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The Last Page: The Spirit of India

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the spirit of india

By Neha Sud '05

It's 9 p.m. in New Delhi and I'm sitting in a cab with Emma James '05 waiting for the light to turn green. A beggar taps on the window and asks us for spare change. He looks fatigued, hungry. A small plastic bag hangs from a belt on his waist. "Oh my god, I think he's on a drip," Emma says. We spot the intravenous tube in his arm and start scrambling around for money. Finally we find a 10-rupee note and hold it out the window, but it's too late.

The light has changed; the cab driver pulls away. Behind us the beggar watches mournfully as his best chance for a meal disappears into the night.

Later in Basant Lok, a ritzy area in South Delhi, we pop into a fancy Italian restaurant. We're surrounded by the Gucci-clad, single-solitaire-flashing Delhi elite. The wine list is longer than a Wal-Mart inventory, and the food looks fabulous. But none of this feels right. We decide to skip dinner and go sit in the park instead. As I watch the traffic pass by, I think about my home city. While there are marble mansions in one part of the city, people live in cardboard boxes in another. The fortunate kids go to school and the less fortunate ones end up on the streets, polishing shoes or selling drugs. It's a world of inexplicable contrasts, yet it's the world where I have grown up.

It is also the world that Emma has chosen to live and work in.

A New Zealander and my classmate in school, Emma first came to India when she was awarded a scholarship to attend Mahindra United World College there. Last summer we got together when she returned to India as part of the South Asian regional delegation of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Her five-member team was responsible for disaster response in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan from May through August.

"India is really second home to me," she says. "But my experience this summer was very different because I was working on very large-scale problems.

"I'm working with child prostitution and human trafficking these days, Neha. There's girls as young

as four who have been taken from their villages and brought to brothels. Hearing their stories, seeing their living conditions . . . it's heartbreaking."

And not only were the social problems overwhelming; Emma arrived at a time when nuclear war in the region seemed inevitable. "It's funny because whenever there was any sort of explosion, I noticed that the whole street would just stop and look up at the sky and I would automatically start sniffing the air," she says. "I wasn't paranoid, but it was a very real threat at the time."

Living with the possibility of nuclear war may have been the least challenging of her activities. Apart from rescuing children from brothels, Emma's team also worked with victims of floods in Bangladesh and Nepal, of conflict in Afghanistan, of droughts in Sri Lanka and India. It was hard work, with the occasional touch of the bizarre.

"There's been severe droughts going on in Sri Lanka for the last four years now, but the government agencies were denying the existence of the drought," Emma says (Red Cross attention to the situation has since changed the government's stance). "We went in as a Red Cross assessment team. Some people in Sri Lanka live in tree huts because elephants from the jungle come in searching for food, and they kill people on their way. That was just something I never expected to hear in my life—death by elephant."

We can't help but smile, yet I wonder how she dealt with seeing and working with immense tragedy. "When you're out on the field you have to make important decisions," she says, "so you have to block your emotions for that time and focus on what needs to be done."

Emma returned to Colby in September for her sophomore year and hopes to continue on to graduate school, if she can find a scholarship. It was the Davis-UWC program that allowed her to come to Colby, for



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Emma James '05

which she is grateful, she says. Eventually she would like to work with the Red Cross or with the United Nations on development and disaster response.

And she hopes to return to South Asia. I return because it's home. But Emma?

"One time I was backpacking around and I ended up stranded on a railway platform with no money," she explains. "I was throwing up because I was incredibly ill. This extremely poor beggar girl, stick thin, with hardly any clothes on came and sat next to me. She had one piece of bread; she tore it in half and handed me some. It was so emotionally overwhelming, such a moment of connection."

As her eyes light up at that memory, I marvel at how a small act of compassion can be a life-changing experience. And I find myself hoping that someone driving by the beggar on "the drip" takes him to a hospital, gets him treated and pays his bill. Naïve to think so? Perhaps, but I've seen it happen before. For it is this unexpected compassion, mercy and tenderness that define what Emma so aptly calls the "spirit of India."