As I stepped off of the plane in New Delhi, India, the warmth of the country immediately wrapped its arms around me. I had a feeling that this trip would be different from my previous ones spent visiting family and shopping. My travel buddy, Sue, and I were anxious to find our YWCA hostel so we could finally get some rest. On the plane, Sue and I spoke about the course we would be taking: Democracy and Development in a Globalizing India. I couldn’t wait to get started! When we walked into the airport, we were greeted by our fellow classmates with huge welcome signs.

The first few days were spent sight-seeing. I know I didn’t look like a tourist, but I felt like one. Having been born in India, but raised in the States, I had always felt a sense of confusion about what my culture truly was. Our teacher, Murli, was a savvy and incredibly sophisticated anthropology professor from the University of Iowa. From day one, he forced us to ask questions as to why and how things were the way they were.

After a week of sightseeing in Delhi, we flew to Kolar, a suburb of Bangalore in Karnataka. Here, we had many activists and professionals come speak to us on various subjects ranging from topics of globalization to the caste system. Each day’s curriculum was rigorous and highly engaging. During the night we would walk around the villages and interact with the local people. What shocked me the most were the aesthetics of the environment in the city. Next to a shack made of plywood, I would see a ten-floor commercial shopping center. Among the billboards of glittering actors and actresses, the homeless stood begging for a morsel of food. I began to ask questions about what a democracy truly meant and what a government owed to its people.

As the days passed, the more I learned, the less I realized I truly knew. My favorite moments were spent at the Kolar women’s shelter. The shelter was a place battered and beaten women who had run away from their abusive husbands could be safe. As a speech and hearing major, I was fascinated by the many languages these women could speak. I was also taught a true lesson in communication and learned that words were not the only way one could communicate. During some of the best conversations I had with these women, not a word was spoken.

As an Indian-American woman, issues of identity had always been prevalent growing up. I constantly felt
torn between being American and being Indian, and I felt it was not enough to be a mix of the two. I began to ask questions regarding what the word identity even meant, and why it was necessary to have one. Each day in India, I was forced to mold my sense of self. I never understood why my parents behaved the way they did and never grasped the world in which they grew up. Being able to go to India on my own with 13 eclectic individuals allowed me to appreciate my cultural roots.

I witnessed many grassroots movements and interacted with activists who have brought about much needed positive change. It was so inspiring for me to see these people making a positive contribution to their society because that is precisely what I want to do in my field. The experience I had will never be forgotten. The laughter and hard work paired with the knowledge I gained will never lose a place in my head or in my heart. I cannot wait to go back again and gain more experience and knowledge.