Self Evaluation Prompt:

In India there exists the oldest social stratification system in the world: the Hindu caste system\(^1\). Throughout our time in India, evidence of the caste system and its negative effects on society was a common theme. Now highly politicized, the caste system is beginning to be restructured: slowly, and not in a good way. Gandhi, who sought to dismantle the caste system, failed to create any lasting changes to the age-old tradition. While the constitution of India (created in 1950) does reflect Gandhi’s intentions by banning caste-based discrimination, such laws are rarely enforced. The caste system has become highly politicized and as a result, politicians will exploit different caste groups by pitting them against each other. Outcastes, or Dalits, have an incredible struggle, but theirs is dwarfed in comparison to those who fail to even make it into the Hindu caste system: Muslims, Adivasis (tribal communities), and LGBTQ communities.

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During our time in India we visited several underserved communities who lack representation and voice in their government. Among these, were the Adivasis who were displaced by the construction of the Narmada Dam. This was of particular interest to me as I have been conducting research into tribal rights issues surrounding water security in the United States—it was enlightening to see a parallel problem in India.

Because Adivasis are outside the caste system, they have few rights and are often last to be considered by the government—if they’re considered at all. Their populations lack access to education and few know their rights as Indian citizens. Additionally, they also lack access to modern support systems such as medical and legal services, transportation, and regular occupation.

Adivasis operate in a subsistence economy, that is, they rely on natural resources to provide for their basic needs. Such an existence aligns with natural systems quite well, but not capitalist systems. Modi’s government is fashioned after the neoliberal policies that have largely dominated western thought, and as a result colonist-style appropriation of land is regularly committed against tribal populations who are deemed to be ‘in the way of development’. One example of this was mentioned earlier: the building of the Narmada Dam—the construction of which submerged hundreds of villages and displaced thousands of people. There has been very little in the way of compensation for displaced Adivasi people: not in financial or administrative support, not in relocation services, and not in provision of resources.

Of specific interest to me was the response of the Adivasi populations to growing marginalization by the government. Father Lancy Lobos, a longtime researcher of these conflicts, discussed two schools of Adivasi thought: the first, common among younger tribal members, is that Adivasis should modernize, and the second is that tribal culture should be preserved.

Increasingly, many Tribal people are choosing to convert to Hinduism. Why? Access to jobs, access to representation, solidarity—even if their entrance to Hinduism places them in the lowest caste. This insight has been very meaningful to me because it has helped to clarify my understanding of why a native group would choose to abandon its old ways. As an outsider I have placed my own value judgment on this issue, albeit largely subconscious. However, it is important to realize that for tribal populations that have been left behind in the not-so-ancient times of subsistence economies, it is not a matter of choice but of survival. It seems to me that the only choice for the Adivasi people, is to decide whether they want their children to have a future or a past—having both is not an option.

Throughout this trip I found fieldwork to be an incredible source of information and perspective that one cannot find through research. I consider myself an adept researcher, and I was thrilled to experience a new mode of acquiring information. While in India, I learned (experientially) a few basic fieldwork concepts, which I’ve listed below:

– **be aware of your own worldview**: often our own worldviews as an interviewer cloud our judgment or understanding of a problem. Awareness of your own worldview will help you navigate those instances.
– **feign ignorance to encourage more information**
– go into the interview knowing the bias of your interviewee
– don’t be afraid to ask difficult questions: it’s useful to ask difficult questions that are tactfully delivered. In the case of organizations that are known to be coming up short, don’t just accept their political answers, dig deeper and be persistent.
– listen, and save your comparisons: the interviewee is seldom interested in your ability to compare and contrast their problems, or the problems of their state, to those of your own or your state.
– read your audience: phrase your questions in simple and concise terms and know how to reframe your questions if need be.
– be direct, not simplistic: if you ask a simple question you’ll get a simple answer, have a gameplan going into any interview so that you’re not wasting your time or your interviewee’s time.
– preserve anonymity in recording of events
– be compassionate, empathetic, and grateful

I felt that I had a natural talent for fieldwork, but my talent is raw. I made some mistakes like making frequent comparisons back to my own life and American context, I was susceptible to overlooking my own worldview, and I struggled at times (particularly in the beginning) to frame my questions in a way that was direct and concise.

I was able to find my fieldwork rhythm by the second week of our trip and at that point my questions became more direct and concisely phrased. I began to maintain a working game plan for each interview. We conducted the majority of our interviews in a group, which sometimes made it difficult to get a question in. Because of this I became diligent about writing the answers of other people’s questions rather than feeling compelled to always ask a question of my own in every interview.

Informal, loosely structured interviews were, in my opinion, the most successful ones. For example, in a small rural village we talked with a woman who was in the process of making dinner for her family (and our group). Hers was a genuine insight, truthfully given, and kindly received.