

"Like Mukesh Bhai said, our inner feelings and emotions connect us to each other, no matter how unique our outer circumstances may be. Our differences define what kind of people we are, but our similarities define us all as people."

—Mihika Sridhar '16



CONNECTING, DISCOVERING, DEVELOPING A WORLDVIEW

NISWARTH IN INDIA

Story and photos by Jill Clerkin

Grounded in "The Danger of a Single Story" by Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie, the parable "Blind Men and an Elephant," writings about perspectives, service, and humility by Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Dr. Paul Farmer, and many open and honest discussions, Niswarth students and faculty mindfully prepared for their three weeks in India.

And while the country provides a compelling context, the Niswarth program is not just about India. It's about discovery, listening, questioning, service, compassion, and connection. And much more.

"India is just one of many possible out-of-context environments where Niswarth's holistic approach to learning and self-growth can be guided and nurtured without worry about judgment or grades," explains Raj Mundra, PA biology instructor and Niswarth (Hindi for *non sibi*) founder and director. "Niswarth is a journey toward developing a worldview, an invitation to look beyond the obvious, an opportunity for self-reflection, a means of discerning human connections among dissimilar people, and a framework for considering issues back on campus and in home communities."

In mid-June, 14 open-hearted, open-minded students (including four from Phillips Exeter Academy) took a flying leap into the unfamiliar, traveling physically—and emotionally—from the rapidly growing city of Ahmedabad to the disparate slums and high-rises of Mumbai to the dusty villages of rural Kalol.

Indian teenagers and Niswarth students chatted, danced, and sang at the Nanghars anganwadi in Kalol, Gujarat. At left from back are Maddie Logan, PEA '15, Isa Tejera-Sindall '15, and Rhaim Kim '15.



SPIRITUALITY AND A SENSE OF SELF

Niswarth's early days in Ahmedabad involved an exploration of spirituality (defined in part by Arzu Singh '16 as "the openness of one's heart" and by Caroline Hoskins '15 as "the state of being one with your surroundings, the ability to find beauty in everything you encounter"), self and selflessness, truth, trust, and love. Students learned basic meditation techniques, participated in group reflections, and conversed with NGO leaders and citizen changemakers passionate about the health and welfare of their communities. "One of my biggest takeaways was meeting and interacting with people who actually live their values," says Claire Glover '16.

After observing conditions in Ahmedabad's largest slum, English instructor Catherine Tousignant '88 reminded the group that Niswarth does not set out to fix problems. "We are here," she said, "to learn, explore, observe, listen, discuss, ask questions, reflect, feel, connect, understand, and grow." A Niswarth veteran, Tousignant works with Mundra to help students be fully present and connect their observations.

"Small is beautiful. So many times we get caught up with visible impact, and, through this, we create desire, stress, and misery. But if we focus on the power of small—what we can do in this very moment—impact will naturally emerge if that's what is needed in the world."

—Jayesh Patel

At the Gandhi Ashram at Sabarmati, an ecosystem of people and organizations committed to the Mahatma's values, students and faculty met with Jayesh Patel, founder of Manav Sadhna, one of Niswarth's NGO partner organizations. "Manav Sadhna's motto is 'Love all, serve all,'" says Singh. "They go into communities, talk to the people, determine what the people need most, and do everything they can to help build and provide what is needed—all with humility and deep love."



The Niswarth group particularly enjoyed their stay in the guest quarters at the Environmental Sanitation Institute (ESI), which tests and implements new sanitation technologies across India. "ESI's beauty is in its simplicity and easy connection to nature," says Maddie Logan, PEA '15.

Bottom: Women working at ESI gather to chat and prepare vegetables for the evening meal.

LIVING AND LEARNING AT ESI

Isa Tejera-Sindall '15 recalls the group's arrival at the Environmental Sanitation Institute (ESI): "As soon as we stepped off the bus, Suresh Bhai popped out of nowhere and embraced us all warmly, saying two simple words to a group of kids he had never met: 'Welcome home.'" For several pivotal days, Niswarthians strolled ESI's quiet grounds, savored delicious meals freshly prepared by a gracious staff, slept in simple quarters, and absorbed its omnipresent Gandhian wisdom.

It was at ESI that students and faculty met Mukesh Bhai, a longtime practitioner of silent meditation. His calm, accepting





Far left: Students recorded their observations and reactions in journals each day, shared multiple blog pieces, and engaged in regular group discussions. Here, Cem Vardar '15 and Mihika Sridhar '16 (background) take a few minutes to write.

Left: Fellow ESI guests create an intricate design with stones and flowers.

nature and principled approach to truth, morality, simple living, and serving others made a lasting impression on many students.

“More than any place, ESI impacted my spirit and sense of self, from learning about mind control from Mukesh Bhai to losing myself in the candles lit at the silent dinner,” says Jenny Wang '16. “I found a peace that was wrapped in layers of worry and insecurity.”

“I think it’s a mixture of things—events, emotions, feelings of community and warmth—that clicked together to forge an environment that fosters growth and clarity here at ESI and during the Niswarth program as a whole.”

—Rhaime Kim '15

FEEL, IMAGINE, DO, SHARE

Late in their first week, Niswarth students teamed up for several days with 14 peers from The Riverside School, a progressive K–12 private school founded by education reformer and social entrepreneur Kiran Bir Sethi. Sethi also developed Design For Change (DFC), a four-step framework—Feel, Imagine, Do, Share—that empowers children to take action to reshape their world.

Following DFC’s rigorous methodology of understanding and responding to community needs, the 28 students divided into five teams to work at two government-run elementary schools serving children from low-income families. Through



At a government-funded elementary school on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, Niswarth students John Gorton '15 (top left), Kimberly Daves, PEA '15 (in pink), and Rhaime Kim '15 (in white) and their Riverside School peers discuss what they learned from observations and interviews.



"All is covered in the orange playground dust. Except for the faces of the children. They run too fast.... Their faces glow with sweat and spread with smiles. We come in, with armpit stains and waterfall faces, and they welcome us."

— Jenny Wang '16

Above: Nick Madamidola, PEA '16 (back left), and Jenny Wang '16 (right foreground) work with Riverside School students to make the government school's sparse library more colorful and inviting.

Right: Indian schoolchildren gather for an assembly to watch Niswarth and Riverside students perform their "Wash Your Hands" song in Hindi. They soon joined in the fun.



Below: Kiran Sethi, founder of The Riverside School and Design For Change, meets with Raj Mundra and other Niswarth faculty. Sethi is slated to visit Andover in early 2015.



observation and multiple interviews, the teams sought to identify areas that the school's teachers and children wanted to improve.

Sethi offered post-project comments and encouragement. "Many of you saw the school's filthy bathroom as one of the biggest problems to 'fix,' " she said. "If you ask their opinions, most schoolchildren will say that the bathroom doesn't bother them at all—it's better than the one they have at home." She thanked students for their hard work, reminding them that their challenge is about determining what issues affect the user—in this case, the children—not about what is important to them.

CITY OF EXTREMES

In Mumbai, India's most populous city, Niswarthians began to recognize essential connections between early childhood nutrition, access to health care, and preschool education while visiting Mumbai Mobile Creches (MMC), an NGO facility located on the construction site of a massive Marriott hotel.

"Tens of millions of Indian men and women are migrant laborers," Vrushali Naik, MMC program coordinator, told the group. "Workers are recruited from their villages to do hard and dangerous labor for \$3 to \$10 a day. Many bring their families to live in shacks right where they work, often for several years. Members of these marginalized communities have no voice, no rights."

Naik estimates there are 50,000 children at Mumbai's 3,000 construction sites. Through a network of make-shift structures throughout the city, MMC provides food, vaccinations and other health care, schooling, and safety for hundreds of children who otherwise would be left to fend for themselves.

From ground zero to a view from 30,000 feet

Prior to visiting Dharavi, Mumbai's—and Asia's—largest slum, Mundra and Andy Housiaux, instructor in philosophy and religious studies and three-time Niswarth leader, enjoined students to seek

Led through Dharavi by local guides, students and faculty wound through the bustling maze of dank, twisting alleys, tangled electrical wires, acrid smoke, and corrugated steel. They observed the arduous and often dangerous tasks performed by plastics recyclers, leather and textile workers, metal grinders, and pottery makers. In passageways barely more than shoulder width, they caught glimpses of a community with few resources, but immense determination, resilience, and ingenuity.



"In Mumbai, we seemed to oscillate between the extremes of rich and poor," said John Gorton '15. "Being thrown from one extreme to the other has made me feel uneasy in both." Twenty million of India's 1.2 billion people live in the west coast city.

commonalities with the nearly one million men, women, and children living and working there. After touring the 500-acre slum (the same size as Phillips Academy's campus), Jenny Wang '16 wrote, "I saw too much and not enough."

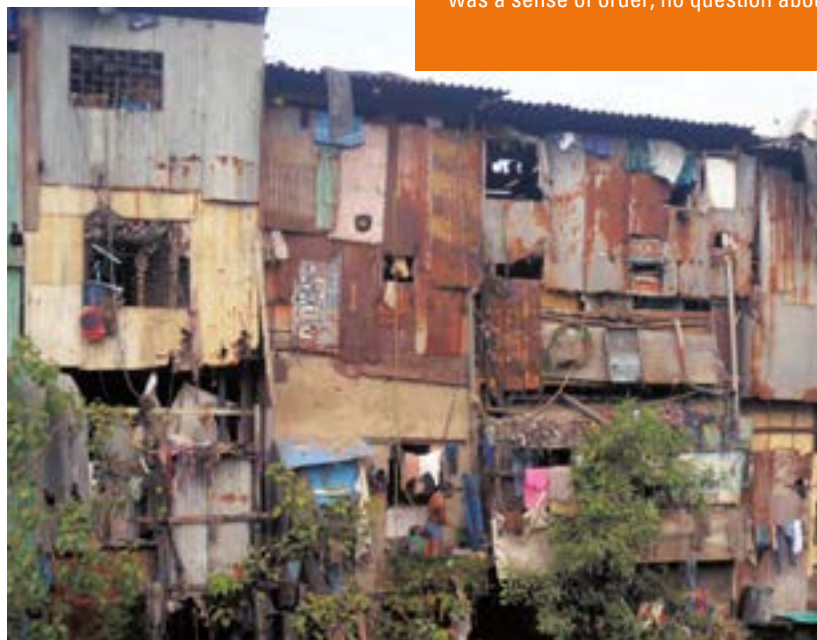
The experience provoked thoughtful discussion among Niswarthians about such questions as what is a good human life? What is a meaningful life?

That evening, students experienced a very different Mumbai

at the Oberoi Hotel offices of The Parthenon Group, a global education consulting firm. Karan Khemka '94, Parthenon partner and cohead of education practice, gave a candid overview of Mumbai, past, present, and future. Backed by compelling data and global case studies, Khemka explained why he believes an expansion of tertiary education is the key to India's development.

"Dharavi is a place where one couldn't be sure whether chaos was the order or the order was chaos. But there was a sense of order, no question about it."

—Cem Vardar '15





Above: Gokul Pura, an anganwadi supported by Setco Foundation, has two Hindu temples, a community well, and numerous cows and water buffalo. Villagers grow okra and mangos. Here, Kimberly Dawes, PEA '15, plays catch with two preschoolers.

Center: Jonathan Regenold, PEA '15 (at left), and Cem Vardar '15 (center) demonstrate their expertise with building blocks.

Bottom: Childhood malnutrition has dropped from more than 80 percent to less than 10 percent in the past three years in Setco's 12 adopted anganwadis, which serve about 1,100 children between the ages of 0 and 6 as well as hundreds of adolescent girls and pregnant and nursing mothers. Here, Caroline Hoskins '15 befriends two siblings.

"With two or three good meals a day, the kids would look healthier and bigger and right for their age. But an answer isn't a solution."

—Rhaime Kim '15



THE ANGANWADIS OF KALOL

Set among grassy plains and, as of late June, still-barren sugarcane and cotton fields (the monsoons were late this year), Kalol is a small city comprising more than 70 villages. Niswarthians were able to meet children and teachers at several area anganwadis—communities of 1,000 or so impoverished citizens that receive government assistance with their basic needs and help establishing preschool programs. Unfortunately, government support can be unreliable.

Setco Foundation, a Niswarth partner organization that focuses on health, nutrition, education, and the empowerment of women and children in rural areas, has "adopted" 12 of Kalol's more than 20 anganwadis. Accompanied by foundation president Urja Shah (wife of Harshal Shah '88) and Setco interpreters, Niswarth students observed varied preschool environments, teacher-student interactions, and the children's activities and engagement. They initiated simple games with the wide-eyed preschoolers, and, with groups of older girls, they connected through interpreters, dancing, henna painting, and learning beadwork.

Niswarthians generated a great deal of curiosity in the various communities; Indians of all ages smiled and greeted them with "Namaste!"—Hindi for welcome. During their final days in Kalol, Niswarth students and faculty shadowed Setco community health workers as they visited local families. Discussions involved the needs of young mothers and their children and whether additional support would be helpful. From Isa Tejera-Sindall '15's blog post:

"We enter a two-room home, with a kitchen/living room and a bedroom, and [the girl] gestures for us to sit on her bed in the corner. A baby goat peaks its head from under my feet and then shuffles off, irritated at our intrusion. I silently apologize.

"One of the preschool teachers who works with Setco has come along with us to ask questions. Urja [Shah] quietly translates in English. I gather the basic facts: the girl is 22, married at 17, her children are 4 and 1. Her older son attends the anganwadi from eight to two every day, while she stays at home with the baby and does household chores. Her husband works with machines. She likes to sew. Her name is Sunita.

"We are joined by an assortment of curious onlookers: two of the children's aunts, 16 and 17 respectively, a mother-in-law with a long grey braid and smiling wrinkles, a 6-year-old with muddy feet and cheeks, and the grumpy goat who has somehow come back to forgive me. The baby boldly tries to grab at the goat's ear to get my attention, and the old lady pulls his hand away, scolding him. She makes eye contact with me, apologetic. I smile back understandingly.

"Our goal, as Urja [Shah] explained, is to make their lives a little bit easier, to share information, to give advice, to share a little bit of love. We are not here as intruders, but as fellow humans."

Below: A rare group photo opportunity at the Gateway of India in south Mumbai. Front row, from left: PEA Dean of Studies Laura Marshall, Isa Tejera-Sindall '15, Caroline Hoskins '15, Jenny Wang '16, Mihika Sridhar '16, Kimberly Dawes, PEA '15, and Arzu Singh '16. Back row: Andover Institute Director Caroline Nolan, Niswarth Director Raj Mundra, Thea Rossman '15, Rhaim Kim '15, Cem Vardar '15, Jonathan Regenold, PEA '15, John Gorton '15, Maddie Logan, PEA '15, Niswarth and Andover faculty member Andy Housiaux, Nick Madamidola, PEA '16, and Claire Glover '16.



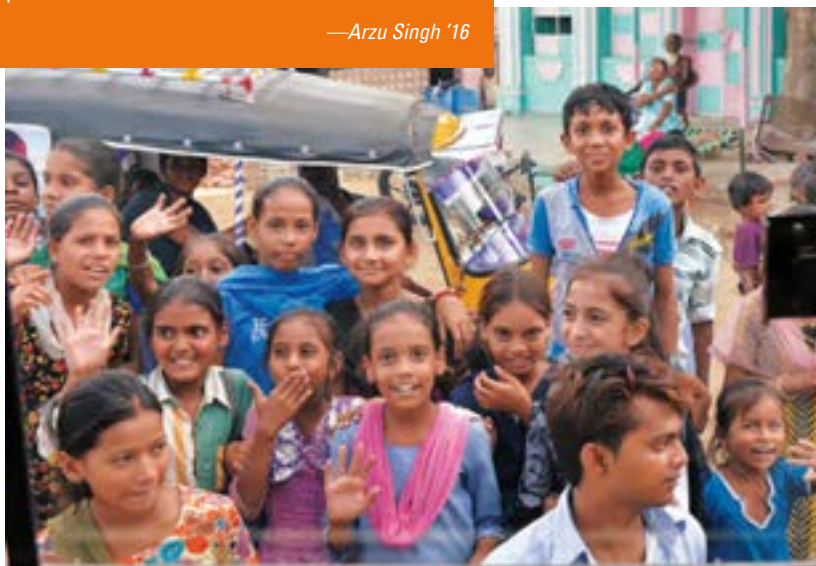
Right: Raj Mundra and (at left) Setco Foundation Codirector Salma Safree discuss India's anganwadi system.

Below: Schoolchildren gather near the Niswarth students' bus to offer an enthusiastic send-off.



"This is the first time that I've started to think that maybe it's about doing something because you believe in the good of your actions—not in the promise and satisfaction of the results."

—Arzu Singh '16



LEARNING FOR LIFE

Near the end of the three weeks, several students wondered aloud how they should respond to the inevitable, "What did you learn in India?"

"Start with 'It's complicated,'" suggested Mundra, "then demonstrate your learning through your actions."

Upon returning to Andover, Niswarth faculty help students identify opportunities to integrate their new global views of education, development, and community, encouraging these young changemakers to deepen their moral introspection through coursework and service. This year, the group will organize a Design For Change conference at PA in February 2015, with special guest Kiran Sethi.

At a Niswarth gathering in mid-September, students discussed their intent to practice Niswarthian habits at school—small acts of kindness every day, empathy as a primary lens for understanding the needs of the community, and frequent reflection and meditation to manage their busy lives.

The transformation they seek does not always come easily. But the words of Jayesh Patel echo in their hearts: "Develop relationships, not results-oriented projects. Work to understand people, and we will deepen our understanding of who we are and what our relationships mean. We will start to see that we are all interconnected, our journeys are intertwined."

For complete 2014 blog posts and more about Niswarth, visit www.niswarth.org.

Jill Clerkin, who spent eight days in India with Niswarth students and faculty, is a senior writer and editor in Andover's Office of Communication.