Photography Seminar in India

Gautam Kapur

My action plan was set up to address societal inequality in India, specifically the caste system. More than 160 million people in India are classified as Dalits or “untouchables.” This means that 160 million Indians are denied the basic human-rights that we as human beings should be granted. The “untouchables” are not considered part of the caste system, as they are deemed worthless to society, and face discrimination on a daily basis. In 1950, “untouchability” was officially banned by India’s constitution. However, crimes against “untouchables” are still being committed every day. Every hour two Dalits are assaulted and every day, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched.

To address the problem I contacted a NGO in New Delhi, called Salaam Baalak Trust. I told them that I wanted to take direct action to help improve the lower castes quality of life. The chief managing director of Salaam Baalak Trust informed me that they had a center in Saket, New Delhi, where I could meet and interact with lower-caste children from underprivileged families. Starting in August 2010, I made my first trip to the center, and met the children. I talked to them about their interests, which mainly consisted of cricket, drawing, singing, and acting. I wanted to make sure that whatever I did with the children, I wanted it to be memorable. It wouldn’t be ideal for them to devote their time, only to forget about what we did at the center by the next week. Therefore, I decided to direct a two-week photography seminar with the children. What better way to incorporate all their interests into a memorable format than a library of photos of the children doing their favourite activities? Best of all, they would be the masterminds behind the camera, as I would present each pair of children with their own camera. In the near future, I plan to host an exhibition of their photos, during which I could talk about the social inequality and human rights violations taking place in India as a result of the caste system. Therefore, my action plan would achieve two goals: educating the children about how to operate a camera and spreading awareness about the inequality of the caste system through the photo exhibition.

During the photography seminar, I taught the children 3 different techniques Depth of field, object isolation, and macro photography. The children and I took portraits and action shots of each other; overall, the photography seminar was a blast.

There were a total of 21 people working with me on the project. The first 20 people are my photography students, the children at Salaam Baalak Trust. They are the photographers, the ones with a responsibility to take interesting photos of their environment. In the end, the success of the exhibition will come down to the quality of their photos, and I know they are aware and excited about their role. Santosh Gupta, the head of the Salaam Baalak Trust Saket Center has also played a huge role. Santosh took roll call each day the students reached the center, and accompanied us on our walks to the park to take photos. In fact, Santosh had a camera of his own which he used throughout the photography seminar!
Personally, the photography seminar impacted me in a number of ways. Culturally, I felt that I connected more with India after my time at Salaam Baalak Trust. The children taught me Hindi each day after our morning session, and would play cricket with me at lunch, teaching me the names of all the famous cricketers and Bollywood actors and actresses.

I’ve also learnt that it’s possible to break boundaries. For example, I originally had trouble connecting with the children for the first couple of days. They were cautious, possibly confused by my alien accent. For my part, I was unsure about whether they were excited about photography in the first place, so I made sure to organize a number of simple, stress relieving activities, during which we introduced ourselves and learnt each other’s names. It’s very easy to stray away from the unfamiliar; we do it both consciously and unconsciously frequently. However, I learnt that I am quite capable of entering a different environment and achieving the goals I set out for myself. I was one of Salaam Baalak Trust’s youngest project initiators, and the first volunteer to introduce photography to the students at the Saket center. I’ve learnt that you’re never too young to start something. It’s true that experience is an important quality when it comes to embarking on initiatives; however, there is no reason why a high school student cannot start something new.

I hope that the children enjoyed the photography workshop thoroughly. Locally, my project has impacted my students, the Saket center, Salaam Baalak Trust NGO, and myself. The Saket center now has a slideshow with pictures of the children who travel to the center each day. The Salaam Baalak Trust NGO now has a number of photos taken by children, which have been posted in various areas of the center. In fact, Santosh strongly thinks that I should continue this project at different Salaam Baalak Trust centers across Delhi, because he believes that all children would enjoy the seminar I hosted, and their photos that will result from it. Furthermore, the Salaam Baalak Trust NGO will hopefully be more renown in New Delhi after the photography exhibition.

Frankly, I’ve always been concerned about the situation of the lower castes in India and poverty in general. In 2000 alone, 25,455 crimes were committed against Dalits according to India’s National Crime Records Bureau. Whenever I travel in India, I see poverty. On my daily ride to school, beggars come to my window with crying babies in their hands, every single day. I’ve always wanted to find a way to brighten their day or at least help them have a better lifestyle, without simply donating money. This concern of mine fuelled my passion for my action plan. I knew that I was travelling all the way from New Delhi, India to Providence, Rhode Island for a purpose. I was to take something from the Leadership and Global Development course at Brown. I devised an action plan, took it back to my local environment, implemented it, reflected upon it, and am now looking at extending it further.