pendulum since I returned. In this still ongoing, and often painful process of readjusting, I can't quite figure out what I want to integrate into my life and what is acceptable as an isolated experience. I would have never predicted it but my fellowship made me value money and for-profit businesses far more than I ever had before. Maybe I was an idealist and the fellowship made me see the reality of the world. I wrote a line in my application essay, "I know Indicorps will change my life. I'm just not sure how." I really had no idea how true that would be.

**Shaila Parikh
Indicorps Fellow, August 2006-2007**

Journal Entry

Questions, Questions, Questions

I was hating the world! I did not know after about two and half years how to deal with people who do not think as I do--the like-minded people were nowhere in my vicinity! Especially I totally expected people who were major part of my life before Indicorps to totally understand what I experienced! Well...it was a debacle and it was worse because the process was totally unexpected. I had made a conscious choice to not think about future after IC (like colleges, family time, travel etc) during the fellowship, as I wanted to totally give all that I had during the fellowship. Now I know, I was extremely judgmental after the fellowship. I had a surly attitude towards my parents and relatives! I had to really work at reducing my ego associated with Indicorps and the principles that I think I learned during the fellowship.

I was totally disgusted with extravaganza at my home and surrounding. For two months after Indicorps I was doing random translations and research for few of the fellows and support phone calls. I did not want to leave Indicorps space (now I will say that a comfort zone that was created with help of everyone over 2 years!) It was like any other transition where past comfort zones are challenged and new ones are not yet established. At a certain point, I had to make titanic effort to stop reading Indicorps emails and not be continually on phone with Indicorps circle, me grumbling mostly in my head about how I miss the team I worked with and how I fear that I will never find such quality people ever in my life. I remember making a conscious choice with another Indicorps alumni, to stop talking about Indicorps. When I stopped always referring to Indicorps verbally (even though it obviously came in my mind) gradually the intensity of fear of unknown and loss of fellowship diminished. I could have not been at two places at the same time. My heart wanted to be in IC office, however, I was at home and I was not doing justice to my family either by keeping that constraint. Being in the present moment and making most of the opportunities at hand without being judgmental was the tremendously powerful lesson I learned within two months of after the fellowship

There were lot more questions than answers, obviously. However, the questions came out with tremendous patience and desire to diligently find answers. The hardest part was when close and dear ones were little impatient with my patience. My total desire to reflect on the fellowship experience and make conscious changes in life and future decisions was mistaken as lack of clarity, abundance of perplexity and even laziness. I also questioned myself many times - am I just being lazy or rather more fearful to make long lasting impending decisions in life. I wish I could have been more okay with my own questions; I wish I could have been more okay with me discovering my journals all over again in new light, I wish I was okay with not having all the answers. I wish I could have felt empowered with the opportunities in front of me, instead of getting overwhelmed. I wish I was more confident about the time I took out to process instead of jumping at a job or applying to schools.

Juie Mahajan
Indicorps Fellow, August 2005-2007

Journal Entry 19 August 2007

Should I start a new journal since I'm in the United States now? Or, would that be another instance of me adhering to constructed dualisms? This is real life, the same life, in fact that I was leading there. I think. I clearly can't even begin to get my head around that because if I could, I would've had something more to say in the previous nineteen days.

I feel like I need to work on the personal statement or journal seriously or at least, enjoy the sunset but I can't do anything really due to

- a. Total and utter exhaustion
- b. The nervousness.

What is this nervousness? Where has it come from? is it America? It is a distinctly American feeling, this neurotic, anxious, always achieve more, always reacting (never being fully sure of what it is that you're reacting to), substituting one pleasurable escape with the next until you very quickly realize that you've tried every type of chocolate already and none of them are at all delicious. That's where the panic sets in. that is this feeling. . It is of my own doing – I've been actively pursuing the pleasurable life, much like Elizabeth gilbert, almost guiltlessly because I know that the ashram is next. But balance, I could still use a good dose of balance.

Things I like about (my life in) India

How vehicles don't have to move in straight lines.
The fluidity between inside and outside spaces
When and how people say "sing a song!!" (and the fact that then people comply)
Guavas
Peas as potato chips
The clutcher that holds my hair in place all day
Mustard juice
The leisurely pace of my life
That there isn't always something else I'd rather be doing
The aata-esque consistency of mehndi-curd. The cooling feeling of it in my hair
The fact that I can walk around with this mixture in my hair, talk to the warden ma'am, talk to the girls upstairs (meet the new girl!) and it ain't no thang.
That I really never know what my tomorrow will look like
That I am always slightly uncomfortable (and therefore, can avoid the trauma of shifting between states of being)
The look on arvind/chandraprakash's face when I put on one their "favorite" songs in the office.

Things I think I've learned thus far

Being amongst natural beauty brings me a profound sense of calm. (think kasturba ashram and hoshangabad).
The time of day from the position of the sun and the way its light colors things
I am pretty impatient
I am most productive when I have some kind of structure
I am not a very hard worker
What a mosquito looks like
That the flame of the forest is the most beautiful flower I've ever seen
That, sometimes, inertia seems more powerful than all of the external forces combined
That a cockroach can survive a nuclear attack
I am a good storyteller

You Are Not This

Friends

Tastes

Buying habits

Physical Attributes

The pretty things you own/wear

Your job, a fancy title, even your career

The mark you do or do not leave on history?

How you exist in other people mind's/memories

Your failed efforts

Your successful efforts.

Tanya Sehgal

Indicorps Fellow, August 2006-2007

Short Essay

When I finished the fellowship ...

It's interesting now as I write this from Bagar and am allowed to observe the GDLers finishing their last month in their community. It makes me think about what I felt, thought, regretted, praised about my year in the hills. Thus, this exercise (much like my year) may be far more useful to me than it will be to you, but I humbly submit it anyway.

Walking away from Naickaneri. It felt like leaving any apartment and town. I had to get rid of my stuff. I had to see everyone and take some pictures. So what if my stuff was a bunch of pottery and seeds and children's Tamil books? Maybe it was me doing it as an American, but it seemed (like so many things last year) that this too was somehow universal.

The last day of Indicorps was something else. I had this high from workshop itself. From having been allowed to experience what I experienced. From having been fortunate enough to have known the people I did.

And then I crashed. Workshop had ended some 8 hours before and suddenly I panicked. We were on our way somewhere and I turned to Ro, Aaz, and Gagan and asked, "is this it? Is this the most significant thing I will ever do?" I sank into something of a depression for the next few days. I'm not sure why. I was afraid. Perhaps of being irrelevant, of not trying hard enough, of not being enough. And not in the typical sense, of not being important enough... but rather of not being real enough, human enough.

I had a tough time leaving the Indicorps space. I think that's what largely prompted me going back to help staff out for orientation and outreach efforts Jan – Mar. I didn't want to let go. But what I mistook was what specifically I didn't want to let go. I didn't want to let go of the things that viscerally reminded me of my year – doing laundry by hand, owning two pairs of clothes, taking long train/bus journeys, not eating at places like Pizza Hut.

Then, one day, Tanya said, "The fellowship has to end."

Does it? In some way it will for everyone. There's obviously no way of incorporating every aspect of the year into the rest of one's life. I imagine it would be difficult to wash a suit by hand.

But no matter what, the depth, the deeper learnings, the bhavana with which one can pursue life – those can and should be always present.

How one does that exactly?

Let me know if you figure it out. I'm still scratching my head.

A friend recently sent me this though and I think it sums up better than I can the different personas we are often asked to be. I feel this could be relevant for before, during, and after the fellowship.

How does one choose? How does one survive? By being, by doing.

**Karthik Raman
Indicorps Fellow, January
2007-2008**

A LITANY FOR SURVIVAL

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive

- Audre Lorde, The Black Unicorn

Journal Entry
August 15, 2007

I left India 60 days ago, June 15th, from Bangalore, so I thought it appropriate to write a reflection today, the 60th anniversary of India's independence.

It was a crazy week preceding my departure. I returned from Gudalur with about 5 days to pack up all my things, finish up a thousand little loose ends, and catch a plane to Dubai. I scooted around the city saying goodbye to relatives, digging a 300 foot borewell for my parents' house (not personally digging), and buying everything I couldn't get in the US.

My time in Gudalur, in contrast, was peaceful and my exit meaningful. I had a wonderful "high tea", to which I invited many close friends from the community. I thanked them for all their support and love. Unlike the previous year, I didn't have to deliver this speech in Marathi, Malayalam, or any other barely-fluent Indian language, but could comfortably elocute in English- good preparation for coming back home I guess. I was also treated to a fabulous dinner on the night of my departure, at Stan uncle and Mari aunty's house. Everyone from the high tea showed up there as well. It was a double goodbye, and made me cherish this community, and seek to build such a community in whichever place I finally set down my roots.

My long-awaited return to the US occurred without much fanfare. Many people ask me if I am going through a lot of culture shock after returning here. I am always unsure of how to respond to this question, about how to convey the depth of the problem, of how much India has changed me, and how much I resent the intrusion of this loud, disposable American lifestyle. Like my relatives in Dubai, I have felt like an exile here. Some of the things that continue to "shock" me are: instant hot water- I was so used to waiting around for half the morning for the bath water to heat up; buying everything in plastic!; shaving; and poison ivy. I forgot that poison ivy existed and must have frolicked in a patch of it in the backyard while weeding. It was horrible, for a while.

Part of my problem is that I felt so at home in India. I loved being able to get "lost" in the crowd there and choose to whom and on what terms I would explain my identity. Riding throughout Bangalore in a crazy, congested and misplanned city was a liberating experience. I felt as though I should have been born there and always lived there. Whenever people doubted my authenticity, I could almost always pass as being from some other part of India. Upon returning "home", I feel more displaced than ever before. Maybe I'm just paranoid, and lately I think that may be the reality, but I walk about with more unease, unsure of my acceptance into this society or this country, or my acceptance of it. Perhaps it's my stubborn refusal to shave my beard and just 'blend in'. I still prefer to wear kurtas and chappals wherever I go.

However, despite my initial intentions of carving out my own space and independence, I have found the dominant American middle-class lifestyle to be overwhelming almost beyond resistance. I have capitulated on many fronts already, in crucial areas in which I thought I would not succumb to the "system". I have decided to take health insurance, upon pondering the huge risks (which would be borne by my parents), should I not take it. I now have a cell phone (well I took my dad's, but he wasn't using it much). I drive a car most everywhere, and couldn't be bothered to even look up the bus schedules, despite the fact that my mom faithfully uses public transportation for her daily commute. In spite of these contradictions, I think the most important and last hold-out I am maintaining is my mind. I am resolutely determined not to allow it to be occupied by American consumerism and materialism. However, this is a slippery proposition, because it is difficult to know at which point your mind has actually become colonized. For this I will be depending on my community to keep me in check.

In trying to discover the meaning of my past two years in India, a process which is necessarily ongoing, I believe that a foundational contribution India has made has been the vision of authentic community. My experience working with communities in my first year in India and *living in community* during my time in Gudalur has given me the vision for what the beloved community can and should look like. It is one which unites people with a common vision of creating a society where people, relationships and the earth are all honored. In seeking to find or create this community I also seek to be more connected- to my family and neighbors, to the food I eat, and to the land itself. Moreover, *it honors the differences* between cultures, while allowing each to "matter", rather than creating a homogenized mass culture or "melting pot". I have come to oppose the melting pot, because it seems to me that it melts to the lowest common denominator, which inevitably becomes the dominant consumerist culture. There is a way to embrace plurality while allowing people to live free of fear and mistrust of the other. My long-term goal has become the creation of such a community here, at home. It is my intention, rather than running away from this place and culture, as I feel I have done throughout my life, I would like to plant my roots deep, *and change the culture*. It is the reason I went to the US Social Forum in Atlanta, to learn about alternative lifestyles and economic arrangements, such as collectively-owned businesses, and to learn about what other passionate and engaged Americans are doing.

While India, as every other place, has a long way to go in realizing such a vision, my experiences there are what showed me the potential of such a place to exist. And for this, on its 60th Independence Day, I honor India and offer my humble thanks for allowing me to be a visitor there for what have been two of the most amazing years of my life.

Sushil Jacob
Indicorps Fellow, August 2005-2006

Dearest Fellows,

I wish I could be in Ahmedabad with you today, to clasp you by the hand, to hear from your own mouths how you have treated the past year, and to drink in your joys and sorrows. I am proud of you for seeing the year through, and I am anxious and eager to see what you do next. Since, to my deepest regret, I cannot be with you today, I will stop myself from elaborating the great wave of tenderness mingled with admiration that I feel for you. The respect I have for you, dear Indicorps Fellows, is rivaled only by my feelings about earthworms – so much so, that I hardly distinguish between the two categories.

Yes, earthworms appear puny, blind, vulnerable, and distastefully slimy. Similarly, at first glance, an Indicorps Fellow might appear to be puny, blind, vulnerable, and distastefully sleek, unable to bargain righteously with the neighborhood fruit-walla, let alone successfully cross an Indian street. But this is far from the truth. Just as each worm is a tiny plough, moving the earth, sifting and aerating the soil, and, over the course of geological time, joining with its fellows in a grand project to change the shape of the land itself, so too, my dearest Fellows, each of you is an engine of transformation; working in tandem, you are changing the contours of India, and the world, for the better.

Some of you will choose to continue working at the grassroots level in India. Actually grassroots is a misnomer. If India is to become a true superpower, it must reconcile its population with its environment. The tremendous amount of work that needs to be done in this realm needs to take place at the sub-sub-sub grassroots. Perhaps some of you will disappear into some obscure rural locale to the chagrin of your friends and family and to the delight of the new friends and families who will embrace you. I would liken you to the earthworms who live up to two miles below the earth's surface, rarely coming up except at night. We depend on them to improve soil at its deepest level, yet rarely see or hear from them. In addition to their ceaseless, diligent work, these worms also possess qualities that are almost mythological. For example, the giant Oregon worm (which is thought to be extinct) exudes the scent of lilies as it moves so far below the ground. Bottom-dwelling worms in Australia gurgle with water, which farmers can hear if they press their ears to the ground. But if you choose to work in rural India, do not force the rest of us to hear of your exploits only by pressing our ears to the ground. In this one respect only, do not be like the worms. You have formed an unparalleled connection with your group. Maintain it at all costs.

Some of you have no stomach for living in the depths. I would liken you to the earthworms that live in the detritosphere, the topmost level of the soil. Perhaps you will return to the country where you grew up in order to swallow its policies whole. Or perhaps you will take corporate social responsibility, or governmental transparency into your jaws. This work is fundamental too – but never forget – even the bottom-most worms rise to the top of the soil at night, and even the top-dwelling worms burrow down. It is equally important for you to remain strongly connected to your bottom-dwelling fellows, with whom you once stood on the same soil, and felt the same rich mud squelching in between your toes.

There is another type of earthworm too – the worm who doesn't even require soil and prefers to live amongst garbage, slowly turning it into gold as the castings pile on top of each other. They are the ultimate consumers turned producers. I hope that your experience with Indicorps has challenged all of you, no matter whether you're a top-dweller or a bottom-dweller, to want to be like these worms. There is so much physical and metaphorical garbage all around us. And yet, I truly believe that the Indicorps experience hones our ability to take the garbage in our stride, and turn the dross into gold using practical, hands-on solutions.

I will never forget the enthusiasm that my community in Tamil Nadu had for the vermicomposting project that I started at a school and in my dwelling. When they saw me in the bazaar, little boys would run up, shouting the Tamil word for earthworm -- Manpulu,

Manpulu! They had so much zeal for experiment. Were Tamil worms really lazier than American worms, as everyone said? We put this question to the test (although the conclusions differed depending on the eye of the beholder). Although the project started off on shaky ground, and did not necessarily stabilize, it catalyzed my resolve to engage directly with everything and everyone in my environment.

And it was so wonderful and helpful to know that others at Indicorps were equally entranced by worms, and working to integrate them into our homes and offices. Exchanging regular updates and having a forum for sharing triumphs and tragedies, worm-related and otherwise, was invaluable. I know that the Fellowship network was crucial to my successes, even if I did not necessarily feel that way at the time. Ending that connection felt like a severe loss. But what were we to do? Our time as an Indicorps Fellow was over. Despite the powerful interactions at the final workshop, it felt like most of us were moving on to embrace new and different identities – like daughter and son, student and teacher, boss and employee.

One year ago, as I sat in your place, I resolved to implement a vermicomposting system at home in the U.S. It took longer than expected, but I finally had a system up and running at a village school in rural Vermont. The American kids were just as excited to handle the worms every day as the kids in Tamil Nadu had been. For me at least, transitioning out of the Fellowship, and leaving India, has been immensely painful. So, for me, my worm box created a daily continuity between life in India and life back in the U.S. The transition became, if not palatable, at least bearable.

Now here's where all my metaphors will decompose, probably for the better. I urge you all to think of yourselves as fellow worms working towards social and environmental justice – an identity that you had before you joined Indicorps even if you did not know it, and an identity that you will continue to have afterwards. I hope and suspect that your time with Indicorps has taught you much about your preferred terrain – bottom or top, loamy or silty, filled with garbage, or lined with leaves. So, now you are worms with a more finely-honed sense of purpose. Do not let that purpose blur as you transition out of the Fellowship. And, if your connection to the other Fellows is important to you, then figure out concrete ways to remain substantively in contact...perhaps through continued bimonthlies or regular conference calls. I warn you based on experience – it's going to be challenging. But you're Indicorps Fellows. You are shaking up India itself. You are leaving apathy and corruption in the dust. But if you want to remain connected to the non-atomistic traditions of India, your group identity will be one of your greatest strengths. Please figure out how to keep strengthening your Fellowship group as the years go on, and do whatever it takes.

And, finally, I urge you all to bring a vermicomposting system into your life as a reminder of your secret, wormy identity. I will be happy to provide more details upon request. Indi-worms of the world, unite! Together, we are changing the lie of the land itself.

Bidisha Banerjee
Indicorps Fellow, August 2006-2007