"India: My Reflections"
by Hanah Rahmatullah
1st Place, Informal Essay 10-12
“India is the one land that all men desire to see...” - Mark Twain.

I cannot find the right words to express the wonder I felt when I journeyed to India. The awe I experienced when I stood in front of the majestic Taj Mahal. The exhilaration I witnessed when I trained my first goat. The love that spread within me when our family sat together and ate dinner. My time in India was filled with surprises, joys, and many benefits. My reflections are many; about the landscape, wildlife, culture, and my family and friends there.

The sun dipped below the horizon, and the land was awash with the last of its captivating beams. The Ganges River’s yellow waters glowed a deep amber, and the wheat in the fields turned burgundy. Here and there a hibiscus flower peeked out from large ferns and palm trees, a flash of bright fuchsia. I was enraptured by the scenery, my eyes glued to the train’s window. How surprising! I had expected India to be drab countryside with sluggishly-flowing rivers and scraggly summits. I had never seen anything like this in America, where I lived. India, I thought, didn’t just have nature reserves. It was a nature reserve! What I was seeing, all these beautiful fields and rivers and forests were pure wilderness, unbroken but for a few bamboo huts and young boys leading their livestock home. This was like something out of a nature show, and I couldn’t believe I was experiencing this. I was very happy and high-spirited for the rest of the train ride, gazing at the scenery flying by. That beautiful view, the last of the fading sun’s glow casting orange rays on the terrain below, has stayed with me, even now.

In America, you’re lucky to see a red cardinal or hawk. Sometimes there might be a lost cat, and if a moose strays onto the road, it makes the news. But in India (usually small villages), on a daily basis, cows, horses, chickens, goats, buffalo, dogs, and even the
occasional elephant run freely among the dusty streets. Wild parrots and golden eagles
snatch sandwiches from hands and take to the sky, while monkeys and rats steal food from
markets and houses. I was dumbstruck at my first sight of the streets crowded with people
and animals. For me, being an animal lover in the U.S. who doesn’t like dogs, is allergic to
cats, had to dump her fish in a pond, and is forbidden to have any other kind of pet in the
house, I don’t have much chance to interact with animals, which I desperately wanted. But
here in the small town of Darbhanga, an abundance of creatures ran before my very eyes.
You can imagine my joy when I saw all this. I really want to work with animals in my career,
so playing with the goats and feeding the pigeons aided me in getting to know each creature
differently and treat it accordingly. I remember the first goats I met that were bold enough
to let me stroke them, a sweet little kid with ginger and white patches, thus the name
Ginger, and a black and white goat which I liked so much at the time that I named it after
myself. There were many more goats which my brother (also an animal fan), and I got to
know and named. There were Cow and White-belly, Temple Run and Blue Goat, and Gazelle
and Bully, with their tiny kids Clover, Rowan, and Fawn. Along with Ginger, my favorite goat
was Oreo. I stuffed him with his namesake along with oats and sun-dried chili, freshly made
flatbread known as rotis and parathas which my friends would sneak from the kitchen, and
specially picked grasses. Eventually, he learned to answer to my call; a clicking of the tongue
or a sharp whistle. This special summoning that no one else could copy soothed Oreo when
the gangs of boys roaming the streets got chaotic, and when I was leaving Darbhanga, he
escorted me to the car with a mournful bleat. One of my best memories of India was the
animals.
Dum. Dum, du-du-dum. Dum-dum. The sitting-room’s walls echoed the sound of the
dhol, the drum that is used to play along with songs as part of a cultural event known as the
gheet, which occurs before a shaadhi, (or wedding). In the weeks before the shaadhi, all the
women in my family from all over would cram into the tiny room and sing. It was both my
mom’s cousin’s as well as her brother’s that I was attending along with my mom and
siblings, which was why we were in India in the first place. My khala (aunt) would beat the dhol
and lead everyone in the song. Tea and some kind of appetizer, usually biscuits or tiny fried
diamonds of dough called namak para would be served. At first I was confused by why the
women would gather together for the gheet long before the wedding, but then I learned
that in small cities in India this was the custom. I didn’t really care much for the songs, being
an energetic person that can’t sit down and listen for more than two minutes, so I looked
upon the gheet as an opportunity to play with my friends who came along with the women.
However, once in a while I would sit in the back and listen to the words being sung, getting
more familiar by the day. The smiles and jovial looks on everyone’s faces filled me with
warmth from both being together with all of the family and helping the older women and
watching the young children. Another cultural festivity that took place while I was there is
called the haldi, (also preceding a shaadhi), in which everyone wears yellow. The bride or
groom sits in the place of honor as one by one, the family steps up to smear haldi, a
turmeric paste on his or her face, then feeds them a bite of laddu, a Desi sweet. Though I
was new to these celebrations, I felt honored and proud to take part in them.

Probably the best part of my trip was being with my family: a thousand people
whom I barely remembered but soon got to know. When I first arrived to the house which
my ancestors had been living in hundreds of years ago, I was bowled over by how many
people greeted us. Everyone called my mom apa, the term used for an older sister or female cousin; (she was the oldest of all of them). Even the hulking men that towered over her called her apa! As time went on, I got to know everyone and picked up a lot of Hindi, which proved useful when communicating with the older women and young children who didn’t speak English. Soon I made friends with the servants’ children and those who lived nearby. There was Ayesha, my very best friend who appeared to be shy but was playful and persistent once you got to know her. Zobiya and Ziya also used to play with me during those lonely evenings when the goats had departed to their respectable yards and I yearned for some company. Shenaz took care of my khala’s two year-old daughter, Fatima, and there were many nights when we two would play chupa chupai, or hide-and-seek, with Fatima frisking about with a ball just beyond. I always looked forward to the big games my friends and I used to play on Sunday night during the gheet, when all the kids were off from school. We used to play cricket on the veranda with Diwali fireworks going off in the sky, chase each other in a game of baraf pani, (freeze tag), and catch the huge black butterflies flitting to and fro. As I sat with my family, I felt a rush of elation. How happy I was with everyone I loved gathered around!

Indeed, I feel that India is a treasure trove with many experiences waiting to be discovered and taken home as memories. I will forever cherish the fresh memories of the sun-bathed vistas, fauna and flora, lifestyle, and all the people that I love.

"Time spent in India has an extraordinary effect on one. It acts as a barrier that makes the rest of the world seem unreal." — Tahir Shah