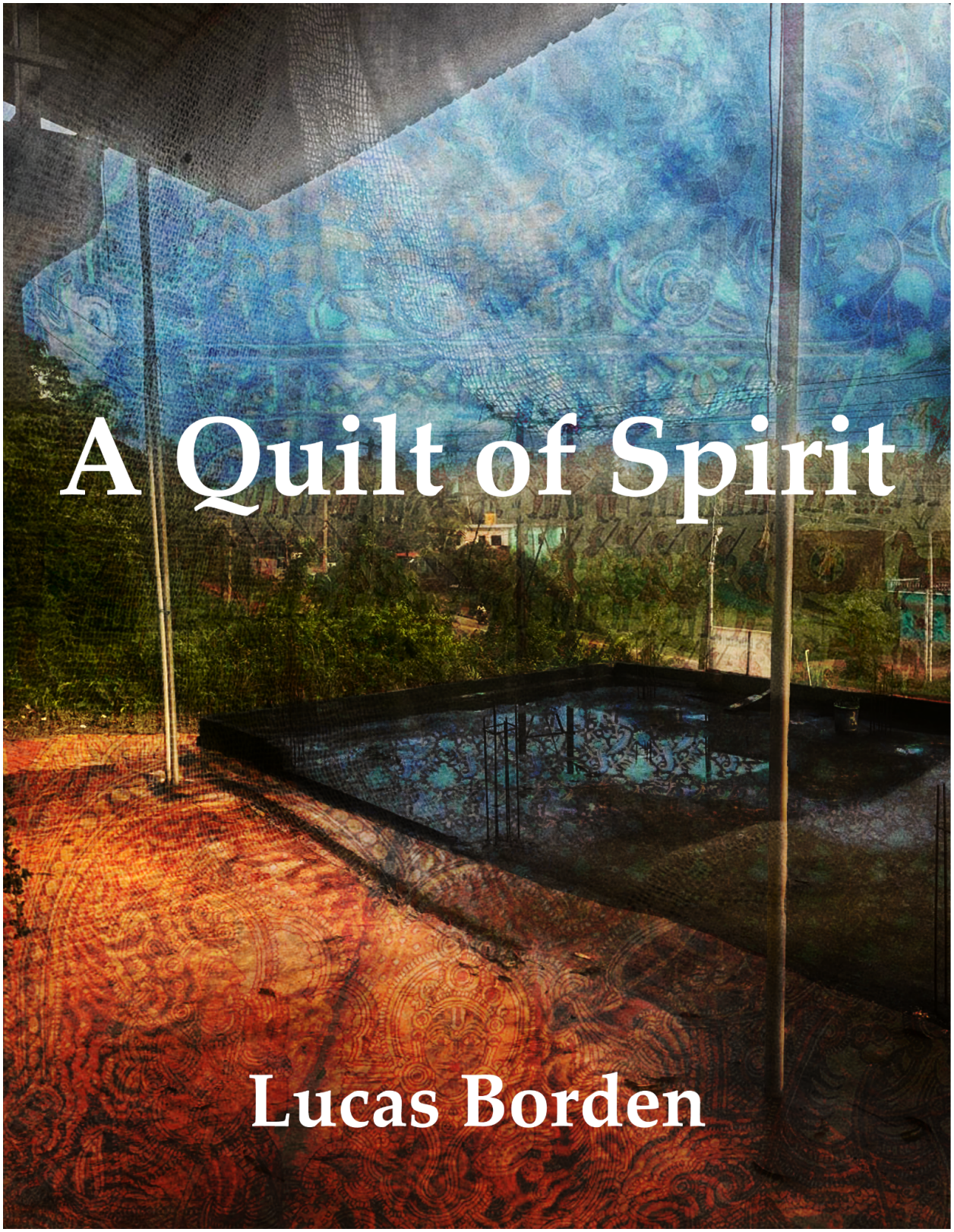
A Quilt of Spirit
Lucas Borden

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By Lucas Borden

Prologue

Most people fall into one of two categories. The first is those who talk a lot, and say little. The second is those who talk little, but say a lot. Akash Shaji, a classmate of mine in my MS of International and Development Economics, breaks this mold. Each time he opens his mouth, you know you're in for the long haul. But it's not fluff—each sentence is jam-packed with relevant information.

I believe that it is for this reason that I enjoy working with him on many projects as we crawl towards earning our degree. My silly creativity and whimsy combines well with Akash's font of knowledge of current events and history. It is a wonder that he is four years my junior.

The time comes to decide where to do my summer fieldwork, a requirement for our program. And I can't think of a reason not to join Akash for his project in India, colloquially known as "Ester Games." The project, named after our classmate Ester, looks to employ an active learning financial literacy mobile game in conjunction with an aspirations intervention, measuring potential shifts of financial literacy in a randomized control trial (RCT) experiment format. Ester will lead another larger team to carry out the same procedure in Uganda.

Although I plan to write my thesis on a separate topic using secondary data, I am eager to help out on this project: half to get experience running an RCT and half to see the wonders of India. Sure, I've traveled around to a few other countries, but this opportunity has a different sheen. India is a big pill to swallow, and I've never lived in a developing country before for an extended period. I've spent nearly all my life in cities, especially San Francisco, where I was born and raised. I have a feeling rural India is going to take some getting used to. I'm nervous. My parents won't say it, but they are too. They attest that they've done plenty of traveling and whatnot but never something like this. I'm not sure if that's supposed to make me feel less or more anxious. Regardless, I know they're proud of me.

I tell myself I'll do some background research on the region, but I never get around to it. Akash doesn't tell me much, but he has a few bullet points. Kadaba, where he's from, is a country town—or village, depending on your definition. It's going to be hot, and I'm going to get sick.

Most everything else is left for me to discover.

May 31

I get to SFO early and fidgety, dreading the exhausting journey ahead. Stanley, another of our team members and a fellow San Francisco local, looks a bit hesitant as well. Still, we find a bit of solace in each others' anxiety. We go through security without hiccups and before we know it, we're on a massive intercontinental plane. I am shocked by the hotel-room-esque first class seats on Qatar airways—a bit like spruced up, lavish work cubicles. Of course, we are not so fortunate, relegated to economy with the crying babies and cramped seats. Arriving in Doha after 16 uneventful hours, it's like a glimpse into a dystopian sci-fi adaptation. Outside: bleak and dusty and hot. Inside: opulent and gargantuan like a space port. I feel a bit out of place, maybe because I can only find one food place in the futuristic airport.

I sleep through some below average movies on the way to Bangalore, the tech industry hub of India. Fancily adorned flight attendants serve us some unfamiliar food options including tasty masala sandwiches. Meals are complimentary. I also imbibe in 4-5 glasses of orange juice whose calories help morale.

June 1

Landing in Bangalore is a stressful affair. Our pilot doesn't stick the landing well and slams on the brakes. The jolt provides a somewhat welcome adrenaline rush, keeping fatigue at bay for the moment. The visa process and re-entering the domestic terminal is a feverish rush, but we get to our gate on time. A nice stranger helps me with the logistics. In Bangalore, it's

about 90 degrees even at 3AM which is an ill omen for our heat-averse group members (me). We run into Andrew, our other team member from USF, at our gate.

“an-DREWwwww,” I intone in a reverberating voice, trying to get his attention.

He turns, confused, taking his earbuds out. He laughs, taking in the scene of Stanley and I laden with our bags and frazzled from traveling. Andrew, relatively used to hot weather in his home of Ghana, looks comfortable with his neck pillow, black baseball cap, and brown pullover sweatshirt. We dap each other up and talk as excitedly as one can while running on fumes.

“Do you feel like everyone is staring at us?” I look around to see many sets of eyeballs locked on me. Some avert their eyes as I look around, self-conscious, but others maintain their gaze even when I glare back.

“Yeah,” Stanley affirms. He pulls at his collar as he glances about, adjusting his heavy backpack.

“Now you guys know how I feel in SF,” Andrew replies. We laugh, but it’s true. The “White gaze” toward minorities is ever present in the US, and the phenomenon appears to be replicated here, albeit with different ethnic groups.

We languish under the heat and the scrutiny of our fellow travelers until our flight is called to board. We clamber aboard feeder buses, which drop us off on the tarmac just outside our plane. Flying to Mangalore, I am struck by how few lights are blazing below. It looks like the ocean.

The Mangalore airport foreshadows major, continuous culture shock. By accident, I leave my duffel bag on the plane, and a smiley airport attendant helps me retrieve it. Afterwards, he asks to take a video of me. I ask him what he wants me to do, and he replies saying that he doesn’t care—just say whatever. He proceeds to show me a WhatsApp group he has with fellow airport employees recording other travelers. I feel weird and remove myself from the conversation.

We go outside and the humidity washes over me, abated by the smiles of Akash and his dad who are waiting for us. Akash's dad is a welcoming, portly man with a friendly countenance.

"Nice to meet you," I say. "What's your name?"

"Shaji," he declares.

"Sorry?" I respond, confused because this Shaji is Akash's last name. I ask again for his first name, unsure if it's even appropriate to call your elder by their first name here.

"Shaji," he reiterates.

"You can call him Uncle," Akash interjects.

"Ok, great to meet you, Uncle," I smile, unsure about naming conventions here. Could it be that he didn't understand my question? His understanding seemed perfect, though. I'm missing something. I notice that he subtly rolls his head and nods it every which way when talking to us. Akash tells me this is a sign of approval, so I am working on emulating it.

We pack up the car and drive off into some honky traffic towards the center of Mangalore. There's even more construction going on than at USF. Rebar and concrete pylons stick up everywhere amidst the reddish brown dirt. The backdrop is leafy, bright green foliage of every type you could imagine. There is an overwhelming variety of plants, from lush grasses to coconut palm trees to monstrous, demonic, ominous bushes. We're in the jungle.

We stop at a local restaurant and store mash-up for some breakfast and get some easy on the stomach food: *Idli* (fermented rice pancakes), some puffy sweet rolls that are succulent and delicious, some white coconut chutney and *sambar* (orange yellow oily sauce). It's 6AM and I'm famished. I will be eating a lot of that bread thing—it's the child of challah and naan. Stanley, Andrew and I eat with spoons, while everyone else in the restaurants eats with their hands. Akash tells me hands are the preferred utensil for most meals.

I'm glad I ate less than my fill because what came next may well have involved a good chunder of chunky chutney. Akash's neighbor, who drives us, was born without fear in his bold heart. I soon learn that Indian driving is the anarchist's fantasy. There are but three rules of the

road. Number one: drive generally on the left (flexible). Number two: spam your horn rhythmically to bend fellow motorists to your will so they let you pass. Number three: Absolutely no other rules.

It goes without saying number three is the most important. I thought India consisted of cars packed in like sardines yelling at each other. In the more rural areas though, this is false. Driving in rural areas is like locking yourself into a closet and spiking 10 of the freshest bouncy balls money can buy at the wall and then dodging them all while wearing roller skates. Did I mention there are no stop signs? No stoplights? No lanes? No seatbelts? No acknowledged speed limits? At least there are some speed bumps. No one notices those, though. As someone raised in the gridlock traffic of California, it's genuinely terrifying. I perform rigorous cost/benefit analysis of throwing up out the window more than once. This cycle of considering chucking up my breakfast and thinking of how disappointing that would be goes on for a breakneck two and a half hours.

We reach Akash's house around 9AM. His house is above a car mechanic's storefront on a hill about 20 steps from the main road. The roof of the storefront serves as a large concrete patio where the laundry is hung. The driveway to the house is made of sandy cobble with reddish dirt in between each stone. On the other side of the house there is a cage with three intelligent dogs. They yelp sweetly as you walk up. Their mangy father, Tingo, stalks around the patio chasing colorful birds of all kinds. The house itself is two stories, and Akash and his family live on the ground floor.

Entering the downstairs, Akash's mom, who we call Auntie, greets us warmly. Her English is a bit better than Uncle's. She's off to lecture on accounting and business at one of the local schools, so she leaves briskly after welcoming us. Inside, the white walls are adorned with murals by Akash's older sister, Anjali, and the floors are of gleaming purple brown tile. Above, fans manically purr above in a vain attempt to fight the oppressive humidity. Curiously, none of the doors but the front door of Akash's house have conventional locks. Each door has a

deadbolt on each side. This means that there's no way to lock the doors from the outside if you are leaving the room. People here are trusting.

We are to stay upstairs in one of two apartments. The floors are of shiny large tiles and the walls are mustard yellow like my entry way back home. I'm rooming with Stanley, Andrew has his own small room. It's humid but clean and spartan, although I do find a small lizard in the midst of my belongings.

Akash tells me how to shower here, and I follow the instructions. I fill up a big bucket, then pour water over myself with a smaller bucket after slathering soapy water all over myself. I feel the airplane gunk wash away. After settling in upstairs, we sit down for lunch. Uncle makes a light chicken curry with rice—friendly on the stomach but still very flavorful. Almost all food products are made by hand here, including the delicious coconut milk which forms the base of the curry. I soon fall asleep with a full belly.

I wake up around 7 PM and we have dinner: fried rice, with the option of ketchup. I pass on the ketchup but wolf down the fried rice. Uncle notices my appetite and takes pride in giving me food until I cannot stomach another bite. He defeats my stomach handily, but continues to heave on more helpings even after I can't eat anymore. I supplement the meal with some delicious tiny bananas which are sweet with a sticky texture.

With full stomachs we tune into some post-dinner WWE. The Undertaker defeats his opponent with a classic tombstone. I'm so tired that I feel as if the Undertaker has tombstoned me, too. Akash notices this and suggests we go to bed. We fall asleep in seconds.

June 2

I wake up around 6 AM and go sit outside on the second floor balcony. Early commuters zip by occasionally. Behind the road across the street, a dense morning fog rests among the lush trees, radiating calming energy. The air is filled with birds of all kinds, and I think of my mom who is an obsessive birder. I try to take a picture of a small black sparrow-like bird with a

white horizontal band around its midsection, but the picture is a grainy blob. Old Tingo strides back to the house after what I can only assume to be a night of gallivanting. He settles down with his vulpine daughter whose coat is burnt orange with white accents. They spectate from the patio as some neighbor dogs below dash around and nip at each other's ears.

Everyone heads downstairs around seven for breakfast. We have a curried potato stew with some spongy tortilla-esque rounds. Uncle brings out some jackfruit as well as some peanut butter for us Americans. I show Akash the pleasures of combining banana with peanut butter, and he admits it has its merits.

Our next mission is to go into town and get SIM cards. First, we stop by a local clothes shop and we try on some items. I can't help but notice how aggressive the staring is. It's as if people see us and struggle to keep their mouths from gaping open in shock. I wonder if they've ever seen foreigners before in person. Next, we head down to the local ice cream shop. They have many fruits for sale, including papayas that are over a foot long. After a quick ice cream snack, we drive up to Auntie's school, which is a Kannada language school. There is also an English school across the way that costs money, which Akash attended. It makes me think about the language divide between income groups.

On the drive around the town Akash explains the system of relationships and marriage in the district.

"Most marriages are arranged marriages, although there are love marriages as well," he says. He smiles, romanticizing. "My parents married for love when it was still uncommon."

Still, there is a stigma against relationships before marriage. Neighbors and extended family talk and gossip about illicit relationships.

"Times are changing, though," Akash insists. "Slowly but surely."

Akash speaks to the backwardness of his region. In the past 30 years, things have changed with the increases in wealth in the region. Mangalore became a major banking hub for India, and the local economy boomed as a result. There are many hospitals, construction

projects and good roads in the area. It seems that with this economic boom, much of the region adopted more western values as well.

Despite the influx of western values, religion remains a key element of society in the region. Akash's family is Christian, and they attend a small church nearby with other Christians. Christians are a small minority in the region, however. The majority of people are Hindu or Muslim. Many shops have names referencing Hindu gods, and there are many women walking around in full black burkas with all but their eyes concealed. It's above 90 degrees Fahrenheit with crushing humidity and I can't help but think of how uncomfortable that must be.

The town of Kadaba itself is centered on a bustling thoroughfare. There is a wealth of colors around, from bright aquamarines to deep reds. The vibrant colors of the buildings make for a picturesque scene when combined with the red dirt and the light green plant life. Our car is hailed down by an older man in a pressed collared shirt. Pulling over, we meet Akash's school friend who he grew up with, along with his dad. The father owns a local water purification plant. He is a prestigious individual in the community. He shows respect to us, shaking his head in the customary sign of approval, marveling at Akash's description of our experiment. Other IDEC students have encountered resistance to their experiments (one was even detained by the police), but it appears our research is more than welcome here. I wonder if we would have been as welcome here 30 years ago when the values were different.

Getting back to Akash's house involves learning a new way to eat for me: with my hands. We have a wet chicken curry with rice, along with cucumbers—not the typical food I'd consider hand-worthy. Akash demonstrates the preferred eating technique. He stirs the curry and rice on the plate with four fingers in a circular motion, tossing the gravy with the rice. To eat, he scoops the mixture with three fingers like a shovel, then leverages the food into his mouth with his thumb. I try to emulate the process. It's very messy at first. On one hand, I feel silly for eating with my hands when there is a fork on my plate. On the other hand, I feel silly for not being able to properly eat with my hands, a feat that humanity mastered before almost anything

else. Andrew giggles at me and takes a video, flexing on me with his knowledge of the craft from years of experience back home in Ghana.

We pile back into the car after lunch to exchange currency in Puttur, a small, bustling city about 40 KM away. On the way we discuss dynamics between religious groups. Namely, Akash tells us of the rise of the Hindu supremacy movement in India and its ramifications. Both historically and in modern times, Hinduism, on the whole, has been an outlier of a religion in terms of its tolerance of other creeds.

“Why do you think this is?” I interrupt his lecture.

He doesn’t need to pause for reflection.

“It's mostly because Hinduism in itself is not a monolithic religion in the slightest,” Akash monologues. “It's an umbrella of hundreds of cultures and thousands of different traditions formed over thousands of years.”

The diversity of Hinduism is one of the foundational uniting factors of India, which binds together thousands of different castes, tribes, cultures, and even other different religions. In many ways, tolerance is the cornerstone upon which modern India is built upon.

Today, though, this foundation may be fragmenting due to a wave of intolerant Hindu nationalism. There are many similarities between the US and Hindu racial supremacy movements. 79% of Indians today are Hindus, and as such Hinduism rhetoric guides the political and cultural narratives. In defiance of historic tolerance, far right Hindu extremists call for a unified state under Hinduism. That is, Muslims and Christians, making up 14.2% and 2.3% of India’s population respectively, should convert or get out. In both the US and India, Muslims are discriminated against, especially as of late. While some Indian Christians (especially Syrian Christians in Southern India) and Hindus are culturally similar due to Christianity’s longstanding presence in India, Islam is met with strong opposition by Hindu nationalists not only due to the differing creeds but also due to the accompanying cultural differences. Now, there is mounting aggression between extremist Hindu and Muslim groups. This is not a fair fight, either, because

far right Hindu nationalist politicians far exceed Muslims in followers and influence. Meanwhile, prominent Hindu politicians continue to downplay the discrimination against Muslims in India. Nationalism comes in all forms, but it shares a common thread: us against them. In many ways, these issues all emanate from British colonization. I don't see this fragmentation in Kadaba, though. Nor do I see any overt evidence of religious conflict in Puttur.

The city of Puttur is a dusty whirlwind, with fantastic smells wafting from most storefronts. We peel out through a tight roundabout and park outside of the currency exchange spot. We take off our shoes and head inside. Being barefoot in an office is foreign to me, but it does make things more comfortable. After some deliberation, the exchange rate we settle is ₹80 rupees to the dollar.

On the way home we discuss the implications for religion and cultural differences in our experiment. In India, the sample of people we are working with is composed of people already in self-help groups. In this district, Dakshina Kannada, there are less fatalistic attitudes regarding socioeconomic mobility than is commonly associated with the Indian caste system. This may not be the case in Uganda. Accordingly, we speculate that the aspirations treatment will yield higher returns for the Ugandan sample. We discuss the difficulty of unraveling cultural effects in our experiment. Using fixed effects seems futile because all our subject groups are within the same district. This is great for randomization purposes, but makes cultural effects very difficult to parse because there is not that much variation in culture, in spite of the perceived, overstated cultural chasm between Indian Islam and Hinduism. Unpacking the cultural differences seems like a tough task given our somewhat homogenous samples. That said, there is one promising avenue of research we agree upon: comparing Christians in Uganda to Christians in India. One might be able to see how culture beyond religion contributes to financial decision making if we compare Indian Christians to Ugandan Christians.

June 3

The power goes out in the early morning—no cooling ceiling fan to fight the heat. It reaches ungodly temperatures in the bedroom, and I begin to sweat like a pig. To make matters worse, a persistent rash grows on all four of my limbs. Upon further inspection we determine that it's heat rash. I change my sheets and apply copious amounts of talcum powder to quell the itch.

Breakfast is fried eggs and a traditional wheat meal hash. Apparently it is customary to include chunks of banana in the savory hash, or put in a bit of sugar. I sample the banana inclusion and the taste is a bit like polenta-oatmeal with banana.

The breakfast conversation turns to water in India, which I figure is massively abundant. Even here, though, where rainfall is almost limitless, they struggle with issues of depleting groundwater. The abundance of rain water compels people to be careless with water in their homes, often leaving the tap running or excessively watering plants outdoors. In the US, aquifers are drying up due to commercial farming at scale, but in this district, this is not the case. Policymakers often blame farmers for the water issues, but Akash disagrees; much of the blame falls on water waste in households.

"About 50-100L of water is wasted per day in each household," Akash claims.

I raise my eyebrows. I see how that could mount up quickly. Intentionality of use of resources is important to consider in all contexts, even when it seems infinite.

At home, we flip on the TV only to discover a tragedy unfolding on the news. 233 confirmed dead in a three-way train crash in another district, with an uncertain number of mounting casualties. The railway minister explains away the situation, but the attention is on the horrors of the piled up train cars. Three trains crashed into each other through a mix up of which trains were on which tracks, resulting in the largest accident in recent history in India. I think of all the loved ones lost. Tragedies of this scale make one question the administration. Akash turns off the TV but my eyes remain glued to the reflective black screen. Stanley shakes his head.

Up next is a team meeting. We discuss plans for our experiment and trial the financial literacy game. It entails purchasing different investments in the form of animals to attempt to reach a monetary goal. One can either pay cash or borrow funds to purchase the animals, which return income to the player depending on the selections made. Make prudent investments and level up, otherwise go bankrupt. On the later levels, different elements are introduced: loans, risk, and multiple livestock options for purchase. We hope that this game can teach our subjects to differentiate between good and bad investments, as well as provide practice for numeracy skills. The game runs seamlessly and we marvel at Lucie's hard work. I look forward to examining the granular decision-making data it will produce.

In the evening we drive on a narrow dirt road to Akash's grandparents house. Although they are native to southernmost Kerala state, much of his mother's family now lives together in a forested region outside of town. The roads are lined with tall rubber trees and skinny palms. Driving past a fenced compound, Akash remarks that this was once a bustling school, but is bleeding students as they leave for more modern schools in Kadaba. In general, there is a wave of emigration out of the countryside and into local towns as people seek opportunities.

Reaching Akash's grandparents' house, it's pushing 112 degrees wet bulb temperature. The humidity is insurmountable. I sweat straight through my pants, feeling strength being sapped from my body by the heat. At this temperature, staying hydrated for me is a futile task. Akash's family is totally fine, though. His cousin, a tall 14-year-old boy, greets us in sweatpants and a long sleeve shirt. He ushers us inside and we meet the gathered family. His aunt and grandma are spitting images of each other, albeit of different ages, both smiling kindly in their dresses. His grandpa teeters out from the bedroom, offering a handshake and a smile consisting of only two remaining teeth. Their home is a one story building surrounded by palms and filled with Christian iconography. As is with all grandparents, their pride and joy is their cabinet of pictures of their family. They don't speak much English but Akash translates for us,

showing us a picture of his uncle in Saudi Arabia. They ask about our families and where we're from and we tell them about the US.

After a time they beckon us out back and shuck young coconuts, giving us each a glass of warm coconut water. It tastes much better than store-bought. Akash's family encourages us to hike down to the river, which we do. While it's expected to be cooler, it is not. Without the forest to shade us from the scorching sun, the river bank is more than sweltering. We take some pictures and head back up, hopping in the car with the AC on for a bit while Akash's family chuckles. They set up a fan for us in the house and we go back in. Akash shows his grandpa pictures of San Francisco as we eat homegrown mango with pepper and salt. Much to their obvious dismay, I'm allergic to mango. To make sure their guests are pleased, they bring out the big guns: homegrown watermelon. It's sweet and warm and tasty with the extra-flavorful pepper. Even with the fan, the heat is still unbearable, causing me to tire. In conjunction with the jet lag, I begin to question my decision to leave my comfortable, fog-bound San Francisco summer.

We return home to Akash's parents house. Akash's dad has purchased a couple cooling units for our room. They cost us about $75 dollars each, but at this point I would do just about anything for a cool breeze. They don't do much for the heat in our room, and the power goes out at 11PM. I try to sleep but end up listening to audiobooks until the early morning, sweating profusely the whole night.

June 4

In the morning my rashes have worsened. It's prickly heat, brought on by irritated sweat glands. Small bumps litter my skin, giving me a reptilian look. It itches something fierce and is unsightly. A cold shower relieves some of the pain but the bubbles remain on my skin like a crispy corn tortilla. I coat my skin in talcum powder provided by Akash's dad. It stings but seems to reduce the swelling for now. We agree I should see a dermatologist. I ask if this is a common plight in the area.

“It is,” Akash smiles. He looks to Auntie, who shares his smile. “Among newborn babies. You’ll be fine, don’t worry.”

After breakfast the rest of the family heads to church, but we agree that I should remain in the shade of the house to nurse my swollen skin. The inside of the church is stifling due to some recent construction mishaps, Akash says. I welcome another nap, although the oppressive heat keeps sleep at bay.

We convene with representatives from a local NGO, SKDRDP, after a brief respite at home for a quick 30 minute meeting. It’s at a local public school, which possesses a massive dirt courtyard, much like that of a base path on a baseball field. On the other side of the courtyard is our meeting place, a classroom with basic wood walls paced with concrete pillars. The meeting starts late, and we are stuck standing outside in the 100 degree F weather for a few minutes. I feel my insides boiling.

The members assemble and the leaders gesture for us to sit in the front row. Akash is granted a seat with the leaders in a panel who face the audience of self-help groups sponsors. The meeting starts with a Hindu ceremony involving burning on a fancy tray adorned with yellow flowers. We are compelled to stand and the group begins to sing. We do our best to engage ourselves without knowing the words. The song ends with rhythmic clapping and a traditionally dressed woman in red and gold introduces the first speaker. The meeting is in Kannada with English words strewn in. The first speaker wears a crisp maroon button down and possesses an air of authority. I gather that he is the leader of the meeting. The main topic for today, according to Akash, is the merits of solar panels to provide consistent power to households. The power shuts off all the time here, often for hours at a time. Solar offers a back up plan if power is down for extended periods and helps abate bills. The main issue with solar panels is their steep cost, so SKDRDP seeks to lower the costs for their constituents through subsidization.

The meeting rotates through various speakers, already stretching well past the allotted 30 minutes after the second speaker. I swear that the third speaker has a simple mission: to

filibuster. Although I do not speak Kannada, I rest assured knowing he provides the audience with a comprehensive history of solar panels, deep insights into the inner workings of the technology, and all possible policy implications to the audience. He speaks for over an hour, trailing off and then revving back up again into another loquacious lecture. The room is getting hotter, and my rash begins to redden further. I contemplate heatstroke; it's rent free in my head.

At one point an audience member stands and moves to exit the room. The meeting leader cuts off the waffling speaker and sternly rebukes the audience member who attempted to slink out. He scuttles back to his seat, ashamed and frustrated. Akash later tells us that meetings such as this are a classroom-esque setting, if you wish to leave early you better inform the professor. Or, in this case, the meeting leader.

Another convention is the use of phones during meetings. Ringtones chirp as people take calls during the meeting, even the panel members who just talk on the phone in hushed tones next to the speaker. This is a common convention in casual meetings. But this convention doesn't extend to classrooms in school. Akash describes classroom culture in India as "deadass strict." No cellphones, no laptops, no leaving the class unannounced, no eating—even in graduate courses.

The other day, Akash's mom, a lecturer, stumbled upon a student using his phone in the hallway. She ripped the phone from his hands and shattered the device against the wall. The parents approved of this retribution, disciplining their son.

I let out a sigh of relief when the speaker finally asks for questions. How naive I am. Of course, he answers each question with robust five minute answers, then jumps back into another long winded speech. At last, he sits down, the meeting leader shooting him a glare. Next, a younger man stands up to speak. He reads the room and his speech is less than 20 seconds. He sits down to thunderous, rhythmic applause. The last two speakers follow suit, clearly feeling a need to speed up the meeting. Hot tea and biscuits are served as the meeting on solar panels comes to a close. I can't even conceive of drinking piping hot tea right now;

even my soul is sweating. I pretend to take a sip and place the tea by my plastic chair—I've learned that not accepting and trying offered food is a sign of disrespect here.

After the solar panel meeting is adjourned, we are left with representatives of all-female self-help groups associated with SKDRDP. Akash tells them about the experiment and asks them for their contact information so we may coordinate our subject pools. This goes smoothly with the assistance of the meeting leader, and we soon are outside taking pictures with the group beneath the merciless sunshine.

On the way home Akash speaks to the bureaucratic hierarchy of the NGO we are working with. Initial contact is challenging to achieve due to the top-down nature of the organization. Akash says he had to go to the head office and exhaustively explain the experiment to three separate people for an hour each to get a meeting with someone in charge. He admits that once he gained a foothold, they were very responsive. I wonder if this organizational system is common in India. If so, could it be an extension of the caste system? Either way, Andrew, Stanley and I are grateful for his wading through the officialdom.

My rashes have worsened and we agree that I should go to the doctor. I tell them I have insurance, so the cost shouldn't be a big deal. I am shocked when Akash tells me even without insurance the visit will cost about ₹200 rupees—just over $2 dollars. I laugh at the obvious shortcomings of the US healthcare system in comparison. For care, we go to a local doctor's house, across from the pharmacy. He serves a family first. We sit in the small waiting room and the child waves at me through a crack in the curtain.

The doctor has seen my plight before. It's a combination of an allergic reaction coupled with a heat rash. He gives me a prescription for some medication and lotion for my skin. While he writes up the prescription on a handwritten note, Akash's dad and the doctor chat about their kids. I don't understand anything they say but Akash fills me in. The doctor's daughter is preparing for the civil services exam, the hardest exam in India and possibly the world. The test takers study for years in preparation, and many aspire to leave poverty behind through the

exam. Each year there are about one million candidates who sit for the exam, but only 700 manage to pass. There are multiple rounds of tests which torture the candidates with impossibly obscure questions on current events, Indian constitution, general science, as well as other sections. The exam culminates in an interview portion, where the candidates are grilled by professors of all disciplines, many asking outlandish questions. No one from Akash's town has ever cleared the exam.

"You gonna be the first?"

"We'll see," he says smugly. I could see it. The dude reads the paper like his life depends on it. Most mornings, I come down to find him deep in ancillary articles on random current happenings in the district and beyond.

Despite the uphill battle that the test presents, many throw their hat in the ring. If you do pass, you are selected to serve in the executive branch of local government as a magistrate. While politicians have a lot of power in the districts, magistrates can override decisions. Politicians retain power through pressuring magistrates with threats of moving them to a different district, though. The Indian government structure is nuanced, to say the least.

"Do you think the exam promotes structural inequality like the SAT does in the US? Do people with more resources at their fingertips do disproportionately well?" I ask.

He shakes his head, pausing to think for a second.

"People who are wealthy have an easy path to power through politics, so most people who attempt the exams are of middle and lower classes."

He continues, outlining how the government offers subsidized, top-notch training programs to people who cannot afford instructors. This indicates to me that this exam is, at least in part, an aspirational tool used by the government to spur the lower classes to pursue education.

It is not just people of lower economic standing who often take the exam, but also people coming from minority groups. Politicians of the legislative branch are elected democratically, and

there is not much hope from a minority group to be voted into power in many regions. Minorities, therefore, see the civil service exam as a way to gain traction in society and make their voice heard. And they are successful in this campaign, with 140 minority group members passing the exam in 2019. Given that 20% of people in India hail from minority groups, this is almost perfectly representative of the population. The same can not be said of representation in Indian parliament, which has similar issues to the US.

There are also reservations for minority groups in the exam, and in most other elements of society. A percentage of passes are allotted to disadvantaged groups and scheduled tribes. Like affirmative action in the US, many people criticize this policy, but overall the sentiment is that it aids the pursuit of equality and representation in India.

This exam helps highlight the pitfalls of democratic voting. Minority groups will not always be proportionally represented in politics due to majority rule, but the civil service exam helps circumvent these issues. Despite its merits, whether or not this is a good policy at large is a question to consider. Either way, it is impossible to deny the allure of the exam; it's analogous to the American dream in many ways. A path out of poverty and into power for those even those most disadvantaged.

June 5

The weather gods decide to make outside a boiling hell today. As such, we stay inside, lying on the floor in front of the fans. Did I mention there is no air conditioning? The heat is impossible to escape and intermittent rain and wind last night presage frequent power outages today. I groan as the fan turns off again, sweat pooling underneath me.

Some of Akash's relatives and church members visit in the afternoon, including two nuns. They wear habits, not of white and black but of aqua and teal. Everything is a bit more colorful and joyous in India. The nuns are friendly to us in spite of a stiff language barrier. We return to lethargy on our phones after pleasantries.

I take my medication and apply the pink calamine lotion provided. Blessedly, my skin rash begins to subside. I nap and watch movies all day. A much needed rest day underneath the fans.

June 6

Power outages once again plague the night. When I wake, it's already time for breakfast. We have Idli and an orange soupy Dahl with white coconut chutney. Once again, I go to battle with Akash dad's feeding-guests-fixation. After plates are cleared, we review the baseline and endline surveys with full stomachs. The surveys are designed to measure a person's understanding of financial matters, numeracy skills, financial behavior and aspirations. In our RCT, the outcome variables will be based on differences in responses in baseline and endline surveys.

Many questions are difficult, putting knowledge of interest rates, risk and numeracy to the test. I can't help but think that less experienced individuals will struggle greatly on the exam. Akash assures us that this is ideal; if everyone does well we won't see much difference between baseline and endline even if the treatment is effective. On the other hand, if scores are low initially, we leave room for improvement on the endline survey.

The aspirations questions aim to measure how fatalistic and stuck people feel in their lives. A low score indicates that people don't have much hope to change their life for the better, whereas people who dream of a better life and believe it to be achievable with hard work will result in a high score. It may be inconceivable to many Americans where the American dream is the backbone of society, but many people in this region are conditioned into fatalistic attitudes about their lives, primarily through the caste system and traditional values. Thus, we target aspirations as a key aspect to strengthen amongst our subjects. To dream is the first step to improving your life.

Without any fans running last night, the pulverizing heat left me with little sleep. Around 7PM, I fall asleep underneath the buzzing fans. I sleep straight through dinner and into the morning. I'm grateful nobody woke me.

June 7

I am awakened by the abrupt pitched-down noise created by power outages in the early morning. I open the window to let the relatively cool zephyrs float into my room, but I pay the price. Busy bugs buzz around the stuffy room. As always, at 5AM the dogs begin to bark and whine as well, waiting for Akash's dad to feed them. They are right outside our window, chirping like birds. Opening the window is a tradeoff between heat and noise.

We discuss our plans for today over a breakfast of some sort of pancakes with white coconut chutney and sunny side up eggs. Now that we have all our self-help groups sorted, we need to randomize the treatments to form relatively balanced groups. Of course, there are also scheduling issues to iron out. Almost all of the groups meet on Sunday morning, so we will have to split up into smaller groups. As a result of the increased number of subteams, we need to hire more enumerators. Potential literacy issues with our subject pool mean that we need people to interview subjects and record their responses on a lengthy survey. For this purpose, we aim to bring additional undergraduate university students into the fold. They are getting paid almost nothing by US standards, but Akash says it's fair wage. They gain invaluable field experience, to boot. Better than the classic unpaid internships that are all too common in the US.

We spend the rest of the day working out inconsistencies in the spreadsheets which detail our subject pools, and translating all the surveys, readying them for print. While we originally intended surveys to be completed online via Qualtrics, the limited availability of devices makes pen and paper surveys the way to go. We all roll our eyes at the thought of more data entry, but this is one of the pillars of experiments in the social sciences.

When I left for India, every single person I talked to stressed two things. One: they knew people in India, and would be happy to connect me (even if it was 2000 miles away from where I was going). Two: I was going to get bad diarrhea. I had the foresight to bring medication for it, and today I was able to stymie my bowel issues quickly. I can only hope it does not happen again. Akash assures me that it will.

The rain begins in the evening. I hear a torrential downpour outside on the tin roof and run outside in elation, feeling like Maria in The Sound of Music dancing through a field of edelweiss. Stepping out onto the concrete patio, I am immediately soaked by dirty runoff flowing from the roof. Not the embrace of summer rain I was after. This kills my desire for frolicking and I slink back inside like a cat after a bath, dry off, and go to bed.

June 8

Tonight Akash and I have a meeting with Professor Jesse on our fertility preferences paper. I am working on setting up our files and running them on a server cluster hosted by USF. I have never worked in Terminal like this before, nor have I dealt with servers in this manner. I am wading through the mud of coding and debugging with my eyes closed, repeatedly falling face first into the void of errors. Plans are dashed when the power is out most of the day, so I sit around and watch a couple pre-downloaded movies. I feel the heat from the lack of fans lowers my intellectual capacity tenfold, and Professor Cassar's experiment on heat and behavior comes to mind. Indeed, I imagine myself as one of the subjects in the experiment. I don't feel like competing, or being altruistic, or not being altruistic for that matter. Just get me out of the heat. I feel like watching fluff films, doing my best to free my mind from the prison of wet bulb temperature shocks. And so I do just that.

Power returns around 6PM, and we meet with Jesse at 9:30. It's nice to experience an old routine—our weekly meetings—to help normalize the foreignness of India. We recount our experiences thus far with planning fieldwork, and Jesse resonates with our struggle. Reflecting

on our past year, Akash and I are proud of how far we have come as researchers, as fieldworkers, as friends. After the meeting we take a stab at Jesse's directives and get nowhere. No matter. We go to sleep excited to continue working on the paper in the coming months.

June 9

The smell of seasoned fried eggs wafts into my room. I rise from my nest of blankets on the floor by the fan and throw on some clothes—same as yesterday. Walking into the dining area, Akash's dad puts his thumb to forefinger as if he is about to accompany the gesture with a thick Italian accent. Instead he gestures to his mouth with the hand sign, the universal gesture for food. Once again, it is a battle at breakfast against his indomitable will. I've learned that the only way to stop him from serving endless food is to cover my plate with my hands so he has no angle to my plate. This act of denial is effective, but Akash's dad always seems a bit sad when he doesn't get to pile more food on my plate—yet another psychological tactic he employs in our war. I've already eaten a full plate of eggs and a wheat/onion mash concoction.

It's a Friday, and this weekend we're staying in Mangalore to train our enumerators who attend university in the lodestar city. As such, we have a two hour drive on our plate this afternoon. We pack light and leave just before noon, making a pit stop at the local petrol station. Like New Jersey, it seems attendants are required to pump gas for their customers. The comparisons to New Jersey definitely end there, though.

While Stanley and Andrew relax in the back, I quiz Akash about Dakshina Kannada, the district in Karnataka State that encompasses both Akash's home and distant Mangalore. If Karnataka is a state, Dakshina Kannada is a county. A freaking big county, for sure.

"What do people think of Dakshina Kannada residents?"

Akash is unsure at first.

"I guess Americans think of Californians as whimsical surfer bros, hippies or bougie LA socialites."

I gesture to my hand-painted bucket hat, reinforcing the point. Epiphany strikes, and he tells me that Dakshina Kannada is a district known for its intelligent people. It's always a top district in country-wide test scores, and they take pride in their intellectual pursuits. The academic excellence of the district is attributed to the high quality schools here. I remark that Akash is right at home here, a good representative of the district. He takes the compliment on the chin.

The discussion moves onto our plans after IDEC. Akash dreams of doing his PhD under Ester Duflo at MIT, the current queen of development economics in many eyes. He also notes Notre Dame as a strong possibility, as he knows a Cardinal from his church personally who is associated with the school. The church is tight-knit here, and that means lots of opportunities through networking. He adds that working after IDEC also is an intriguing prospect. After all, Akash is only 22. I'm less sure of professors I'd like to study under in a PhD program. Probably somewhere on the west coast or abroad. Maybe Europe, maybe Australia.

I notice massive chunks of earth missing from the hillside exposing the orange-red underbelly of the region. I point them out to Akash, and he tells me they are building a colossal highway to Mangalore. In some sections we can see the beginnings of construction on the road itself, and it's as big as any US highway. I think to myself that it must hold six or seven lanes on each side, but then realize the irrationality of my thought. There are no lanes here. We sit in silence for a while before I break the silence.

"So your dad's name…" I venture, harkening back to my persisting confusion.

"Shaji," Akash responds immediately.

My befuddled look prompts him to expand.

"His first name is Shaji," he says.

"Then what's his last name?"

"Antony, which is my grandfather's first name."

It's as if the clouds part and the sky opens. I get it—children take their father's first name as their last name, and the cycle repeats. Akash's middle name, otherwise known as the family name, is Naduviledath. The family name is passed down from father to child, and women who marry into the family adopt their husband's family name. Now I know the name, but not his story—so I enquire further into Shaji's life and purpose.

Now retired, Shaji Naduviledath Antony was the region's eminent civil engineer specializing in dams, but he did work on other types of projects as well, including some roads—including the very highway we drive along. I see a gleam in Akash's bright eyes as he recounts the beautiful dams and other megaprojects his father has facilitated; he's a proud son. Shaji is only 55, decently young to retire.

"Why'd he retire so young?" I ask.

"I guess working outside was getting to him," he replies.

I'm just a week into my India experience, I can relate. I, too, have felt the pressures of the stuffy climate weighing me. Like many potential retirees, he wavered back and forth between retiring and not retiring for some time, promising one more project more than once. The work on dams began to dry up, and he turned to alternate megaprojects like roads and even apartment complexes. He found these projects to be rife with corruption and bureaucracy, and he threw in the towel after a hair-pulling apartment complex contract.

Shaji finds fulfillment in atypical activities, at least atypical for a man of his stature within the Kadaba community. Chiefly, he enjoys gardening and cooking. He takes great pride in being a welcoming host, and I know from personal experience the indomitable levels of hospitality he brings to the table. These are not roles that the husband in Indian society is expected to adopt, but that doesn't bother him in the slightest. He reminds me of my Grandpa Bob in many ways; he brings intensity and gravity to situations which are not usually associated with intensity nor gravity. He also has a gaze that reflects deep analysis of every moment. If there was a contest to win the most caring and diligent host award, he would compete at a professional level.

As we approach Mangalore proper, the traffic begins to thicken and the boldness of drivers increases. This is much more akin to my prior imaginings of an Indian driving experience. The road is divided down the middle with an island, much like on 19th Avenue in San Francisco. But, unlike 19th Avenue, there are people driving the wrong way on their scooters and motorbikes against the flow of traffic. The roads are packed with vehicles of all shapes and sizes, and blaring horns fill the air. As Akash jerks and steers through the bustle, the evident food chain of Mangalore roads unravels. Motorbikes and three-wheeled auto tuk tuks weave in and out of the cars, deferring to cars. That said, if cars are dolphins, buses are whales. Everything flows around buses like a boulder rolling through a shallow river. They're not good or evil; they are simply a force of nature. Akash stresses to never get on a bus's left side—this is how you get crushed. I can imagine. Buses seem to have no regard for human life whatsoever.

The buildings grow in height as we delve into Mangalore's heart. Concrete exteriors are replaced by glass facades with logos in a wide spectrum of bright colors. There's less and less of the iconic dirt of the region to be seen, and more and more pollution gassing from the mountain of vehicles. Akash navigates through the city, explaining things we see around us. At one mammoth intersection we cross underneath a staunch blue overpass. Due in part to corruption, the overpass was not planned well or built up to standard, Akash says. The result of the sloppy work is a small lake that forms when it rains, and it rains often here. Also, there's cracks in the supports already. Wry locals pinned the location on google maps, calling it something along the lines of the "temporary lake." Finding nuggets of joy around the incompetence of politicians is one of the constants of humanity.

Traffic comes to a complete standstill. Akash states that up ahead is one of the few traffic lights in Mangalore, a recent addition to the city center. Harkening back to old times, he laments that before the advent of this godforsaken traffic light, there was far less traffic build up here. I begin to see the merits of the Indian road etiquette: chaotic, but efficient.

After another stretch of weaving through traffic we arrive at our hotel, The Goldfinch. We head inside and it's nothing short of luxurious. I inquire about a gym or a pool, but the receptionist shakes her head. In general, that's one aspect of culture that I could not have foreseen: an aversion to exercise as we know it. When I ask Akash about the national aversion to working out, he says that people exercise by working outside, and doing anything on top of that is not normal here. Not exercising is somewhat of a privilege to many, it seems. But not to me. I've been feeling as if my muscles will atrophy if I go on living here. Worse, not exercising has lowered my mental endurance as well. Astronauts desperately stimulating their muscles using electric impulses comes to mind, and I almost wish I had one of those devices at my disposal.

We check in and head upstairs to our own rooms. There's AC, showers with good water pressure, and a great view over the tops of coconut palms. It's a nice hotel, even by US standards. And the rate? $50 dollars a night. The purchasing power of the dollar here is absurd. This notion is amplified when we head to lunch. I get a spicy plate with a cross-section of some unfamiliar fish layered with spices, a prawn ghee roast, and a prawn biryani. It's a veritable feast, and the food is spicy in both regards: hot and flavorful. My favorite by far is the prawn ghee roast, which is shrimp roasted in a thick red sauce formed of a smorgasbord of oils and spices. I top it all off with a gut-friendly ginger lemon housemade soda. The cost? About ₹700 rupees, or just over $8 dollars. I think of the ludicrousness of the $14 dollar marinara pasta with broccoli I am known to partake in at the USF cafeteria between meetings and classes. I compliment the waiter on the good food and service as we leave. He puts his hand over his heart and shakes my hand with reverence. I've never had a waiter shake my hand before.

We spend the afternoon resting in our rooms and enjoying previously absent comforts. I crank the AC and crawl under the soft sheets. Around 6:30, Andrew, Stanley and I elect to check out the hotel bar. An intimidating bouncer ushers us through a padded door into a dark room full of tacky 18th century England decor and LED strip lights. I was expecting a swanky

bar meant for business people and maybe a couple on a honeymoon. The bar is a Sherlock Holmes themed nightclub with a neon sign in red and blue bold font urging us to “Get Sherlocked!” House remixes of top 100 pop songs are being blasted through a chain of high-end speakers around the club. The blue lighting underneath the transparent faux marble of the bar makes it look like an iceberg. I sample a taste of a local beer, finding the sickly sweet finish off-putting. We order some Coronas (no lime for Andrew) and have a seat at the bar. The bartender talks to us in heavily accented English about good food options around and the glories of cricket: 360-degree baseball with a few twists. He’s a good bowler, but not much of a batsman, he proclaims. Akash said something similar about his cricket talents. Curious. Akash joins us around 8, and we head up to the restaurant on the top floor to eat. The restaurant has a white, clean aesthetic with gold and black accents. It induces feelings of royalty and esteem. I look down at my hiking boots and windbreaker, feeling a bit out of place. Still, the host treats us with respect and ushers us to a table with a sweeping view of the squirming of the streets below. The menu is in English, but I understand few of the options. Akash orders for us after telling us of the many options. I return to the classics, requesting a mutton biryani with squid ghee roast, and a whiskey sour to wash it down. It’s better than lunch, and the cocktail is dressed up with gaudy lemon particulates. The cost of the expensive meal? $14 dollars. I’m giddy, maybe due to the alcohol, maybe due to the cost of living here, maybe both.

June 10

I crawl out from my abode underneath the blankets and into the AC-pumped climate of my room at 7:15AM. Today, we will train our enumerators. We head upstairs to the restaurant which has been transformed into a breakfast buffet. It’s almost all Indian food with two exceptions: baked beans and thick cut French fries. French fries are universal so I’m not too surprised, but the presence of baked beans is a mystery. I lump my plate with an Indian vegetable pancake dish, adding a healthy helping of baked beans and French fries. I sit down

in front of a TV broadcasting a cricket test match between Australia and India. Then it hits me—baked beans are a key element in the classic English breakfast. I haven't noticed too much English cultural influence here, but cricket and baked beans are notable relics of English occupation.

Dusting off our last bites, we head over to Akash's alma mater, St. Aloysius College, to meet our enumerators. Akash notes that modern Mangalore grew up around this very school. Before modernity and its importance as a banking hub, the region Mangalore was a fought over, disputed territory across the ages. The port was the crucial nut to crack for an army set on conquering the region due to the importance of coastal access for shipping troops and supplies. The importance of Mangalore persists to this day, in a similar but far more peaceful capacity. Instead of malicious conquerors, these days fresh fish and crustaceans flow through the port into restaurants.

Akash tells us that the college is making a big deal of his return, but I underestimate the importance of the occasion. We park in the faculty parking lot and find our assigned building, Arrupe Block: an imperious tan behemoth of a building, certainly blocky. The training room is in a distant corner, a u-shaped table dominating the room with plastic covered comfy chairs circled around. Akash instructs that we sit towards the curve of the table, places of honor. We chat with the enumerators as they trickle in. We have four core enumerators who are undergraduate students in their final year: Anushka, who leads them, Pooja, Veron and Sushrith. They are a smiley, bashful bunch. I can tell they relish this opportunity.

The college has made a grand show for us. Akash laughs at the bright poster detailing the project and our planned exploits. Before we know it, the professor Akash has consulted with, the chair of the economics department, and the director of the humanities and social sciences programs join us. We start the meeting with a familiar moment of silence. The meeting proceeds much like the meeting with SKDRDP in Kadaba: long-winded speeches singing our merits from each of the three faculty, each emphasizing what an honor it is to collaborate with us. Akash

offers his respects, then our team are each presented with roses and photographed with the director. We head outside to take group pictures. It's pouring rain in buckets so we pose on the stairs underneath the eaves. The faculty wish us good luck and shake our hands once more with reverence.

We begin our training session, detailing the process of running an RCT, explaining our experiment and our goals. Andrew explains the responsibilities of enumerators, and Stanley expounds on each treatment arm. We are estimating the effect of three treatments: financial literacy training via our web app game, an aspirations intervention, and the combination of both of the former treatments. The role of the enumerators will be to communicate and explain the instructions of the game to subjects in Kannada, as well as facilitate our aspirations sessions.

The game is the focus of our hands-on training. There are six levels, in which the player makes investment selections based on projected return on investment. Possible investments are limited to cows, chickens, and goats. Each period, the player chooses to buy the offered animal or not, and they gain or lose funds based on how the investment pans out. The first level is easy—simply buy the investment if it is profitable, refrain from purchasing if it is not. As the player progresses, different elements are introduced to make investment decisions murkier and more akin to the real world. Level by level, borrowing, risk, and increased choice are introduced. To succeed in the game, the player must possess strong numeracy skills and understand the advantages of borrowing over paying upfront.

We expect the students to finish the game within 30 minutes, but this expectation is shattered. The game is difficult for all of them, and some do not even complete it within the hour. Sweat trickles down our proverbial brows as we consider if we may have made it too difficult. If the game is hard for our enumerators, completing the game for our subjects will be like summiting Mount Everest with debilitating asthma. Coping to ourselves, we remember that the subjects will have five weeks to learn the game, and even if they don't finish we may see positive treatment effects. The faculty have provided us with snacks, and after refreshing our

stomach energy reserves we move on to a brief summary of the aspirations training. There's little time left, but Akash manages to get the key points out, promising more resources by email to continue working on understanding the material. We have a pilot on Monday, so time is of the essence.

The provided snacks are not enough to sate our appetites, so we head to a South Indian restaurant to meet up with Akash's cousin Aleena, sister of Alvin who we met in the countryside. Our method of transport to the restaurant is a rickshaw, an open air three-wheeled vehicle the size of a golf cart, which buzzes with ferocity through the streets. Our driver gets us to our destination with haste. The fee is only ₹35 rupees, but we give him ₹100. Still, the ride has cost us just a smidgen over a dollar.

Slipping out into the road from the tuk tuk, I almost get clobbered by a heartless bus. The buses are all of bright colors and funky names, as if from an anime. As it tears away, vomiting thick black pollution, I spy the nameplate: *Mercy*. That's rich. Like naming a volcano *Empathy*. This near death experience does nothing to combat my appetite. We sit down inside and our skinny waiter asks us if we want warm or cold bottled water. The prospect of ever choosing lukewarm water shocks me, especially given the spiciness of the food we are preparing to consume. We order some decadent whole fish creations, some more of my favorite prawn ghee roast, and a Southern Indian style biryani for each of us. We discuss life with Akash's cousin who studies biology at the local college. She is quiet, sweet, and polite, much like her brother Alvin.

We go back to the hotel and rest, our bellies brimming with spices and seafood. I take a hot shower and fall asleep in bed. It's one of those naps where you wake up and you're unsure whether it's been 20 minutes or three hours. Looking at the clock, it's been three hours. It seems like it always is.

Indigestion aside, I am hungry. Over WhatsApp, the group decides we want a taste of home. Naturally, to maximize our purchasing power, we seek out the ambrosiac delicacies of the

world's finest restaurant: McDonald's. It's raining cats and dogs outside, but we don't let the weather deter us. We're on a mission. McD's is situated in the biggest, busiest mall I've ever seen, with endless floors chock full with stores of all types. Looking off the side of the escalator I get a pang of adrenaline, the vertigo of identical floor after identical floor reminiscent of gazing into two mirrors facing one another. We stroll through a few department stores and arrive at our destination. For some reason, the doors to the golden arches are shut, even though we see happy customers chowing down inside. Akash tells us the street entrance is open, and we trek to the mall exit. We push through a big crowd waiting underneath an awning for the rain to let up. On our right, KFC beckons, tempting us away from its competitor. McDonald's waits about 100 meters to the left. The only path is through the perilous downpour and an emerging gulf on the brick pathway. We deliberate, deciding that I will undertake the sojourn to the promised land because I have a raincoat. Last minute, everyone but Andrew and I cave and go to KFC. I take Andrew's order of a McChicken and drudge through the tempest. I climb the stairs and am blasted by that sweet greasy air that I'd know anywhere. I don't like McDonald's in the US all too much, but something just feels right about this particular pilgrimage. Inside I notice a lot of people eating fried chicken. That's unusual. I step up to the counter to order, puzzled by the limited menu. I'm looking for my go-to double quarter pounder, mouth watering for some gross processed food. I can't find it. I scan the menu over and over again, confusion settling in. Where are the burgers? Where is the flagship Big Mac? Where is my beloved double quarter pounder with no cheese?

Realization strikes. I mentally slap my forehead. Cows are sacred here, of course there's no beef! Even the inevitable forces of the universe, including buses, stop for cows crossing the road here. To slaughter a cow for a lowly Big Mac would probably be punishable by death. A couple McChickens, a medium fry and a small sprite will suffice. I traipse back through the atmospheric river to the KFC. At first I have reservations about eating McDonald's in a KFC, but

Akash reassures me that nobody cares at all. I feel silly for having even an inkling of respect for KFC.

I bite into the classic chicken sandwich. I discover that one constant across space and time is that every McChicken has a touch too much mayonnaise. Still, this sandwich is way better than its US counterpart. It's real, unmashed chicken with a golden, supple crust rich with an Indian spice palette. I'm glad I got two. The fries are very comparable to the US: tasty but soggy. The Sprite is made with real sugar, but is even sweeter than back home. Not my cup of tea. I'll take the high fructose corn syrup Sprite to the bank.

The conversation turns to Bollywood. I jest to Akash that he is next up with his impeccable singing talent, but he responds with a sobering denial. Even if he was the most talented actor and showman in the world, the darker shade of his skin would likely bar him from fame. Most Bollywood actors are fair skinned. I ask if this is a relic of British colonization, and Akash rejects the notion. Even before colonization, he attests that fair skin was associated with wealth and power. This is a tough pill to swallow, but the stigmas around skin color are improving in India. The caste system persists, ebbing slowly. In Southern India, the discrimination and microaggressions are less prominent due to the darker average complexion. Much like the US, India is rife with both skin color and religious discrimination.

We take a tuk tuk back to the hotel and sleep quickly claims me, stomach loaded with chicken and a touch of too much mayonnaise.

June 11

Akash compels us to breakfast around 10AM. I have the patented post-McDonald's bleakness. Every single time I have their food, I wish I hadn't. Never stops me from going back in two to three months, though. We pull up to the restaurant in our small white Hyundai and Akash tosses the keys to the valet. Another attendant guides us to the safety of the awning under an umbrella. It's raining sideways so the protection is limited. I step gingerly through the

puddles in my Crocs. The menu is jam packed with a million items, so Akash recommends some of his favorites. We start with Mangalore buns. The puffy dough is piping hot and scalds my fingertips, but I go back for more, tearing apart the roll into bite-sized portions so they cool quicker. I order a Palak Dosa for my main course, a crepe-like wrap made with spinach and filled with a hearty potato onion curry melange. Breaking local convention, I top it off with a black coffee. The coffee comes in a small copper chalice within a larger copper bowl. I go to pick up the steaming drink, touching the rim of the drink. I peel my hand away, shrinking back.

"Dude what? Who decided to put a hot drink in a metal cup?"

Akash snickers, picking his milk coffee up with no complaints, pouring it into the larger bowl. The larger bowl is there to allow the coffee to cool for drinking. He swishes it around the bowl like a fine bordeaux. This custom is frustrating to me at first, perturbation confounded by the thin light roast coffee which is not my preference. As I sip the acidic brew I warm up to the flavor profile. It's like an americano—a bit watered down but pleasantly subtle. I leave breakfast in a good mood, caffeine raising a grin.

A brief respite at our hotel later, we emerge from our food comas and head back to the local mall for some shopping. We traverse our way through the expanse. It reminds me of a corporate, unimaginative, and bright version of the Mines of Moria in the Lord of the Rings; the scale of the complex is tremendous, almost unending. We park on the roof, and wade through the hustle and bustle. Many wear burkas. Islam is strong in Mangalore despite systemic discrimination from the government. Akash tells us that the current administration has banned the hijab in schools. I disagree with this verdict. Considering the prospect of the legality of burkas in school makes me pause, though. Previously, I saw burkas as a symbol of oppression of women. That said, if I stand for freedom of expression, where do I draw the line? Would people wear the burka if not for male urging? Regardless, I don't feel it is my place to judge a religion I am not well versed in. I just want everyone to be able to be their full selves.

Our primary objective today is to get a gift for Akash's parents. In one of the department stores, we purchase matching perfumes for him and her, Andrew smelling our other options with a practiced nose. While we make the sale, Akash encourages me to try on a kurta, a traditional collarless tunic embroidered with intricate patterns. I try on a red and gold one, feeling regal in the dressing room. I feel like the embodiment of cultural appropriation, but Akash gives me the prevailing head shake of approval with a wide smile. It's far more comfy than any formal western clothes. I buy the tunic.

For lunch, Akash shows us the pleasures of Indo-Chinese food. I'm expecting Indian-Chinese fusion food, but the restaurant serves us familiar Chinese food with perhaps a hint of Indian spicing. I almost feel like I'm back in SF—the food, the fish tanks lining the walls, and the US top 100 pop songs blasting from the speakers all remind me of home. This illusion is shattered once we step back outside of the restaurant into the swarm of Mangalore.

My new kurta is ideal for our next adventure: a trip to a local Hindu temple known as Kadri Sri Manjunatha Temple. When we arrive in the parking lot, Akash tells us to take off our shoes. We walk delicately up the hill to the temple entrance. I can't help but think of the seminal Worms paper by Miguel and Kremer on how intestinal worms arise by a lack of shoes and the efficacy of deworming drugs. Entering underneath gates of blue and gold, we pass through a metal detector, a stopgap against anti-Hindu terrorism.

We mill around the courtyards and delve into dimly lit shrines to different Hindu gods. Each shrine has a different expected ritual, often entailing walking around in a circle and receiving a clay mark on the forehead. In the center of the courtyard there is a large shrine to the chief deity of the temple, Manjunatha. The bronze statue is enclosed to the public except by view, lying down a deep dark passageway. With my bad eyesight I can't make out much, but the spectacle radiates power and ominousness. Having observed each shrine, we climb stairs up to a raised level overlooking the complex of shrines we visited. The crenellations of gold, blue and white sparkle in the sunlight, adorning the roof of each shrine. Stairs tower above us still,

beckoning us into the forest. Akash begins the climb and we follow suit. We are rewarded for our cardio; a brilliant green statue of Hanuman, the legendary monkey warrior of Hindu mythology stands at attention shrouded in the trees, 10 meters tall. We walk around the statue to show respect, and snap some pictures. They fail to capture the nobility and scale of the statue.

We descend to the ridge that banks around the upper levels of the temple. Akash guides us to a set of emerald green pools set in stone where several worshippers wash themselves. These baths are said to cleanse the bather from negativity. I can't say that they look clean, but Akash assures us that the fish in the pools keep them cleaner than you might expect. Even so, none of us venture a bath. All agree that our bare feet ache, so we head back to the hotel. The feelings of foreboding power of the temple emanate within me.

June 12

In the morning, I rise for a swift breakfast of champions: a couple peanut butter Clif Bars and a swig of bottled water. I relish a final shower with strong pressure and hot water, and take the elevator down for checkout. Before we leave Mangalore, we return to Akash's alma mater to present about graduate school opportunities abroad. As expected, we are greeted by the administrators of the arts and sciences department. They direct us into a lecture hall reminiscent of the USF classrooms, but with a raised dais with a table and five chairs facing the audience below the projector screen. The administrators usher into the hall, and we all take off our shoes as is custom in almost all buildings. In the US, shoes are an important mark of formality and respect; a proper choice of shoes complements your outfit and reflects the gravity of the gathering. Here, sandals are the choicest shoes for most occasions.

The presentation begins with loquacious speeches from the administrations exalting our wisdom and thanking us for our presence. We are each presented with roses once again before Akash begins his own declarations of gratitude. At long last, Akash begins his presentation on

his own personal journey to USF. I've heard some before but much is new to me. For instance, obtaining a US visa if you are from India is like walking a tightrope—one false move and you will be rejected, even if that move is saying you don't plan to return to India. In his six person group at the consulate, everyone but him got rejected, including a man a job at a bank in the US already lined up.

Akash describes the perils of applying to graduate school abroad. There are many malicious "agents" which seek steep payments in return for shady guarantees of acceptance to a program. The quality of these programs is often overstated and not what the students are after, so Akash warns against using agents. Better to just apply directly. The question emerges on how to find places to apply. Akash details the importance of personal research into prospective universities and programs, eyebrows raised in sincerity. He wraps up with a discussion of scholarships, fellowships, and loans. While grad school abroad is exorbitantly expensive, he explains how to find and apply for abundant scholarships. He cautions his juniors in the audience about loan sharks and the ruthless US student loan system. In closing, he fields questions from the audience, which trickle forward at first and then come in a torrent. He's hesitant to share specifics into different universities due to his personal biases being imparted unto the audience. I think it's better this way. People should draw their own educated conclusions about a decision as significant as where to attend grad school.

We stick around a bit after the presentation and Andrew, Stanley and I field some freebie questions about the US and our experiences. I emphasize the importance of finding universities with professors whose research suits your interests, citing the wealth of lauded behavioral economists at USF as a reason for my enrollment. We find ourselves trickling out of the lecture hall and over to the campus snack bar, where people force a spicy veggie sandwich and a watermelon juice down my gullet.

Then, it's back to Kadaba through dense midday traffic. I am reminded of the Rush Hour gridlock puzzle game that I enjoyed in my childhood—cars going every which way, letting chaos

rule. After what seems like an eternity we emerge from the automotive battlefield as the road clears. On the two hour drive we discuss the state of Indian clothes production as we pass warehouses filled with merchandise. Akash tells us that these stores contain surplus clothing and other factory products that have slight imperfections. In a department store, an Adidas shirt might cost ₹3200 rupees, but a factory reject of almost identical quality produced legitimately might cost ₹100 rupees. Our global society is so hellbent on consumerism, but our standards are also so unreasonably high.

We pull into Akash's driveway to the familiar scent of coconut oil and stewing chicken. It's late afternoon, and we're all hungry. We scarf down a nice home cooked meal and go to sleep soon thereafter. Tomorrow is our first day of fieldwork! Everything is prepared.

June 13

The pleasant, relaxed evening marked by anticipation the night before contrasts sharply with today. Today might as well be armageddon. I've come down with a demonic case of food poisoning. Even thinking the word biriyani or seafood prompts a dash to the restroom. Diarrhea follows. I've prepared well with medication, but flimsy floodgates can only take me so far against a natural disaster. I lie on the floor in blankets trying to stay cool against my rising fever, curling around my aching stomach, rejecting even water. People said I would get sick. I was not ready.

I spend the day hanging on to more below average Netflix movies, trying to distract myself from the devil inside me. Although I'm not religious, I look up at the crucifix adorning Akash's doorway more than once. It's like someone is revving a motorbike in my intestines.

The team returns from the first sessions of fieldwork. It's not a smashing success, but it's a promising start. Some key procedural elements were forgotten, and the team didn't have the phones required for the game treatment arm. Still, the baseline survey alone took far longer than expected—almost one and a half hours. Subjects struggle with reading comprehension as well as writing. Even when the questions were asked verbally, Akash says participants seemed

to have issues discerning that these were hypothetical scenarios; we were not offering them a choice of a cow and goat with different yield structures. Payment also presents challenges. The subjects refused to accept payment for their participation as a token of respect to us. Akash, quick on his feet, told them that the ₹200 rupee stipend was a gift to them. They accept our "gifts". Framing of gifts and respectful gestures seems to be key to Indian society; much emphasis is placed on elaborate displays of gratitude.

In the evening we head to the doctor's office. Once again, the doctor is helpful. He's almost positive it's food poisoning, and he prescribes an injection for nausea, a fever reducer and some other unidentified pills. The injection site is across the street in the hospital. We are greeted warmly by nurses, who record some administrative information as they ask about me. I utter pleasantries to the best of my ability, as they prepare the injection. As always, I close my eyes and take slow deep breaths, slowing my heart rate. I am surprised when the nurse begins massaging my hand instead of my upper inner wrist, where shots always go in the US. They slide the needle just under the skin on the back of my hand and into the veins there. One of the last places I would have thought to administer an injection, but everything works out. There is a bit of swelling at first topped by a prick of blood, but the ridge on my hand soon retreats. All told, the medication costs less than ₹300 rupees. Moreover, the injection at the hospital costs only ₹5 rupees.

With the combined strength of the nausea injection and the diarrhea medication, my symptoms lessen. That said, food is still out of the question. I return to my nest and fall asleep.

June 14

Today is my birthday. It is an echo of yesterday, stalwart stomach pain persisting. There will be no celebration today. Again, I miss out on fieldwork, lying around and sulking all day. This is the toughest day of my summer in India so far. Alone in the dark, hot room, sick as a swampy rag, over 8000 miles from home, I wish I was in my own bed. My parents give me a call, but I'm

not too chipper nor interactive. Birthday wishes from friends don't cheer me up either. Health is something we take for granted until it evades our grasp.

Akash tells me the team ran into similar issues with the game group, but the aspirations intervention went swimmingly. The enumerators share amusing stories of interactions with subjects. One of the older women asked Pooja, one of our enumerators, if she was married. When she confessed that she was not, the lady informed her that her son was a successful mechanical engineer in Dubai, and asked if she was looking for a husband. Pooja politely declined the advances. This was not an isolated incident, though. Anushka also received similar proposals. While I've heard stories of IDEC students being rebuffed by communities, if anything, our group is facing issues of opposite polarity.

I continue to rest until dinner time. At the table, I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place. That is, between looking down at my own food and watching other people eat. It's not that the food is at all bad, my stomach just has a personal vendetta against food at the moment. I close my eyes and try to clear my mind. Prawns biryani is being shouted from the rooftops in my tired mind. Giving my best effort, I have a few cucumber slices and some rice—all I can stomach.

Akash's dad clears the plates but lethargy has me glued to my seat. Uncle, Akash and I talk about the differences between the US and India. Given that Akash's father is an acclaimed civil engineer, I am unsurprised when the conversation turns to urban planning and the hyperboles that are Indian metropolises. India is the most populous country in the world with 1.4 billion people, or 140 crores of people as Uncle says. Indian cardinal numbers don't rely on millions or billions, instead describing amounts in terms of groups of 100,000 (lakhs) and 10,000,000 (crores). This unique system emanates from time immemorial, from the Sanskrit/Vedic numbering system. While it is common to encounter different units of measure in our world, never before have I come across a different number system in everyday life.

The colossal population is not apparent to an observer like me in the countryside. Kadaba does not strike me as a densely populated area, Mangalore sure did. While 60% of India's population does live in rural areas, the 40% in urban areas live in close confines. Mumbai is the strongest example of a crowded Indian, which lies 900km up the west Indian coast from Mangalore. Much like San Francisco, Mumbai cannot sprawl out into suburbs to combat issues of population density. Unlike SF, Mumbai is home to over 21 million people, or 2.1 crores, with a population density about three times greater than NYC. Akash points to the small bathroom off his parent's room: the size of a Mumbai apartment for a whole family, and not a cheap one. Still, Mumbai represents a hope for a better life for many people—it's the finance capital of India. Rapid urbanization chokes many, but some urban migrants do achieve their dreams. Hope remains.

Of all the things about Mumbai that Akash and his dad pelt me with, descriptions of the train system are the most incomprehensible. About eight million passengers commute through the Mumbai train network daily. In San Francisco, about 40 million passengers use public transit annually. Mumbai hits the total number of annual travelers of SF in just five days. I've often grumbled to myself about a crowded 38R bus, but Akash assures me I know nothing of crowded public transportation at all. Every train in Mumbai, commuters pack themselves in like sardines in a hydraulic press. People count themselves lucky if they can move any of their extremities at all, or look down at their feet. I'm not claustrophobic, but I suspect 30 seconds on a Mumbai train might change that. Despite the lack of room to move, people seldom miss their stops. This is one of the great mysteries of the universe according to Akash. India seems to be home to many of those.

June 15

The medications are an immense help, and I deem myself ready for fieldwork. We have two simultaneous self-help group sessions to attend, so we split into two subgroups. My group

consists of Andrew, Pooja, Sushrith and . Akash has commandeered an enclosed jeep from his church. Most vehicles are monochromed here, and this jeep is no different, “St. Mary’s” adorning its upper windshield. With a black canvas roof and a dark green paint job, it looks like something out of the original Jurassic Park movie. Akash’s dad has graciously agreed to drive us to the meeting place today. As I pop into the front seat, the rest of the team slides into the two rows of bench seating which are perpendicular to the direction of travel. Uncle revs the engine and wiggles his eyebrows at me, grinning mischievously. It sounds like an ancient man coughing into a megaphone.

We wind through the bumpy backroads, deep into the jungle forest. We come across a small settlement of houses and stores, then bank up a steep hill to another tight group of houses. At the end of the path there is an open air cement building where several women chat. Removing our shoes, we join them in the dusty center of the concrete floor. Introducing ourselves, we show our respect for the subjects by greeting them with our hand to our heart as if we are plucking it. A couple women hurry over plastic chairs for Andrew and me. We accept them with gratitude, the humidity sapping our strength.

Within 15 minutes, nine out of the expected 13 women from this self-help group have joined us. They sit in a semicircle on the floor in front of us in traditional dresses of pink and green and blue with shiny sashes, simple golden jewelry adorning their wrists and necks. They vary in age and height, but they all share a smile of anticipation. As do we.

Pooja, our extroverted enumerator, steps forward to address the subjects in Kannada. Andrew and I nod and give reverent signs of gratitude and respect as Pooja introduces us. Indian introductions are lengthy, but Pooja keeps this one to a minimum. The women don’t speak English, and we don’t speak Kannada, so Andrew and I can’t communicate much—best to let Pooja and Sushrith do most of the talking.

Through randomization, we have earmarked this group as an interaction group. That said, because we have not yet procured extra phones for those who do not have touch phones,

we will only be doing the baseline survey and the aspirations intervention today. I unload all the baseline surveys from my backpack and hand them out with accompanying pens. The survey itself is slow going for our subjects. All of them need some sort of assistance—some need help with reading, some with writing, others with Kannada. Many speak Tulu, with Kannada as an understood spoken language but are not sufficiently literate to fill out the Kannada survey on their own. Pooja and Sushrith guide them through the questions, kneeling and explaining line by line. It's a long survey, and it takes an hour and a half for all subjects to complete. Andrew and I gather the finished questionnaires and pens. Truthfully, we feel somewhat useless without being able to communicate directly with the subjects. We are grateful for the diligence and focus of our enumerators.

We have already exceeded our allotted time, and a couple of the subjects have tasks and work to attend to. We have Pooja explain to Suganda, the representative of the SKDRDP that leads the self-help group, that we would like a few more minutes if they'll allow it. They accept, so I take my computer out and flip it open to the aspirations video we have prepared. The video shows three women who have successfully implemented what they have learned from their own self-help groups into burgeoning small businesses, selling plates crafted from palm fronds or handcrafted tea. Ambient, upbeat music plays in the background, half to mask other background noises in the video, half to lend sentiment to the stories. We hope that the subjects view this video as a source of inspiration to take the reins of their own lives and push for something better. Their eyes locked to the screen, the group hangs on every word of the video. After 10 minutes, our short documentary is complete. We follow it up with a short discussion of the video in a socratic seminar format. The women share smaller scale stories in their own lives. Through Pooja, I learn that it is through loans from this group that have allowed one of the subjects to send their son to college. This group does not seem to be short on aspirations. I wonder if the aspirations treatment may not yield significant results if all groups in our sample are not defined by fatalistic attitudes. Given my sparse knowledge of the rigid Indian

caste system, I did not expect to see such desire for a better life, and I am glad to see motivation coursing through our subjects even if our results will be insignificant.

We rest at the house until our afternoon session. The whole team piles into the jeep and we delve deep into the Kadaba forest. Each turn makes us question the last. Akash is confident though, decreeing his professionalism as a navigator. Seconds after his proclamation, he stalls the car on a muddy hill—our hearts in our mouths as the behemoth slides backward for an instant. Soon enough though, we arrive at our quarry, a compound far along a meandering dirt road. A wall of hedges and vines traces the perimeter, and we enter through a small metal gate—one of those gates which you could easily step over but requires you to make a slightly immoral act to enter the premises. 20 women sit in the cramped patio on the floor in a circle, chatting. By my standards, we are disrespectfully late, but I've learned that India operates on a different clock. Five minutes is 10 minutes, 10 minutes is 30 minutes. We are 10 Indian minutes late, but the women are excited to see us. Today is an aspirations treatment group, so we spend about an hour filling out the baseline survey with the subjects. Again, I can't help much in this regard due to the language barrier, but this is not a concern due to our enumerators and Akash being so capable. They flex between Tulu and Kannada like nothing, writing down answers in Kannada for most of the subjects. Like yesterday's session, many of the subjects struggle to imagine buying something they never have. We read them word problems, and they reject the notion that they are in the scenario. When Akash asks one woman about inflation, she provides the following anecdote to illustrate falling purchasing power as inflation persists: The first day, you buy a big sack of rice. The second day, you buy a small sack of rice. The third day, you can fit the grains of rice in the palm of your hand.

Hearing this simple parable of an anecdote made me reconsider our subjects' capacity for imagination. At first I figured they weren't accustomed to imagining, but now I see that they just are not used to word problems. I wonder if we can frame the numeracy-testing word problems in alternate phrasings such that they are more familiar.

During the aspirations intervention, one woman speaks up in reflection. Before joining the self-help group, she had no home and was doing her best to subsist with her children. To many women here, gold jewelry is inseparable from their sense of self. Akash says a woman's jewelry is more than gold, especially the *karimani*, which represents marriage. Many would give their life before giving up their *karimani*. Perhaps it was because her husband was a belligerent drunk, perhaps it was due to her financial desperation, but she was forced to use her *karimani* as a collateral for a loan. When the loan didn't pan out as she hoped, she was forced to sell the rest of her gold to subsist. She remained adamant that one day she would buy her gold back, but no one would give her a loan, nobody would give her any assistance. She was on her last legs.

With some of her last remaining funds, she paid the ₹10 rupee entry fee to join the self-help group. Through the group, she was able to take out a loan of ₹5,000 rupees, or about $60 dollars. An additional ₹5,000 rupees would be provided to her once she paid the first loan back. With the first loan, she built her family a rudimentary house and was able to begin some farming outside her home. After paying it back, she was awarded the second installment of the loan, and with this she bought a couple cows and expanded her home to make it more comfortable. Having built up credit, she was able to secure loan and after loan, one at a time, careful not to become overleveraged. Her house, farm and livestock group swelled into health along with her family, and she was able to reclaim her jewelry. Not long after, she began a business as a maid for wealthy families in the area. After 20 years of maid service, she serves many households and earns a monthly income of ₹45,000 rupees, much higher than the median income in India. In fact, Akash notes that most recent graduates for a master's program would be more than pleased with a monthly salary of ₹30,000 rupees. I realize our aspirations video probably provided little insight to this entrepreneur, but perhaps her story can do more than the video ever did for the rest of the cohort. It's great to see an example of the power of the self-help

groups at work. With an entry fee of ₹10 rupees and hard work, she was able to pull herself up by her bootstraps and become a successful entrepreneur with the help of the loans.

Pooja shows me videos of local Hindu demigods possessing people on the ride home. An avatar adorned in red and white and gold with a towering semicircular headdress dips its head down and whips it back up, dancing around an enclosed circle of spectators. She shows me another, who climbs a tree looking to escape the spectators. If he makes his escape, he will disappear, never to be seen again. She shows me more, more and more of these demigods. They all share one common denominator: their humanity has ebbed in their trance, taken over by the will of the demigod. They walk through fire on hot coals and perform other such feats. I can almost see the spirit coursing through them.

Later that night, everyone has gone to bed but Akash and I. We eat late here, around 8:30 PM, and I need to stay up to finish digesting. I bring up the demigod videos, curious to see what a practicing Christian might think about the phenomena. Many US Christians would probably condemn these demigod ceremonies, but Akash accepts them. He tells me the god of this region is Nagadevaru, the Serpent God. Churches in the area accept the existence of Nagadevaru**,** and it is said that angering the gods and demigods (gods which possess humans) could provoke their retribution. Akash tells me a story that is known in Kadaba.

Once, a man was stranded by the roadside as he had run out of money to reach his destination. Searching for help, he spied an old man in the brush, and on a whim, he asked the man for some money to aid him on his journey. The sitting man did not appear to be of wealth or many worldly possessions whatsoever. Nonetheless, surprising the traveler, the old man produced a ₹500 rupee note, not a paltry sum, and handed it over. When the traveler asked the old man how he might repay him, the old man replied that he would find him—not to worry. Confused but thankful, the traveler went on his way, counting his blessings. Later, he attended a ceremony of a demigod, Koragajja, far, far away from his run-in with the old gentleman. The traveler was appreciating the spectacle when the demigod locked eyes with him and bee-lined

to his position in the crowd. Koragajja stood in front of the traveler, gaze unwavering. Then, the demigod demanded that the man repay the ₹500 rupee loan to him, which had long since left his immediate memory. Eyes like platters, the traveler returned the sum.

There are many such tales of demigods that lack complete explanations without accounting for a belief in the spirits. While these demigods originate from Hinduism, the population at large, even of different faiths, has great reverence for these divine beings. The universal spirituality that extends across religion here is a great blessing in my eyes. With common beliefs and values, xenophobia is less likely to crop up. Most people here are deeply spiritual regardless of religion, Akash included. Spirituality is a pillar of society here. Akash says that much like today's science would be incomprehensible to those of ages past, one day the human soul and the spiritual connections it makes will be understood to a level that we cannot foresee in the present day.

The universal spirituality of India is in stark contrast to the secularism of the US. While there are pervasive Christian values and influences that can be found in the US, in San Francisco, we live in a bastion of skepticism of the paranormal. Here, spirituality is the underlying fabric which informs society's unfurling.

June 16

We ease into the weekend with just one session—only two self-help groups meet on Friday. Luckily, they both have the same meeting time and both in Valya, a forested area coated in banana trees and rubber tree plantations. Our meeting place is a palatial house in a hollowed section of a hilly crest. The landscaping leaves a towering wall of red dirt exposed where a complete hill once was. It reminds me of Half Dome in Yosemite, except it is only about 20 feet tall and made of soil. One can see the claw marks in the wall where the landscaping machine chewed through the earth to carve out this area. There are two young cows which munch on

foliage in a lean-to behind the patio where a couple of women sit waiting. I spy a coveted AC unit on the wall of the house, a sure sign of luxurious living.

We're waiting for about half our subjects to show. I complain about how people are always late here. Akash, kind of fed up, explains to me that the reason people are late here is because they do not have the privilege of effective transportation. Many people walk through the dirt paths after a hard day of chores and work. Besides, our subjects are doing us a favor by taking up their precious time in their groups. I realize that the convention of timeliness that we raise up in the US is a privilege in and of itself. I feel like a spoiled brat and keep future insolent comments to myself.

The subjects trickle in until the patio is filled. As is customary, the leaders light the incense of the shrine. We stand and sing the national anthem together. Or, rather, the others sing while Andrew, Stanley and I nod along, oblivious to the lyrics. Then comes the gifting of the flower bouquets. They are handpicked and hand wrapped. The usual recipe entails some ferns on the outside, the interior bright with flowers of yellow and red. We accept them, nodding in reverence.

This group is a game treatment group—just the baseline survey to complete today. We'll start playing the game next week. The whole team is present, so there's nothing to do for me except hand out pens and make sure everyone is comfortable. That, and sit and do my best to bear the sweltering heat and humidity. It's about 90 degrees F, about average for midday in the forests of Kadaba. The humidity is spiking though, around 85%, which has us praying for cooling rain. The slightest breeze compels Andrew and me to tip our heads back in pleasure. They bring tan sugar cookies and a purple juice with what looks like chia seeds dotting the beverage.

Before we leave, Akash explains the loose premise of the game and we make sure that we have enough touch phones to cover for those who don't have access to one. Many women only have a simple keypad phone with a small screen, but have access to a smartphone within

their immediate household. We compel them to bring the smartphones they have access to for their next meeting. As we are about to leave, Pooja and Anushka are called to have a coffee in the main house. I'm surprised when they just go with it, there's no way they know the residents. But Akash admits this is common practice here. We return to Akash's house through the dilapidated road for a team dinner before the enumerators head back to their accommodations.

June 17

A much needed rest day stretches before us before the impending maelstrom of Sunday. I sleep through breakfast, waking up just in time for lunch. I have a light lunch, evading Uncle's insistence that I eat more by rehashing that my stomach is not feeling right. In the evening, our additional enumerators from Aloysius College come to supplement our four core enumerators. They number six in all: Neil, Apoorva, Daniya, Suizy, Manasa, and Megha. A lively bunch, one can tell at a glance that they are the green recruits of our group.

We sit down as a full team around Akash's dining room table which is covered in a sparkly blue tablecloth. While they may be a bit younger, the new enumerators have brains like sponges. They soak the plans for tomorrow as outlined by Akash, eagerness apparent. Tomorrow will be nothing short of hectic. Throughout the week, we have met with 12 groups. On Sunday alone, we are set to meet with 21 self-help groups, which we have divided into the three blocks: morning, midday and afternoon. The bulk of the groups meet in the morning, and numbers ease off as the day advances. We relay the schedule and assign the enumerators to team leaders. Andrew and I will be mixing and matching with Pooja, Megha and Daniya for most of the day.

Our next step is a baseline survey walkthrough. Of course, it is in Kannada. I sit back and observe, absorbing nothing but an English word here and there. After all questions have been resolved, I add a few procedural points that are key in data collection: include full names, self-help group names at the top of the page, and check over the survey after it has been

completed. These boring trivialities have everyone craving sleep, and we cave to the desire in short order, retreating to our quarters.

June 18

We convene downstairs at 8AM. Enumerators rush around the living room, survey copies being allocated and sorted according to the number of subjects in each group. Each batch has a neat colored rubber band holding them together. I hope to emulate the rubber band and hold my team together in the trials that await us.

Uncle drives us to a weathered school in Renjilady where we meet our first two groups. Across the street from a couple scattered shops at a crossroads, the crenelated school gates open to an expansive dirt courtyard. Uncle peels through the gates and towards the tight faculty parking lot. We pile out of the car. The waiting subjects and Suguna hail us toward an outdoor corridor which trims a squat school building—just enough room to conduct our business.

This group is slated to receive the aspiration treatment. Data collection for our baseline goes well, with Pooja leading the charge. Three school children sit and watch us on nearby steps. As we finish up the survey, one of them asks for a pen, which we have in droves. I grant her wish.

It's blustery out, and Pooja again proves her worth by bringing an external speaker to amplify the volume of our aspirations video. Without it, the limited volume of my laptop speakers may have posed an issue. We close with a discussion of the video, which was well received. As we are wrapping up, Akash gives me a call—reinforcements are needed at the 90 person session that Akash, Stanley and six of the enumerators are managing.

We keep pleasantries and conversation truncated, citing that we are needed elsewhere. Uncle takes us at top speed through the narrow forest roads, left hand flashing over the clutch like a rally car driver. At the top of a steep hill lies another school, much more isolated than our first site. The school is a single building, long and skinny with many adjacent classrooms. As we

approach, small children flow around me like a school of fish, staring at me unwaveringly. We enter the school building proper and find many circles of women guided by our enumerators through the survey. Every subject here has been assigned to the control group, so there's just the baseline survey to complete. With the additional strength lent by the enumerators we brought over, the surveying wraps up within 30 minutes. The classroom I'm in is being co-opted by another group who needs the space and I head outside to wait outside of the stuffy room. Shy kids giggle and wave at me, and I wave back. They keep their distance at first but this all changes when a gangly tiny boy rushes up to me and grabs my wrist. Unabashed, he clutches for my phone. I give it to him. He is absorbed by the device, and I see him virtually fall into the screen. I invite him to take a picture with me. Bending down, we're the same height when I'm on one knee. I smile and snap the photo.

Many other kids follow suit and I take a picture with all of us waving together. I look to Akash, asking if I can send the pictures to the school or their parents. Akash shakes his head solemnly—no one here has touch phones and they are not able to receive pictures. I just hope that the children remember meeting me with as fond a memory as the memory I have of them. A media car pulls into the school right as we are leaving for the next site: Kadaba.

"They have come to interview you," Andrew tells me in jest, grinning broadly.

I give him a flat stare.

Our next site is in the countryside of Kadaba. On the way, Uncle hails a street vendor who hurries to the lowering car window. He returns with several crunchy nut snacks that have chilis on the interior. We have no time for lunch today. Duty calls. The site is a picturesque jungle abode at the bottom of a hill, ringed by banana and coconut trees. A well lies in the middle of the compound, with two cows resting on trimmed brush next to a coup of chickens. A child rides his bike circling us, grinning as we pick our way through the surrounding grasses to the meeting patio.

I hand out pens and surveys as Pooja provides introductory remarks. Pooja runs the subjects through the baseline at record pace. They are receptive subjects. I set up the aspirations documentary as the last surveys are completed, hitting play once we are prepared. Andrew calls me mid-video, and I step away to talk on the phone by the cows. Reinforcements are needed at their location. We guide the subjects through the discussion questions, then it's my turn to be guided. It's a 20 minute walk through the trails of Kadaba to the other group's location. Nalini, a kindergarten teacher and member of this self-help group, is our companion on the hike. I put my crocs in sport mode as we begin our trek along a narrow dirt road. Suddenly, Nalini cuts into the forest to our left, which is on a steep incline. There's no path, just some brush that is marginally trodden down. Back in the US, this would be known as bushwhacking. Our footwear is less than ideal for such matters, with Nalini venturing to wear platform flip flops. I can't help but contemplate all the insects and snakes that are in the underbrush around us. I try to make my steps as loud as possible behind Nalini so as to alert all snakes to my passage. After jumping over some small creeks and ditches, we emerge onto a gravel road.

Nalini stops in her tracks, holding us back. A lithe form shakes the brush on the side of the road, 10 feet in front of where we had just exited the forest. My adrenaline spikes. My eyes zone in on the threat: a writhing snake of black and white wrestling a mortally wounded lizard. Our party stands back as we watch the snake drag its prey deeper into the foliage. Shaken, we scurry past the bloody scene, skirting around the edge of the path to create maximum distance. I can't help but think of Nagadevaru, the resident serpent god of the region.

The rest of our walk is far less eventful, and we arrive at our destination within 15 minutes. This neighborhood is experiencing a wave of construction of homes, big piles of earth and construction materials litter the side of the path. Our meeting place is a basic home, surrounded by other similarly compact residences. There's no room for me to sit inside, but I proffer my computer to Andrew to play the aspirations video when the time comes. Pooja assists

the other enumerators. I lean on the wall outside in the light rain under the eaves. A little time alone is nice.

Our last session is in Valya, a simple control group. The whole team will be joining us but we're an hour late. My cortisol levels spike as I imagine making all these busy people wait on us. When we arrive, we spy a small van pulling up just ahead. A critical mass of the group we're meeting with disembarks. India time has saved us—maybe this alternate take on timeliness isn't so bad.

Tiredness is apparent in all of us and the rain is coming down now in sheets. The gathering takes place in a quaint home with floral wallpaper, bright colors, and a tank filled with bulbous fish. A maroon couch looks very welcoming, and I plop down after handing out the surveys and pens. Our enumerators get to work on the baseline, marking the subjects answers with fervor. Surveys are laid out before our enumerators in fan-like formations, subjects sitting in semicircles of three and four. They go down the line of surveys, accounting for all subjects in their subgroup before moving onto the next question. Once the surveys are completed, we shake hands with the subjects, touching our hearts in respect. We leave in a tired daze from a long day.

June 19

We can sleep in today because our first and only session is at 2PM. That said, my enigma of an internal clock wakes me up at 7AM. The enumerators who joined us just for the weekend leave to catch the bus, and we bid them farewell until next Saturday. I chat with the remaining core enumerators after breakfast. They ask about Netflix and Spotify subscriptions in the US, raising their eyebrows when I tell them the going prices. I am equivalently shocked when they tell me recurring billing is not an option here. Each month, to renew a subscription the customers have to call a local office. Perhaps this lack of recurring billing is a tactic from the

government to shield its citizens from unwanted charges. I, for one, know the frustration of realizing you've been paying for a service you don't even want.

Credit cards are also different here. They're a show of wealth, with middle class people preferring debit cards via Google Pay. Almost all credit cards require a down payment equal to the monthly credit limit, gatekeeping those without sufficient savings. But this is changing. New cards from Slice emulate US credit cards in that no down payment is required. While trust and reciprocity are cornerstones of Indian local society, it appears that credit markets are far less trusting of potential customers.

Akash expands on the history of Indian monetary policy. In past years, "black money," or untaxed cash played a vital role in the economy. Black money is generated primarily through individuals underreporting their income and receiving the lion's share in cash untaxed. Going to a store, you have two options for pricing: black money or white money. If paying in black money, prices are cheaper and both you and the merchant are able to evade taxes. This is reminiscent of tax evasion done by cash only US stores. I ask Akash why you wouldn't pay in black money if you had it—it's better for both parties in the transaction. It comes down to a question of whether or not you take issue with shorting the government on the taxes it requires to run. If you are skirting around poverty, this is not even a question to consider. If there's no chance of being caught, people will choose the black money route.

Estimates from the World Bank and the IMF suggest that black money accounts for between 20-50% of India's GDP. Black money is stored by individuals in the form of gold or other physical assets like real estate.

"If the government comes knocking asking for how you got your gold, you just say it's been in the family for 10 generations," Akash says.

Due to the obvious perks of black money, it became a critical component of the economy. But politicians, understandably, took aim at the issue. It is an issue that merits careful consideration. The clear solution is to tighten up regulation and standardize tax policy across

the country, but this costs precious resources that are scarce in a developing country. Even if you rolled out all this regulation, would it even be worth it? Enforcement of regulation might cost a significant portion of the money recouped.

In 2016, the Indian government avoided this question altogether, instead opting for a policy that Akash says was out of the fantasyland of movies. In order to combat black money, the Indian government ordered the recall of all ₹500 and ₹1,000 rupee notes from circulation. Holders of these notes had one of two options: deposit them in a bank, or exchange them at the bank for notes of smaller denominations. The government presumed this would wipe the black money clean, making it white money. In a way, they were right, some previously black money became taxable. But overall, policymakers were catastrophically far from the mark.

This demonetization order was draconian for a variety of reasons. First, most black money is not held in these notes under peoples' mattresses as alarmist media led people to believe; it is held in other assets. Therefore, only a small fraction of liquid black money was wiped clean. That said, the ₹500 and ₹1,000 rupee notes accounted for roughly 75% of the total money supply. With far less money in circulation, demand for goods and services plummeted. While 86% of these notes were recalled, Akash says that many people from the Kadaba region did not even know about the demonetization of these notes and missed the deadline for their return. As such, many of the most destitute lost their savings to the policy.

Even if this policy had been effective in the short run, the Reserve Bank of India immediately reissued new ₹500 and ₹2,000 notes. It is well known that consumers are less likely to spend or break up notes of higher denominations, making the money supply more stagnant. It's hard to believe, but there was nothing stopping people from restarting the same black money transactions they were previously carrying out before the recall. Not only did the RBI strangle the money supply, they made the money that is in circulation more static. What a colossal mistake.

We've run out of time to consider India's monetary policy as we have an afternoon aspirations session to attend. There's only 10 participants, and we have the combined strength of all eight of our core members—should be light work. Once we reach the location, it begins to drizzle, which turns to rain. Rain-averse cats of orange and white dart for cover under the eaves. We huddle closer together underneath the patio, but it provides lackluster shelter from the slanted showers. The rain begins to let up as we conclude our work, the last drippings providing a calming sensation as they rattle off the tin roof. We pack up and take some pictures with the group.

Akash asks us if we want to check out the local church on the ride home. I figured it might be a chapel of modest means. Pulling up to the front gate, it's obvious that I couldn't have been more off the mark. The grounds of St. George Orthodox Syrian Church Ichilampady stretches out into an extensive compound, the white facade of the church standing tall in the distance. Three white triangle forms jut up from the base, resembling a giant A-frame house with two extra overlapping A's that are slightly offset. We park in the grass in the middle of the field. I imagine people coming in droves for mass, the field full of cars. Today, we are the only visitors.

Inside, the walls are pink, the floors red. Akash, Veron, Pooja and Andrew all give a quick prayer in front of the red curtains that shield the altar from view. I find it interesting that Pooja chooses to pray at a Christian altar as a Hindu. I abstain, not knowing what I would pray for or how to do so. We leave and mill around the grounds. Near the entrance, there is a painting of St. George, depicted on horseback stabbing a dragon with a spear.

According to legend, there was once a pagan village that was under the dominion of an evil dragon. The dragon would demand daily tributes in the form of human sacrifices for it to eat, and also sapped the resources of the land. The local government had mounted resistances against the dragon, throwing all their might at the beast. These struggles proved futile, so little hope remained.

Enter St. George, an early Christian who was a soldier in the town, honorable as they come. His religious beliefs were rejected by the locals, but he stayed true to his faith. One day, the dragon demanded that the king's daughter be sacrificed. St. George couldn't stand for this, so he fought the beast in single combat, slaying it with his lance.

Despite this, the pagan king could not have the savior of his land be a Christian, so he executed St. George. Instead of stymying the adoption of Christianity, the martyrdom of St. George caused people to convert in droves. The king, repenting and admitting his sins, caved and converted as well.

There are many versions of the legend of St. George, but this is the one recounted by Akash. The dragon in the painting of St. George's triumph looks awfully like a snake. I ask Akash if Nagadevaru, the local presiding Hindu god of snakes, would take offense to such a portrayal of a serpent's demise. The answer is no, only king cobras are heralded as aspects of Nagadevaru.

Indeed, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and Hinduism are on good terms; they are intertwined in many ways. Christianity was brought to India in 52 C.E. by Saint Thomas the Apostle—much earlier than I would have guessed. Christianity took hold here in peace due to Hinduism not having an issue with the worship of other gods. As time went on, Christianity and Hinduism melded into something new, with Christian beliefs complemented by Hindu tradition. For instance, each May, the St. George church's parish takes two days to bathe in the cleansing river behind the grounds. Other days, the gates are locked, and those who bathe in the stretch of river are said to never be seen again. Let's just say no one's bathing in the river on other days.

Under Portuguese colonial occupation, Christianity in India took a dark turn. Unlike in the first century, forced conversion was commonplace. The presence of most other Christian sects in India originate from this period of violence, including conventional Roman Catholicism. Indeed, the Portuguese even forced Catholicism on the Saint Thomas Christians. Christianity

has a rich history in India, moments of beauty and cultural growth marred by awful bouts of forced conversion and colonial rule. I find the modern blending of Christianity fascinating in India, and promise myself to have further conversations with Akash in this vein.

Returning home, Akash and Uncle have a lively conversation in the kitchen. Akash is sharing his frustration with the self-help group members' disinterest in conventional saving. Most people have little liquid cash savings, and they seem satisfied with this state. Uncle provides a mind-blowing alternate explanation: self-help group members use the group itself in lieu of traditional avenues of saving. The ease of getting a loan and the loans being backed by SKDRDP means they have very little need of liquid cash at their fingertips.

But is this way of saving necessarily better or worse? Akash and I discuss this at length. We agree that so long as they are able to cover even the shortest term expenses with loans from the group, there are few flaws in this strategy. We concur that issues may arise if demanded loan amounts exceed the mark that is available to the group—kind of like a bank run, but in reverse, where everyone aims to get loans from the same place at one time. Also, if one borrows for everything, interest rates pile up. Whereas conventional saving earns you a small amount of interest, saving through self-help groups paying interest rates. For most of our subjects though, this form of saving seems like a valid choice. It’s working thus far.

Aversion to conventional saving does throw a wrench in our study, however. The point of the game is to understand simple financial calculations, realize the value of borrowing, and weigh risks in order to build up savings. But our subjects claim that they don’t need to build up excessive savings. One of our primary goals, if not the primary goal of this study seems to be void. Akash is dejected for the moment. But I insist that this is a pretty crazy finding in and of itself—people seeing financial success with minimal savings. I tell him that this discovery merits a paper on its own, I’m sure many would be interested to have a window into the inner workings of successful, longstanding self-help groups. Still, any way you slice it, this hurdle will complicate his thesis.

June 20

Today marks the first day of week two of our experiment. At last, no more surveying—we can guide our subjects into our treatment interventions untrammeled by time constraints. The first session today is aspirations. We have adapted a local tale to our means. The story is designed to make subjects consider what they want out of life and aspire to meet those goals.

Sushrith recounts the story to the group. 200 years ago, there once was a family living in the remote forest on the distant outskirts of a township. They led a simple life of subsistence, and so did their neighbors. One day, the mother looked at her two infant children and couldn't help but imagine them living a life more filled with joy and comfort than her. With her husband, they agreed to do their best to educate their children in the far town. They required funds for transportation, tuition and many other expenses associated with getting an education for their kids. When their neighbors heard of their lofty dreams, they scoffed and shook their heads.

The resilient parents did not lose hope, and they created a step-by-step plan to achieve their goals. They began by expanding their farm. The farm required more work, but they were able to sell some surplus crops to buyers. They used this income to purchase some livestock: a cow and a couple goats. Their farm grew, but the locals once again doubted the parents' ambitious plan. The parents could not expand their farm further because the water from the well was not sufficient to water their fields. The neighbors shook their heads, resting in the fatalism that they were all too comfortable with.

Defying the naysaying neighbors, the parents had a new plan. There was a healthy stream that bubbled a mile away. In order to bring flowing water to the small community and raise up all their neighbors along with them in the process, the couple used their leisure time to begin digging the canal to their village. It was not completed overnight, involving seemingly endless toil, but one day the first drops of water were flowing past their wide-eyed neighbors. The water provided by the canal allowed the parents to expand their farm further, and their

neighbors benefitted too. Seeing all their successes, the neighbors were inspired by the couple, and put the canal water to work as well. With the revenue from their expansive farm, the parents sent their children to school, achieving their goals after years of hard work and inspiring their peers.

As Sushrith tells the story, his quiet but intentional manner of speaking has our subjects leaning in, hanging on every word. He completes the story, and then asks them the moral of the story. The subjects are on point with their answers. Education is a goal worth striving for. The key to long-term aspirations is step-by-step planning. Goal-setting is important. When you aspire to something better and strive for it, you benefit your whole community, even if they cannot see it. It's great to see them nailing the lessons we intended.

We follow up by asking how the subjects see their own story unfolding. They have goals ranging from building roads to more agricultural output to building houses to educating their children. This group is not short on aspirations, and the discussion brings out a lot of emotions. Wiping tears from her eyes, the elderly leader of the group tells us that she started this self-help group more than 21 years ago. Some of the members are involved to this day. She is so proud of them. Another woman pipes in, also wrought with emotion. To her, this group is a lactating mother, and she's the nursing baby. At this point, everyone's in their feelings.

The discussion comes to a close after more meaningful sharing. As we're leaving, Akash is thrilled. The aspirations treatment is taking hold. Our other session today is a game group, and this will be the first time we roll out the game to our subjects. We come equipped with plenty of ammunition in the form of 10 touch phones. Arriving at the site, the women excitedly tell us that they went home after our last session and asked their friends and family what they knew about interest rates. It seems even in the game group, aspirations are flowing.

Veron and Akash explain the basics of the game, and show how to use the smartphones. Many in this group have never touched a phone like this before. It's a wonder how quick they learn. As an iPhone user, I was struggling to set up the used Android phones we

bought to use for the experiment, but here I see people who have never used a smartphone before figuring it out in minutes.

The game itself proceeds with mixed results. Some subjects pick it up with ease, others can't read. Some make random selections, going bankrupt quickly. Most subjects wait for guidance, proceeding with caution. They're uncertain. There are outliers, though. One woman finishes the whole six levels in under 30 minutes, a blazing speedrunning time. What is she going to do for the next three weeks? Keep playing the game going for speedruns, we suppose.

Differing levels of aptitude with finances is a big strength of the self-help groups. When there is someone that is just a small step above you, like a second year IDEC student for me, you look to them for guidance. In turn, you help out the person that is one step below you. Akash tells me that in most of the self-help group weekly meetups, there is not much structure after balancing the books. Instead, the women chat amongst themselves, catching up on each other's lives and imparting wisdom. The more I think about it, the more awesome these female self-help groups are. I think a lot of men would benefit from this kind of arrangement, as well. That said, NGOs like SKDRDP are likely hesitant because men pose more risk than women in loan arrangements. Perhaps in the male groups, the new initiates would have to show commitment before being awarded loans.

June 21

Data entry work is set to consume today. Originally, we had planned to collect baseline data digitally on Qualtrics, a digital survey platform, but we opted for paper surveys in order to streamline the process of data collection. Although we agree it was the right decision, today we pay the price for our decision—nobody likes data entry work.

I create a spreadsheet for us to input the 90 distinct variables of the baseline. Given that we have collected about 350 baselines, we have over 30,000 observations to input. We have the combined might of the enumerators, Andrew, Akash, Stanley and I to complete the task. I

brief them on the process of entering the data into the spreadsheet. They nod their heads along; we've all done this before.

We start with the aspirations treatment group. It's slow going at first, but soon enough papers are flitting around, numbers flying into cells. Two hours or so into the slog, we take a lunch break, heading to a local spot specializing in biriyani. With my last biriyani experience resulting in food poisoning, I opt for a different dish: a spicy mutton curry, parotta and some kebab. Kebab here refers to spiced chicken nuggets, more or less. They are far better than any chicken nuggets I've had in the US. Here, kebab pieces are ordered one at a time, instead of the gluttonous 20 piece McNugget special that is so prevalent back home. It's like having one, super delicious chicken nugget. I order a couple more, topping my meal off with a Shivani soda which is a sweet lemon soda reminiscent of a more syrupy Sprite.

When we get back to the house, bellies brimming, some of us take a nap, some of us get back to work. Over the next couple hours, we grind through complications—mainly formatting issues, but with good communication and prudent suggestions from Veron, we finish inputting all the aspirations treatment group.

In the evening, I retreat to a corner of the common room in Akash's house. I attempt to prepare for my meeting with Jesse tomorrow. I pop my headphones in and assume the customary hunched coding posture. I solve the issues with the directory pathing, but stumble on the code that is supposed to unzip certain files. Time passes. I call Akash into the room, hoping that I figured it out. When it returns an error just 60 lines of code in, we sigh and pack it in for the night.

June 22

We must have left the door open with the light on, because in the morning mosquito bites cover my extremities. I've heard that mosquitoes prefer people with sweaty feet. If it's true, I am condemned to death by bug bite. I try not to itch without much success. I mention it to

Akash, fearing my chances of catching malaria. He insists that malaria is super rare here and the fact that I've been routinely taking my malaria medication brought from home lowers the chances to almost zero. There is another mosquito-borne disease to be wary of, though: dengue fever. It's not a killer disease per se, but warrants immediate care. The symptoms are flu-like—fever, headache, nausea—with red rashes thrown in. I can only hope I don't get it.

After breakfast, we have an interaction session to facilitate. To Pooja's chagrin, it's the group with the woman who proposed marriage between Pooja and her son. We've been ribbing her all week about her betrothed—Prince Charming the Dubai Engineer. She takes the jokes good naturedly, but it's getting stale. We need new material.

Like our last aspirations session, this one produces strong emotion. Sushrith's storytelling and the following discussion brings the group leader to tears. She tells us that long ago, she didn't have the access to credit to save her son, who fell ill. He passed away, and she felt like a bystander. Instead of wallowing in mourning, she started this self-help group to bring access to credit to her friends and relatives, so that none of her loved ones would fall victim to a similar fate. Akash gives her a hug. Again, this group doesn't lack aspirations.

We dry our eyes for the game component of the interaction session; this group is receiving both aspirations and game treatments. I set up the phones with Sushrith as Veron and Akash provide instructions to the group. Anushka and Pooja comfort the group leader off to the side. As I proffer phones to the subjects, many stare at them as if it is magical. Indeed, smartphones are indistinguishable from magic to almost everyone, we just are accustomed to the wonders of modern technology.

If patience is a virtue, our enumerators are as virtuous as they come. Like the last game session, subjects catch on at different rates. This time though, we have a secret weapon on our side, so secret that not even we knew about it. Uncle, who drove the team over, takes one glance at the game and begins guiding a subject through it, perhaps too effectively. The role of enumerators is to articulate the rules and assist with technological difficulties, but Uncle takes it

a step further, getting wrapped up in the game himself. In no time the woman reaches the third level, smiling at her progress. Uncle's enthusiasm is infectious.

Before we know it, the 30 minutes allotted to the game are up. A skinny man approaches our gathering, and the leader of the group asks us to give him some money because he has been diagnosed with late-stage cancer. Judging by his facial expression, I give him what appears to be more than he expected, and shake his hand. I gaze into his sunken eyes and see someone on their last legs. It breaks my heart. As we drive home, I contemplate the fragility of life.

Since coming to India, I have often questioned my decision to do so. When the faucet doesn't work, when the power cuts off mid YouTube video, when I get bubbling heat rashes, when I suffer the devil's own food poisoning. That's when my doubts creep in. What am I doing? But seeing the gratitude in the dying man's dimmed eyes, I know that helping others is what brings my life meaning. That's why I'm here. When the mosquitoes won't stop biting, when I am allergic to everything here, when people won't stop staring at me like I'm a freak. That's when I reassure myself. I'm here to help people help themselves. I'm here to take an honest stab at understanding what development is.

June 23

The fragility of life is a common theme across this week. Our morning session is canceled due to the death of a son of one of the subjects. The amount of parents that lose a child is steep. I don't pry into specifics.

In lieu of our session, Veron and Sushrith ask me about career choices. They are both 20 years old, having just finished their bachelors. Veron asks me what the most lucrative job for an economics graduate is, and I reply that I don't know, that shouldn't be your goal so long as you have some financial stability. Making money won't make you happy; happiness should be your goal. Sush really seems to buy into it, but I don't think Veron is convinced. I'm also unsure

about telling them to follow their dreams, due to societal and parental pressures. They both admit that their parents put a lot of pressure on them to find a good career.

They ask me what my career goals are. I tell them I love school, and want to pursue a PhD in economics. Six years their senior, I'm not entirely sure what the future holds, but I reassure them that certainty is something rare indeed in careers. You just have to be ok with that. I remember the nauseating feeling of graduating college and not having any plans all too well.

Sush tells me that he will be pursuing an MBA in the fall, but he's unsure what his plans are after. I ask him what his interests are. He loves to read novels, specifically romance ones. I ask him to think about how he combines his personal interests and his professional experience into a meaningful career. There's plenty of careers that combine reading, writing and business. I encourage him to work hard to find more interests, and to take risks to find out what he does and, just as crucially, doesn't like.

Last week we missed one group on Sunday, so in the afternoon we have a make-up aspirations session. There's some exploring to do as we've never been to this location before. Our plans are further complicated when the old jeep doesn't start. Akash calls a tuk tuk to pick up Veron, Sushrith and me—the rest go ahead in the family car. We follow the car in our three-wheeled taxi, and it becomes apparent from his driving behavior that he has no idea where he is going. We stop to ask a local man strolling along the roadside. He points us down a muddy road. This less traveled path is not the ideal terrain for our vehicles. Sharp hills and troughs littered with rocks and overgrown plant life stand in our way.

One mucky incline gives Akash's compact Hyundai a run for its money. He pauses at the bottom of the hill. We spectate Akash's attempt to go up the hill from the safety of our tuk tuk. Halfway up, the wheels spin and the car slips backward. He brakes back down the hill in reverse. Against safety precautions, he tries again from farther back. Same outcome. At the

bottom of the hill, I run over to the car, motioning to roll the window down. I advise everyone to get out of the car besides Akash and try again. Already late to our session, this is our last hope.

Akash backs up further at the bottom of the hill. Stillness. Then he floors it. The car zips up the path. The wheels start to sputter in the mud and I grit my teeth—it's not going to work. Out of nowhere, the wheels catch on some entrenched rocks and the car summits. We breathe a sigh of relief.

The tuk tuk still has to prove itself. The driver pilots his taxi with a practiced hand, making it look like light work. This was the crux of the offroading and the rest is easy going. Breaking out onto a paved road, Akash thinks he spies the meeting place. We park at the top of the hill and pick our way down a slippery mud driveway to a compound of several houses in a depression between two hills. I walk with Veron in front. Stretching my legs feels good.

All the sudden, Veron freezes in his tracks. He wheels around, looking me in the eyes. Run. I have no idea what's going on, so I follow suit. My face must have been pure, unadulterated fear. Everyone starts laughing. Veron tricked me, getting me good. Or so I thought. When we get to the top of the hill, I concede that he got me. He's surprised—he was genuinely telling me to run because he saw a malevolent looking guard dog in the distance. Regardless, my heart is still racing, and everyone's still giggling.

The actual meeting place is a couple hundred yards down the road. Around the house, there is a menagerie of animals living in harmony—black and white and brown chickens, a cute squat blonde dog that yawns and stretches his back, and a big white cow with black spots. It is an uneventful session, with baseline surveys and our mini documentary going over well. The subjects reject taking money from us, but they fold once we insist that it is a gift. You don't turn down a gift here.

June 24

It's our day off, but we receive a rude awakening at 5:15AM. The dogs bark and yelp rhythmically for what seems like 30 minutes straight. I hope their vocal chords are alright, because my sleep schedule isn't. Just as I'm getting back to sleep, the Muslim call to prayer, the *adhan*, is recited over loudspeakers from the mosque down the street. The singing is beautiful, even over the muffled speakers. The voice entones wavering phrases, praising God and compelling His followers to prayer. It's a welcome break to the monotony of daily life, even for non-believers. The *adhan* is broadcasted five times a day from the spire of the turquoise mosque, just visible out of my bedroom window. There is a rotation of *muezzins* who are chosen to sing in the timeslots throughout the day. Some are more experienced singers than others.

In some Indian districts, the legality of the *adhan* is being called into question. Dissenters against the public call to prayer claim it is intrusive and annoying. Every day at sunrise it wakes me up if Akash's hungry, yapping pups don't, but I don't believe the ban to be justified. The *adhan* is an integral routine in Islam, and it's not hurting anyone. It is a broadcast of communal spirit. Indeed, the Karnataka high court recently upheld rights of public broadcast of the *adhan* over speakers systems, citing the vitality of religious tolerance outlined in the Indian constitution.

I manage to fall back asleep, waking up late for breakfast. Not to worry, though—Uncle has saved me a green onion omelet sandwich. It puts a smile on my face, reminding me of something off my dad's famous breakfast menu. After breakfast, I receive an unexpected FaceTime from my best friend John, who's staying at my apartment while I'm away. In the unit across from mine is a joint birthday party for him and my friend Katie. It seems it has spilled into my place as well, which is how things usually develop. They've been drinking. One of my friends who shall not be named for fear of defamation proudly proclaims that he's sipping a mixed drink of tequila and non-alcoholic rosé because they've run out of mixers. I cannot fathom a more vile concoction. John one-ups by recalling that he once had to drink a mixed drink of sesame oil, red wine and whiskey as a prize for losing a drinking game. It's so nice to see my friends happy and being loud and fooling around. I miss them.

Things are going well back in SF in my absence. My friend Will found a new job. He'll be designing APIs for websites. The crew seems happy. On video, I show them the lush green surrounding area and my spartan accommodations. They are amazed, asking what the time and temperature is It's noon here, but around midnight there. Having rained last night, it's a cool day in Kadaba—only 83 degrees with 82% humidity. I'm wearing sweatpants as I mill around outside in the universal phone call ritual of strolling in circles. My friends agree they would die in that weather. I joke that I already died and was reborn anew, able to bear the heat. I never thought I'd say this, but I'm getting accustomed to the initially unbearable heat and humidity. I get a notification that my data is getting low for today, so I bid goodbye to my tipsy friends. They are happy to get back to the pumping music.

In the evening, the six additional enumerators return from Mangalore for the chaos of the Sunday sessions. We discuss scheduling and logistics, hammering down the details. After placing all required materials for tomorrow in my backpack, we turn in early.

June 25

I am prompted out of bed at 7:30AM by the ringing of my phone. It's a call from Akash. Breakfast. I scramble to get ready in two minutes, which I have developed a knack for. Breakfast consists of *idli* and Mangalore buns with *sambar*—same as my memorable first meal in India. After distributing all materials to the subteams, I head to the Renjilady interaction group at a local school. We show up five minutes late, as is customary, but to our dismay there are just five members present. We were hoping that we wouldn't run into attendance issues, but there's nothing we can do. This group should be over 10 women, it's a shame to see such a low attendance rate.

Suguna, the coordinator of the group, gives absent members a stern phone call off to the side. With her urging, additional members trickle in over the next hour. This presents timing

challenges, as this group is an interaction group, set to receive both aspirations treatment and game treatment.

Sush begins his tale as part of the aspirations treatment, captivating the present subjects. They have a discussion about the morals of the story, which goes well. Sush turns to me, ready for the game component of the session. Andrew and I have prepared the phones, but there is almost no cell service here, making the signal of the hotspots difficult to maintain for the game.

Running the game is a struggle today. This group consists of many elderly women who are illiterate and lack numeracy skills. To boot, we have a deficit of phones. We give each woman about 15 minutes with a phone, but most subjects just stare at the phones, unsure of what's going on. I'm not sure how much progress we can make with this group through the game. In general, we've underestimated the aspirations of the groups but we've overestimated their literacy and math skills.

We have lunch at a non-veg restaurant in town. Non-veg refers to a restaurant that serves meat dishes, whereas veg is vegetarian. Veg restaurants don't appear to be like US vegetarian restaurants, though. The menu is simple, with limited options: Rice, with a crispy papad tortilla-like thing, a bunch of sauces and chutneys, and a deep fried vegetable. Tragically, there's no raw, roasted or sauteed vegetables at all. A more apt name for veg restaurants is carbs only restaurants. As a certified pasta lover and a general carbs enthusiast, the plainness of the carbs at veg restaurants is what frustrates me. It's safe to say that Andrew and I in particular are elated when Akash announces we will have non-veg today.

I have parotta and mutton pepper curry once again. Akash supplements my meal with an order of Chicken 65, which he is sure I'll like.

"What did they do to Chicken 64?" I ask.

He smirks and waves me away. But he's correct to think that I'd enjoy it; it's the most American of all dishes I've had here. Red chili crispy exterior coats an interior of mouthwatering,

piping hot chicken. A generous drizzle of lime completes the flavor profile. Much like kebab but with a kick, Chicken 65 is the new winner of my “best chicken nugget award.” I leave the restaurant feeling queasy after my rampage of Chicken 65. Maybe I ate all the Chicken 65 and next time there will only be Chicken 66.

Our next group in Kadaba proper is an aspirations treatment. Again, Sush shines in telling the aspirations story while Pooja diligently fills out latecomer baselines at record pace. This group is younger and more lively than our morning group. They are eager to share their aspirations and how far they’ve come. Where once not one member could secure a loan due to their miniscule income, they insist that this self-help group has made the impossible possible. Every month, this group has special trainings with professionals such as police and farmers. Police teach them about law, self-defense and how to navigate emergency situations. Nefarious scammers have tried to fool them in the past, so they sought out training for preventive reasons. In their trainings with farmers, the group learned how to make fertilizers, the details of mushroom farming and which crops to grow in the dry season. As a result of their industriousness, the group takes an annual vacation to a tourist destination to famous temples around the state. While the last session was tough to swallow, this one flies by, marked by joy and hope.

We end today’s long day of session with a return to Valya and a game group treatment group. Only five members of the 20 person group are there when we get there. With our limited phones, we decide to begin game training with the present members. As additional subjects join, we give them a chance with the game. Although they are an elderly group, they show sparks of curiosity and a willingness to learn. Akash’s subteam joins us about halfway through. We finish up the session with the full complement of phones.

We wait for Stanley and Sush to arrive, chatting with the subjects. They are off at an aspirations session, and we’re killing time. Akash pushes me to the front and commands me to address the subjects. He translates for the women. I offer my respects, continuing with some

lighthearted questions. I ask them to guess how old Akash is, and who's older—me or him. His robust beard gives him the nod from most of the subjects. When I tell them I'm four years older, they laugh. I'm out of questions, looking over my shoulder to see when Sush and Stanley materialize. When they do, we bid our goodbyes to the friendly group and head back to Akash's for dinner.

Around the table, we discuss the social dynamics of young people in India at large. I knew arranged marriages were common here, but hearing about it from people who may have to experience the tradition is eye-opening. None of the enumerators want an arranged marriage, but this isn't representative of the population. Sush assures me that in the past 10 years, the social paradigms around marriage are changing. He doesn't want an arranged marriage, but his older sister does. That said, his parents refuse to orchestrate an arranged marriage for her. I imagine that in cultural transition periods such as this result in many similar scenarios, with values clashing. The enumerators tell me that money is the typically most important factor in marriage decisions. This saddens me—I've seen materialism in the US destroy many marriages. Still, I understand people seeking financial security over all else, especially in a developing country where that is less common. I often find myself being unrealistic here. The values that we aspire to in the US are a privilege.

June 26

I consider myself an extroverted person most of the time who doesn't shrink back from attention, but our morning visit to Akash's primary school prompts me to reevaluate that notion. School here is split up differently than in the US. This school is kindergarten through 10th grade. Then, there are the pre-college schools, which prepare 11th and 12th graders for college. Finally, stand out students attend three year colleges like St. Aloysius, where graduate programs are offered as well.

Entering the school, our group is surrounded by a surge of small children. Most of them are staring at me, laughing, touching me, extending hands to shake. This is endearing at first, and I return their smiles and shake their little hands. We go up to the second floor office of the principal. He's an ordained priest, who was assigned to the school. He speaks in hushed tones and I can't hear him over the kids who hover in the door, giggling. Breaking his amiable countenance with a snap of his fingers, he shouts something at the kids in the door. They all scram.

We visit other teachers from Akash's youth. I ask his grade school teachers if he was a mischievous kid and they avoid answering. Akash assures me he was a well-behaved student. I was not, and I know a kid who got sent out of class often when I see one. In the halls, we see Akash's cousin Alvin. We exchange pleasantries, and I give him a pat on the back. I see the awe in his friends' eyes who crowd behind him, all looking at me. I wave at them.

As we walk back down the stairs, the stares and touching are becoming overwhelming. I understand their interest, but it's too much for me. Everywhere I look to escape eye contact from children, I see more staring at me expectantly. I feel like I'm a spectacle in a zoo. Something inside me wants to run away. The enumerators tease me, saying I'm a celebrity—Justin Bieber. I'm on the verge of a panic attack.

We take a bunch of pictures with Akash's past teachers underneath the too bright sun. The introverted part of me is spazzing out, the bright sunlight increasing my discomfort. I walk fast to the car, feeling nauseous and just wanting to be alone for a bit. We hop in the car. I guess my mental condition is apparent because Akash asks me if I'm good. I say no, and he reassures me that we only have to go to see his mom for a second at the other school. The other school? I can't hide my malaise.

It's noon, and all the kids are on recess. Walking up the building, play stops and waves of unabashed stares wash over us. At this point, I've exceeded my tolerance for attention. I keep my head down and follow in Akash's footsteps. They're just friendly kids, but the

unwavering looks and the point-and-giggles still get under my skin. I am an experienced public speaker, not afraid of crowds. I wonder why this gets to me so much. I feel as if my mental walls have been knocked down by a feather.

It's the accumulation of the non-stop attention from onlookers over the past month that comes to a head. I can barely bring myself to produce a forced smile as Akash introduces us to his mom's colleagues. Sensing my desire to leave, he keeps it short and we head out at last. Walking to the car, I'm so rattled that I almost slip in the mud.

I rant to Akash about how I almost had a psychotic break back there. To such a small thing, too. Nonetheless, I need to be alone. I tell Akash that I need to stay at home in solitude and can't attend our afternoon session. Writing alone and listening to calming music is the exact recipe I require. I think about crying, but just lie down and close my eyes instead. When I sit up from the couch, I feel a lot better. My social battery is still critical.

The team returns from the session, and we begin the accompanying administrative work—checking the ledgers, sorting the consent forms. Since I missed the afternoon session, I do my best to be of assistance. I notice the vast piles of baselines and ask if anyone wants to join me for some data entry work. A couple hesitant hands crop up.

Having finished logging all of the aspiration treatments baselines, we set the control group's baselines in our sights. As our motley couple of data enterers pours over the surveys, the other group members join in on the work. They must feel hesitant to sentence us to doing all of the work ourselves. Reciprocity is a great motivator.

The control baselines are nearly done. Uncle cuts our efforts short, calling us to a lovely dinner—white rice, chicken curry and some bread rounds resembling wheat tortillas. When offered white rice, Anushka declines, opting for boiled red matta rice. Her rationale is that white rice heats the body too much. The boiled rice is similar in appearance to US brown rice, but is a bit puffier and more soft. I jog my brain trying to envision how one type of grain would heat your

body more than another. This is a foreign concept to me and I must appear skeptical because Veron interjects with an outstretched hand, confident in his ability to explain.

“In India, there are two types of heat: one is like the sun and outside heat, the other is inside heat,” he lectures.

“What?” I blurt, brow furrowing. He repeats his concise explanation, expecting the words to sink in. They don’t. After a few minutes of deliberation, we come to an understanding. Certain foods increase body temperature because they are harder to digest. With some quick research, we discover that there is a scientific term for this phenomenon: thermogenesis. I had no idea about this notion. I suppose it’s not important to control your body temperature in temperate SF as it is in sizzling Southern India. Come to think of it, though, I have run into this idea before. You haven’t lived until you’ve endured the “meat sweats” after getting your money’s worth at all-you-can-eat Korean Barbecue.

June 27th

Akash and Uncle have an appointment in Puttur this morning, so we’re without our fearless leaders. The first session is just down the road. I rouse the troops and we traipse down the side of the road, stepping into the underbrush when vehicles whizz by. We walk up a long driveway and through an open rusty gate. Rotting, spiky, bulbous, gigantic, light green fruit fester on the fringes of the path. Anushka gestures at the fruit, quizzing me on what they are. They’re jackfruit. The flesh of the tropical fruit is tangy and sticky, sweet like candy. Nobody’s eating these ones but the flies.

Trudging up the hill, we run into one of the SKDRDP administrators who we met back in our first meeting with the group representatives and NGO leaders. He recognizes us and beams at us with a big smile, and I shake his hand. He’s here to collect the payments on the loans the group has taken and to facilitate new loans.

Our session takes place on a cement patio covered by a flimsy tin roof. The NGO representative gets straight to business. He collects the loan payments and records what new loans the group wants and for what purpose. SKDRDP runs a tight ship—he wraps up his business with the group in under five minutes. I'm impressed how simple getting loans is for the group, and how streamlined the process is. He rushes off, bidding us goodbye. I'm sure he has many other groups to get to.

Sush steps up and garners the attention of the subjects. After a quick prayer from the group, he leads the subjects in the third installment of our aspirations treatment. This week is all about mutual affirmations, aimed to recognize and develop agency among the women. Subject by subject, he requests that they say specific, nice things about the other group members. Anushka volunteers to translate for me. They are shy to give compliments at first, but the ice breaks and affirmations begin to flow—general at first. Some articulate their gratitude to all the motherly figures of the group. Given that many in the group are relatives, some members state the obvious: they love each other very much. Others emphasize the amount of trust they have in each other.

One woman gets specific in her affirmations. She stands up and compliments each member, turning and facing them in the semicircle seating arrangement. Some of the women to her left help by taking care of the group's responsibilities. The women to her left help her with financial matters and any problem at all in the household. Affirmations fly around the patio, and Anushka can't keep up translating. At the very least, the subjects are highly engaged with the aspirations curriculum. We look forward to reviewing how this treatment shapes our results when all is said and done.

After a quick lunch, we head out to our afternoon interaction session. We begin with the mutual affirmations. The compliments are passed around, general at first and then more specific. Subjects raise each other up as great hosts, diligent ledger balancers, close friends and shoulders to cry on. Of particular note is one woman, who multiple people recognize for

contributing her personal savings to the group's coffers when times were tough. This is significant because it shows the occasional value of personal savings to the group, not just group saving. Perhaps this group will perform better at the game.

Indeed, when we move over to the game portion of the session, the women are remarkably receptive. Last time, the members of this group were standouts, but one subject takes it to the next level—literally. She completes all six levels in under 20 minutes, which has to be a world record. Akash and I let her know that she completed it much faster than us. She smiles.

We bring the session to a close after the allotted time for the game is up. Hopping back in the car, I sit in the back rows, feeling like one of many tightly packed anchovies inside a can. I reiterate my desire to see an elephant, and Akash confirms that tomorrow we may be able to go to a local temple—Kukke Subramanya Temple—where one is domesticated. Hopes are dashed when scheduling issues are brought up. Also, one of our enumerators is on her period and is not supposed to enter temple grounds on those days. This is a curious custom, and I ask what other statuses may bar you from entering temples. Akash tells me there are plenty of temples where women are not allowed. I diplomatically pry into this issue, frustrated with how many religions bar women from prayer.

Akash begins a long explanation. In India, women and men are often kept apart. Schools are not separated into gender in terms of the student body, but there are gender lines one does not cross. Boys and girls do not hang out together in lower schools, something which Akash tells me he got in trouble for. One day in his 9th grade, he got a snazzy new computer. Many students were fascinated with the unfamiliar device. As he was showing off to a group of girls, a teacher spotted him, enraged. He was swiftly punished. This division of men and women carries beyond school with those who are eligible for marriage—unmarried people of opposite genders are dissuaded from interacting too much for fear of sexual temptation.

This cultural paradigm applies not only to humans, but also gods. Sabarimala Temple in Kerala—the southernmost state of India—is dedicated to a god, Ayyappan. Like humans, gods themselves pass through different stages of life known as *asrama*. Ayyappan is in the adolescent stage of his life called *brahmacharya*, in which celibacy is imperative. As such, women are not allowed into his temple so that he does not desire to stray from his path. This reminds me a bit like blaming women for "inviting" harassment based on their choice of dress, which I condemn. Barring people from places of worship doesn't seem right to me. My concerns are somewhat abated when Anushka insists that there are other temples in which men are not allowed. At least exclusion conditions are imposed on both women and men.

The rain begins and we roll up the windows. As we're driving back through the center of Kadaba, I realize that almost nobody is using an umbrella, and raincoats are nonexistent. I ask if any of our group owns a raincoat. Only Veron does.

This rain is not a San Francisco sprinkle. Downpours here cannot be defeated by a flimsy raincoat or umbrella. It's just not going to cut it. This leaves two options for those who consider braving a rainstorm. One: get unequivocally soaked to the bone. Two: avoid going outside until it stops.

When we get home, I choose option two. We have a filling dinner of parotta and chicken curry. I succumb to tiredness soon after, drifting off to the cacophonous rhythm of rain on the tin roof.

June 28

I sleep through breakfast, watching a movie before heading downstairs. To tell the truth, I just need some alone time. This afternoon we are set to attend sessions with two aspirations groups who we missed on the first Sunday amidst the chaos. We'll have to catch them up on the baseline survey, inspirational video and the story discussion. It's a blessing that these are our only two sessions today, because they will be lengthy.

The whole team crams into the jeep, and we drive to an unfamiliar region of the Kadaba forests. Akash drops our subteam of me, Sush, Pooja, and Andrew outside of an imposing, walled-off compound. But our session is not within the fortress of a building. One of the subjects hails us from a small shed on the fringes of the flat hilltop, beckoning to us. We find the women sitting cross-legged inside, wearing matching outfits of deep blue and burnt gold. There is construction equipment strewn about the small shelter, but there's room enough for us to conduct business given that there's only nine subjects.

After the customary prayers are sung and the flower bouquets handed out, Sush gives an introduction to our experiment and we begin the baseline surveys. The enumerators have streamlined the process of baseline data collection, but the survey still takes upwards of 45 minutes. When the subjects are asked the numeracy questions regarding the hypothetical purchase of a cow, they once again have trouble considering the scenario as imaginary. One woman exclaims, frustrated, that she doesn't want the cow. The other subjects laugh.

The baseline survey completed, I provide my computer to show the subjects the documentary. While it's playing, I give Akash a call to check in on his group. They are not even close to done. Akash instructs us to proceed with the story and discussion. Sush guides the subjects through a reflection on the video, then jumps right into the story. He keeps it concise, along with the accompanying discussion. Again, the subjects catch on to the morals and apply them to their own lives. Education is the priority. As we are wrapping up, a man dressed in formal looking white attire comes to observe. He introduces himself as the caretaker of the temple next door—what I thought to be a stalwart compound estate.

Sush dials Akash to get an update on the other group's status. We have some time to kill, so we take the caretaker up on his offer of a tour of the temple. Slipping off our shoes, the caretaker jumps into his tour guide role. He tells us that this temple is among the oldest in India, constructed over 1200 years ago as a bridge between two warring Hindu traditions.

Within Hinduism, several factions disagree on who is the supreme deity and creator of the universe. Shaivism asserts that Shiva is the true creator and supreme deity, while Vaishnavism argues that it is Vishnu. This lack of agreement has led to many conflicts throughout history. One such conflict prompted the raising of this temple inside which I now stand. To bring the Shaivists and Vaishnavists together, this Temple was erected to celebrate the combination of Shiva and Vishnu as a single deity.

The caretaker leads us inside, and we are confronted by an imposing, black, many-headed cobra statue. He confesses that there have been copious renovations since the temple's opening, but the soul remains. Bringing us around to the front of the statue, there's a gaping hole at its square black base that looks like a storm drain. He gestures at the hole, explaining there is an underground room beneath the statue. During the British occupation, temple stewards would hide in the underground sanctuary to evade capture.

We walk around the temple and Pooja and Sush take time to pray, pressing their foreheads to the floor, chanting to themselves in Sanskrit. The temple grounds are flush with large squares of emerald grass ringed with diverse plant life. Pooja points out various gods to me, most of them related to wealth and prosperity. The caretaker tells me that one generous US donor gave $25,000 USD towards the upkeep of the temple. I have a feeling that he hopes I will make a sizable donation as well, but I am sorry to disappoint him.

Out of nowhere, the caretaker asks us if we want to see his music studio. What? Nevertheless, Akash is running late so we oblige. He invites us into his house on the exterior of the temple. Stepping inside, the abode is dimly lit, with old computers and audio equipment strewn everywhere. We follow him into a makeshift recording studio, which is adorned with Hindu portraits of many gods. There is even a recording booth.

He encourages us to sing, but we are all awful singers. We decline his offer. However, Andrew and I do take a few pictures in the booth pretending to sing. The caretaker is anything but shy. We take several pictures with him. He tells us that artists come from all over Karnataka

to use his studio. He's a producer and a singer himself. To prove it, he boots up the karaoke set up. Foreign words pop up and he follows along. He's not bad at all.

Akash honks outside, the signal that it's time for us to go. He corrals us for a video of us in his studio, then ushers out of his studio. Being serenaded in a music studio was not on my radar as a possible event for today. Nevertheless, it was a surreal experience.

We drive over to a local school where the other subteam is finishing up. Walking through the central courtyard, educational gardening projects hang everywhere—sprigs sprouting from dirt in plastic water bottles. Teachers and subjects alike greet us. After cordially shaking all their hands with some *namaste*'s sprinkled in, they gather us for what feels like the millionth team photo.

It's hot and wet out and I'm eager to get home. I hop in the jeep and throw my head back against the headrest. But Akash insists that responsibilities remain. He guides us into the principal's office, where we meet more teachers. They have us sit down in plastic chairs and they offer their respects. The principal addresses me directly, thanking me for the opportunity to be part of their study. I emphasize that Akash, not me, is leading this arm of the project but that doesn't seem to resonate. She also requests that we get her students involved in the study somehow, but kids are not the target subjects for this experiment, nor can we handle any more work.

The meet-and-greet ends. I breathe a sigh of relief and we hop in the jeep and get back on the road. Just 50 feet down the road, some of the teachers insist that we have a snack at a local cafe. We pile out half heartedly and crowd around the flimsy table. Flies buzz everywhere. None of us want to be here. The store owner brings out some sodas. Akash tells us that we must have it to avoid disrespecting everyone. I'm not opposed given the heat, but the lime soda tastes more like sugar water than any distinguishable flavor.

Our waiter brings out some snacks—peanut *chikkis*, basically Indian peanut brittle. We slip the thin packages in our bags. Even then we're not done receiving offerings. The waiter

brings out a couple steaming egg puffs, pretty much that last thing I want on this hot day. The enumerators are standing in the entryway of the cafe at this point, leaning out the door. Nobody wants an egg puff right now, and there's a foreboding silence as no one offers to eat one. Akash and Veron surrender, ending the egg puff standoff by deferring to the waiter's desires. I can see that Akash does not want this right now. He puts on a resigned face, telling me that it's his duty; to not eat it would be super disrespectful. He munches it down, determined, as he takes one for the team.

At long last, we're back in the jeep, this time for good. Akash brightens, recounting that one of the teachers' sons is a writer for a local newspaper. Our experiment caught his eye and will be the focus of an article in the coming days. It's nice to receive some recognition from the local community, and even better to know that they are so supportive of our endeavors.

June 29

In the morning, we split up into two groups. Once again, Andrew, Sush and I accompany Pooja as she faces the woman who is set on matching her Dubai engineer son with her. Upon arrival, without skipping a beat, the extroverted woman approaches Pooja with further lines of questioning. Pooja is nervous-laughing, finding the scenario amusing but also uncomfortable. The woman asks about the degrees Pooja has, and she responds that she is a recent graduate with a Bachelors of Science in Economics. She's disappointed that Pooja doesn't have a master's degree—no MBA, no match. Pooja is relieved.

Later, I ask if a master's degree is required to have an arranged marriage. Sush and Pooja agree that it is to an extent. Sush reminds me that he's beginning an MBA program this fall. I wiggle my eyebrows suggestively. He's said he doesn't want an arranged marriage, but degrees are helpful in pursuit of love marriages here as well.

The session itself is less stimulating for us diligent researchers than the pre-session drama. Sush takes the group through the mutual affirmations portion of our aspirations

treatment. Much like the mother of the Dubai engineer, this group is less modest and shy. But they are not arrogant, just to the point. They emphasize the cohesion and unity of the group above all else. When we prompt them to speak to their strengths, most of the compliments revolve around how selfless their fellow group mates are. This is not really the type of agency we intended to cultivate, but that's the beauty of running experiments: things never play out how you expect.

The game session is not efficient, but we do see improvements among the subjects. Because Akash, Anushka and Veron are running another game group simultaneously, we're down to half of the phones. We agreed that we'd take six phones and Akash would take four, but as we wrap up the session we only count five phones. We ask the subjects if there's any phones that we did not collect. They say no.

We convene as a group, calling Akash. He says they only have four phones at that site. I'm a bit suspicious in the moment—could one have the subjects surreptitiously slipped a phone into her pocket? We've already asked if someone still has a phone, so there's no use in asking again. Sush assures us that asking again would be disrespectful. I agree that if a phone was stolen, it's really no big deal. We pay the subjects and go home.

We tell Akash we may have a lost phone, but implore him to check the count he's got. Veron pipes in.

"Where's the phone?" Grinning mischievously, he doesn't stop fooling around.

I seethe for a second, taking the bait. "Dude, if we knew where the phone was, would we be looking?"

"Veron, you play too much…" Stanley shakes his head, capturing all our thoughts.

Anushka rifles through Akash's bag and pulls out the missing phone, one of her famous flat stares directed at Akash. She cracks, giggling, and we all join her. I can't believe I thought for a second that our beyond accommodating subjects would take one of the phones.

The afternoon brings another interaction session in the grounds of a local preschool. It's a holiday, so there are no boisterous children to contend with. We begin with mutual affirmation. The subjects stress mutual reliance above all else. They underestimate their own contributions while emphasizing the help received from others. One member articulates that she is worried about what will happen if another wise member leaves the group because she has helped them avoid financial mistakes in the past. Again, we are not hoping for the subjects to be modest. These statements downplay their own agency while exalting others. It's interesting that they do not seem to have much confidence in themselves, but have unlimited confidence in the group in unity. This is consistent with our previous observations.

The game session reveals an unforeseen trend. Veron divulges that this group's barrier to overcome is literacy, not math. While many subjects struggle to read numbers, they are mental math whizzes. This is inconceivable to me because learning how to read numbers seems trivial to me. In the English writing system, there's only 10 distinct numbers, so how long can these take to learn? Akash tells me they probably are experienced abacus users, and written numerals serve less of a purpose in daily life. Meanwhile, I'm terrible at mental math. Any which way, I hope the game provides further introduction to written numerals.

Akash and I have a meeting with Professor Jesse at 9:30 tonight. Since we've been busy this week, there hasn't been too much time to work on the paper. We've run into more roadblocks, so it'll be nice to get his thoughts on things. Akash has church tonight at 6:30, but should be back well before our meeting time. But a wrench is thrown in the works—duty once again compels Akash to take his sister to meet with his grandparents after church. Their old house is far off the beaten path, and it's been raining heavily. 8:30 ticks by, then 9, then 9:30. Looks like it'll just be me and Jesse today.

I get an email from Jesse that he is also tied up in meetings and can't make ours. I breathe a sigh of relief because I didn't have much progress to show. Akash phones me 30 minutes later. He's knee deep in mud; the old jeep got stuck in the mud on the way home.

Worse, the car battery has died in the efforts to get the car unstuck. Uncle is already on his way to pick Akash up. I pray that the smaller white car does not fall victim to the same fate.

June 30

Today marks Andrew's last day in India. After Akash gives him a ride to the airport two and a half hours west, he'll be flying to Nairobi, Kenya to intern on a project on how floods affect agriculture. We're all going to miss his innocuous pranks and infectious laughs. Stanley, Akash and I will see him when the semester restarts, but the enumerators will likely never see him again. Veron, uncharacteristically gloomy, whines that he won't have anyone to mess around with anymore. Anushka and Sush are sure to take pictures with him.

Pooja takes Andrew's departure harder than the rest, I think. They have a lot in common. Both wear beaded bracelets, baggy pants and graphic tees. Both love crappy movies. They both had complicated family situations growing up.

He'll miss teasing her, drawing out her name in an amusing call—*Pooooja*. She'll miss watching slapstick movies in the common room together. It's one of those friendships that you see secondhand and just smile. They probably will never see each other again, and that sucks.

The game treatment session in the afternoon isn't quite the same without Andrew. The subjects make it easy on us, though. They are locked in on the game, asking many questions. It's nice to see agency and persistence flowing. They're taking hold of their own personal development. I get bitten by a bunch of bloodthirsty mosquitoes, but that doesn't bug me too much. I'm used to getting eaten alive by now.

On the way out, I make note of a glazed planter in front of the home. Most households in the region have one, a wiry plant sprouting out from the dirt. When I ask what this recurring plant is, Anushka tells me it's a medicinal plant that is traditional to Hinduism—*Tulsi*. It's great to see that other cultures recognize the medicinal properties of basil, although the medicinal

quality it offers me back home is a food coma after overeating some creamy pesto pasta. I have a feeling they have disparate uses for the herb.

The enumerators have a bus to catch back to Mangalore in Uppinangady, a thirty minute drive to the east. It's a swirling, dusty town with active construction all over. Entering the town proper, Uncle points with urgency towards the front window. The bus to Mangalore is pulling out of the stop three cars ahead. There's a lot of traffic, there's no way they're getting on that bus. Uncle has aspirations, though. He weaves through oncoming traffic in the jeep, passing the bus. He yells at me to do something. I can't make out what he's saying. I'm a deer in the headlights. He waves his hand up and down like a bird flapping its wings. I'm still a deer in the headlights. Then I realize—he wants me to flap my arm out of the window to hail the bus. I do so, and everyone in our jeep shouts at the bus operators through the open windows. Uncle swerves in front of the bus, forcing it to stop in the middle of the road by slamming on the brakes. The enumerators pour out of the back and hail the bus. In SF, if you try to hail a bus outside of designated stops, the best you can expect is a frown from the driver as they speed past, uncaring of your dilemma. But I'm far, far from home. The bus driver obliges, collecting the fares and ushering them on. I can't believe Uncle's bold move worked, but it's just another day in the office for him.

Driving back from Uppinangady, we drop by a local sculptor. I have been tasked to procure a small stone Ganesh statue from India for a family friend's budding collection, but there are no souvenir shops around here. Miniature statues of Nagadevaru and other gods are displayed around the stone workyard. The sculptor himself is not here, though. We'll have to call and come back for the order.

My eyelids are drooping on the ride home. It's been a long week and I'm looking forward to a big meal and an all-night food coma. The drive is longer than I remember. Feeling a bit grumpy, I just can't wait to get home. We reach home and I collapse on the couch.

Akash gives me a call on his way back from Mangalore. His great uncle passed away, and he's driving directly to visit the family four hours away. They were very close. Still, he's concerned with matters of hospitality. Stanley and I will have to hold down the house tonight because his parents will be joining him at his relatives house. He explains that they have to go visit tonight because they are unable to attend the funeral due to responsibilities to our experiment. The level of hospitality that Akash's family shows to us is otherworldly. Even facing the death of a dear relative, they find a way to make sure we're comfortable. Americans who sing the praises of southern hospitality should experience southern *Indian* hospitality.

They'll arrive at their relatives house around 5AM, pay their respects and head back to Kadaba right away without sleeping. I'm half-asleep from my mild exertions of the day, I can't imagine how tired they'll be. It's a bit spooky living in someone else's house while they're away, so Stanley and I have a comforting meal of parotta and chicken curry and turn in.

July 1

I bump into Akash's extended family as I come downstairs, rubbing sleep from my eyes. I greet them and we share a few pleasant smiles. They are stopping to visit Akash's immediate family before going on to the funeral. There are no tears, but I can tell they are leaning on each other in mourning. Even with all the familial responsibilities, Uncle makes me a breakfast of a sunny-side up egg wrapped in *chapati*, an Indian tortilla of sorts.

Akash tells me that Christian Indian funerals are much more streamlined than US funerals. His great uncle passed away yesterday, and the funeral is today. The body is kept in the home in a mobile morgue freezer, time is given for all close relatives to visit the body, and then they are buried. Akash's uncle and aunt had to fly back from Saudi Arabia for the funeral on one day's notice. I acknowledge the efficiency and swift process of Christian funerals in India given the ingrained love of tradition and ceremony.

The relatives give hugs and wave goodbye. There's a moment of peace, but Akash and his dad have a long day ahead. Uncle is taking Akash's sister, Anjali, to Bangalore for her finance internship. Having just finished her MBA, she's quiet and sweet, a year older than Akash. The bus ride to the growing center of tech in India is more than eight hours. Akash has more traveling to do as well—another drive to Mangalore to pick up additional phones for our experiment. I've never lived in a rural area for an extended period, but I see that it's not just the prospect of jobs that would drive people to move to cities. I miss the convenience of urban life. At the same time, that lack of convenience serves to cultivate close communal ties. When not everything is at your fingertips, you band together with those around you. There are less people here, but there are tighter relationships on average due to the necessary mutual dependence. Reciprocity is required to fight inconveniences in the long term.

I spend the day lounging around, working on projects. Stanley and I sit in the common room underneath the oasis of the fans, like statues glued to our screens. Our sedentary existence is interrupted by the enumerators, who arrive back from Mangalore in the evening. Sleeping in their own bed was a blessing, but a night and a morning are not enough to satisfy mild homesickness. Pooja tells me her mom called her, telling her that she gets sad when she's not around.

I ask the enumerators if they've ever seen snow in person, they all shake their heads. I show them pictures of Lake Tahoe and Yosemite in winter. They have eyes like platters. Akash insists that we go skiing this winter, and I'm more than happy to make that happen. Pooja confesses that the lowest temperature she's ever experienced is just under 70 degrees F. She's shocked when I tell her I prefer to keep my apartment colder than that.

There's no option for that preference here. Heading upstairs, I collapse on my bed in the 85 degree heat. In Andrew's absence, I've moved into his room, which is behind Stanley's, deeper into the flat. It's a bit hotter, but with less bugs and a bigger bed. I'll take it.

July 2

I wake up to bad news from Akash: six group meetings are canceled due to poor communication from a self-help group representative. This has become a recurring issue. She often throws curveballs at our experiment by rescheduling meetings without telling us, and assuming that we will show up late and scheduling meetings later than she tells us. Still, Akash insists that it would be impolite to address the issue with her superiors. Although we agree that she is already being pretty disrespectful to us, the cultural norm is to avoid reciprocating disrespect. Akash chooses the high road.

Since it's Sunday, we still have a number of sessions to fill our day. On our way to Renjilady, the horn and external headlights fall off the front of the jeep. We only notice due to a crunching sound from behind. The backseaters turn and see the debris strewn in the road. We collectively shrug and pick up the pieces. In the US, driving without honking would be an inconvenience, maybe a safety in rare cases. But in India, the horn is your voice. Akash presses the dysfunctional horn, frustrated.

"I no longer have a voice, I feel constrained," he pauses, looking at me. "Can you yell at the other drivers for me?"

I take him up on the offer, shouting my best honk as we pass slower traffic.

"Ok… definitely don't do that," Akash recants his previous instructions. "We're going to get into a fight."

Even without the car's voice, we make it to our session early and in one piece, without fighting too. It's an interaction group. Just about the only interesting thing that occurred all session is my trip to the bathroom. I ask where the bathroom is. It's located in the jungle behind the school. I shuffle across the smashed underbrush, keeping an eye out for snakes. The building I come across is a squat concrete shelter with multiple concrete berths. There's no sink. I'm not really sure where I'm supposed to pee, because I see shower buckets in some of the

berths. I go back to Akash and ask him if I'm in the right spot. It is indeed the bathroom, shower stalls doubling as urinals. I choose to take a pee outside instead.

Our second session is an aspirations session. It's a bit later in the morning and everyone's more awake—the subjects are much more engaged, as are we. Sush stokes the mutual affirmations among the subjects to a rapid flow. Again, we find the co-dependence staggering. We need to figure out a way to reinforce the importance of individual development. I wonder if they are being shy and modest in the group meetings for the sake of reputation, or if they're like this as well in private settings. Despite their strong co-dependence, it seems that the self-help group has marginally increased individual agency for some. Before joining the group, many members were scared to go to the town center. Now, they don't have a problem with it.

The group's phenomenal collective agency may overcome the lack of individual agency. One member shares that some time ago, her husband started to get violent. She left to live with her mother, but at this point she had lost all hope for a happy life. Although she wanted to leave the self-help group due to hopelessness, the other members of the group forced her to stay. Gradually, she regained some hope for the rest of her life.

"We don't let each other go down," one woman adds.

Our final group of today is a conglomerated aspirations session. Three groups combine for one session, which makes logistics for us simple. They are all clad in navy and orange *saree* dresses, symbolizing unity amongst the group. Muslim members match the color scheme with their *hijab*. Co-dependence is stressed in the affirmations session. It's becoming clear that this is universal for self-help groups.

July 3

At breakfast, Akash vents about the difficulty of obtaining a driver's license in California. The bureaucracy is overwhelming. In contrast, it's virtually unnecessary to even have one in

India. The process is much simpler here, too. Like the US, there's a written test followed by a behind the wheel exam. When Akash went for his DMV exam in Puttur, he was the only person at the DMV despite it being midday. For the written test, the proctor just handed him the answer sheet for him to copy off of. Next came the driving test. Akash recounts his interaction with the "proctor."

"You see that car over there?" The proctor pointed at a car 50 meters away. "Here are the keys. Get in the car and park it right over here."

Akash followed his instructions, maneuvering into the spot. Getting out of the car, Akash watched as the proctor gave him a perfect score on the exam. Inside he took his picture for his license, and he was on his way, fully licensed. Akash admits that the rigorousness of the process to get a license depends highly on your proctors. Most of the time, a bribe of ₹500 rupees or so will allow you to skip the exams. But they can also be as nit-picky as in the US.

After we eat our fill of eggs and rice, we head out to an aspirations group. I've never been to this specific group, but Stanley, Pooja and Sush all have before, so introductions are swift. The entryway is a crenelated metal gate that leads to a slippery driveway covered in moss and mud. We sit down on a square patio behind the house which looks out onto an overgrown garden. We're early. We make small talk with the homeowner and she lights some incense which has a pleasant earthy scent and also repels mosquitoes.

The subjects trickle in one by one. Uncle, our volunteer driver for today, keeps spirits high with wisecracks while we wait for everyone to arrive. We missed this group last week due to scheduling issues, so we have to get them up to speed. Sush tells the story to the subjects, and they express the intended morals of the tale, marking similarities in their own lives. One woman started an areca nut farm, which she says only succeeded due to help from the group. Another installed solar panels in her home via a loan from SKDRDP, which is becoming more common with urging from the NGO, which we witnessed in our first in-person contact back in early June.

Our subjects sing the praises of SKDRDP, which they consider to be the best NGO in the region. Unlike other NGOs, SKDRDP insures the full amounts of the group's loans. The subjects are not getting loans directly from the bank, they are getting loans from the bank through the NGO. Similarly, they act as a correspondent to insurance companies, allowing members to get meaningful insurance for tiny sums. One woman explains the effectiveness of this system through her personal experience. When her husband had to get dialysis, she had an active loan with SKDRDP. Insurance covered the treatment, but she was still not able to make payments due to the efforts caring for him. The loan was forgiven by the NGO. In essence, the NGO acts as a mediating body between the self-help groups and colossal banks and insurance corporations which would be otherwise disinterested in serving the members because they do not make much money off their customership. That is, the resources required to vet the customers are not worth it for the miniscule profits they stand to make. By guaranteeing repayment, the NGO circumvents this issue, and the disenfranchised women get the resources they need to escape poverty.

The affirmations portion is reflective of most other sessions. At first, the subjects struggle to understand that affirmations are meant to be for individuals. Once Sush gets through to them, though, the compliments emerge in a lively, upbeat fashion. Most of the compliments are directed at individuals, but speak to their contributions to the group, not their individual qualities such as smarts or industriousness. Still, increasing group agency can’t be a bad result. We hope that this can translate to individual agency somehow. We fear that because of their reliance on the group, individual agency is stunted.

Many of the women in this group have amblyopia, or a lazy eye. Pooja tells me it's a very common condition among rural people because of limited access to medical procedures as well as limited awareness of how to prevent it. Most often, the condition can be treated when it emerges in early childhood. If it goes untreated, though, it persists for life.

When we get home, Pooja gives Andrew a video call. We crowd around the phone as he tells us about Kenya. He's safe and sound at the hotel, resting after a long first day. Like most jobs, his first week is shaping up to be a breeze—just a bunch of onboarding tasks. We express that we miss him and he responds in kind. We tell him about the recent developments, and he's excited for us. Hearing a *Poooooooja* out of Andrew makes us all laugh. After a cold shower, I go to sleep with a smile on my face.

July 4

It's Independence Day in the US, so it feels right to encourage others to strive for a type of independence—financial independence. Our only session today is an aspirations group, which is the last week of the treatment. This week, we focus on pathways, aiming to get the subjects thinking about planning out steps to achieve their goals.

The first 10 minutes of the session are spent rewatching the documentary we viewed the first week. This time, we instruct subjects to take note of specific steps the women in the video took towards their goals—the *how*. The video wraps up, and Sush asks them to express steps they might take to achieve their goals. They have five common aspirations: agricultural expansion, horticulture, building a house, education for their children, funds for marriage. They all agree that they've already taken the first steps to their goals: access to credit. But they are unsure of what to do when they get the money. Getting a loan is only the start of the journey. We want them to outline what steps they'll take to balance their expenditures so that they can pay back their loan while using the influx of funds to enact change. Individual agency will be key in creating a concrete plan, which is lacking among the groups. They cite that without the group, they would be lost. Like our dilemma with the group/individual saving, if the group breaks up for some reason, the results might be catastrophic. But having individual savings could be construed as risky as well.

I am thinking in the context of the US. One of the pillars of US society is our individualism and the belief in the American Dream which is fueled by competition. Development in the US occurred in large part due to individual agency. I see that the women in these groups do not have as much desire to compete on the individual level in pursuit of prosperity and wealth, but they have far more communal agency than us. I worry about the dissolution and failure of these groups and the repercussions. But individuals are far more likely to falter than a rock-solid community. Development in Kadaba will not look the same as in the US. I clung to the notion of not inserting US values into my notion of development, but confronting this in practice is far more difficult than I imagined. Coming to terms with the fact that these relatively uneducated, rural women know far more than I do about development is a tougher pill to swallow than I expected. We must let people develop themselves and the community in their own image, not ours. Maybe our relatively futile attempts to stoke individualism via savings and agency in our subjects is not the path that we need to go down at all. This is why we do fieldwork: to see firsthand how little we understand about how development really works.

Kadaba is in a period of transition. Many older women have little education, yet are sending their kids to get Master's degrees. The women we visit all cite that the self-help groups cobbled together by SKDRDP as the reason for these intergenerational education leaps. SKDRDP is a deeply religious Hindu organization. Many in the US see religion as something that is a barrier to development, but Akash disagrees. The communities created by religion through tradition and community gathering are vital to the economic growth of the region. Spirituality binds these people together, even as it divides in other places. Religion has shaped values so immensely here that I doubt it will fade as people develop in their own image, just as individualism has not faded in the US as it has developed further.

July 5

They don't have snow days in Kadaba, but they do have rain days. In fact, there's one today. And it's a great day to be sick, so my body obliges. A bad cold has wormed its way from the enumerators to Akash to me, and now I bear the brunt. Nothing special, but there's some uncomfortable congestion and a light fever. I feel like my head is a massive loogie of snot encased in a skull, topped with some hair. Looks like I'll be lounging around all day, sick or not.

Over in Mangalore, there's a red alert due to the rainstorm. Akash and Veron laugh at viral videos of Mangalorian demonstrators swimming in the "temporary lake" under the consistently flooded, poorly constructed overpass. This doesn't seem very hygienic. The water is oily brown and the flooding is severe. But sometimes protesting in humourous and/or dangerous ways is a great strategy to rouse attention. The project, which took nine years, is the laughing stock of all of Mangalore. Still, the rest of the city is an engineering marvel, Akash decrees. There's comparatively less traffic and fewer drainage issues than other cities in India. Of course, the location of the "temporary lake" is at a critical point in the primary road into the city. Hopefully officials bite the bullet and admit that this project was a complete failure and remedy the issue.

When you're a guest in a South Indian household, you get pampered and spoiled. But when you're a *sick* guest, things are taken up another notch. Auntie brings me a fragrant hot brew which is salty as it is spicy. I feel my throat beginning to unclog. Akash tells me it's a *kashayam*: a tea of a variety of herbs and spices including tulsi, ginger, salt, pepper, cloves and more. The *kashayam* is made with different herbs and spices to target distinct ailments, such as cough and indigestion.

This tea is part of *Ayurveda*, the traditional alternative medicine system which originated in India. *Ayurveda* is detailed in the ancient Indian texts referred to as the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* are the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, and cover everything from religious doctrine to, well, medicine. *Veda* translates to "knowledge", and the texts form a foundation of Indian society, not just for Hindus. While many Indian peoples have adopted other religions, many of the teachings

of *Vedas* stick around. While *Ayurveda* is regarded as pseudoscience by Western cultures, I can't deny that I feel better after guzzling the *kashayam*. But I would also probably feel better after chicken noodle soup. Is this medicine? I don't think it's my place to say. I'm happy to drink hot, spicy tea either way.

For dinner we have Uncle's fried chicken, which he has made just for me.

"Just like KFC," Uncle exclaims, nodding his head in the patented approval shake.

But it's way better than KFC, and different too. Made with no milk, to my appreciation, the outside is crunchy with what can only be oats and some other flour mixed up. It's not the ideal meal to reduce decongestion given the high fat content, but it's called soul food for a reason. Tonight, fried chicken is the medicine I never knew I needed.

July 6

Despite the healthy helping of fried chicken, my sickness persists. I've blown my nose through a couple rolls of toilet paper since yesterday. I miss breakfast, instead opting to rest in the sweltering bedroom. When I head downstairs for wifi access, I try to distance myself from the crew because I don't want to risk spreading my cold, trying to do some work but really just staring at my laptop and listening to music.

The team heads out after lunch for a game treatment session. I'm left to my own devices in the dark common room. As I'm drifting off to sleep on the couch, neck craned with terrible posture, Akash's relatives who live in Saudi Arabia stop by the house. The sunlight blasts through the opened door, and I shield my eyes from the brightness like a vampire. I give them a wave and a *namaste*, hoping that I can just be alone. I'm sick and tired, and don't want to infect the youths with my cold.

Within five minutes, Akash's three young cousins have migrated from the table with the parents to the couch with me. I don't really give them much attention beyond a pleasant greeting because I don't want to interact right now and we don't have any languages in common. They

go back and forth from the dining room like clockwork, taking turns peering over my shoulder and often falling over into me. So much for keeping my distance. I can't help but smile.

Akash's relatives head out and the team returns from their session, which I skipped for health concerns. According to Sush, subjects displayed a lot of frustration with the phones today. In a way, frustration shows progress in understanding smartphones: they now know enough to know when it's not working as intended. The fixes are simple—they've returned to the home screen, gone bankrupt in the game, or lost connection to the cell hotspots we've set up. We hope that the subjects take away some smartphone skills from this experiment, even if it teaches them little about financial literacy.

At dinner, Pooja frets about her upcoming job interview tomorrow with a South Korean company that runs an academic hub website much like Canvas, which we use at USF. She's especially nervous because it is a final round interview with the CEO himself. But she's prepared well. I ask her about the previous rounds of interviewing and whether they've asked about her experience in the experiment. They have, and they asked a very pointed question that must have been pulled from her description of it: "What would you do if the husband objected to their wife's participation in the experiment?"

Pooja answered well, citing that she would attempt to explain to the couple that the wealth created through the groups is not only for the wife's interests, but can be put towards their goals as a couple as well. The wealth generated should be used to benefit their family as a whole.

There's another angle here that the interviewer missed in their question, though. Participating in an experiment sanctioned by the NGO and the representatives who lead the groups is no great leap, and we haven't run into husbands objecting at all. Joining the self-help group in the first place is the big leap that the husbands may not condone. I ask Akash if there is a cohort of men who object to their wives joining these groups. He considers as he washes his hands.

“Not really… Loans here are only given to women for the most part here,” he responds.

“So they’re used to accepting that men are stupid with money?”

“Yeah,” he pauses. “But there is a case of one woman. She wanted to join the Prakriti group, but her sons—I know them from school—they wouldn’t let her join.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea.” He raises his eyebrows as if he has a headache. He wrings his wet hands with a bit of energy.

Sons of aging parents always think they know best. Still, it’s strange to see the younger generation latch on to more sexist values. Apparently the resurgence of these discriminatory attitudes are not unique to the US.

July 7

There’s just two weeks left until Stanley and I are back in the US. At breakfast, we daydream what we’re going to eat when we get home. The food’s great here, but there’s not much variety in comparison to what we’re used to. There’s no pork or beef, two of my favorites. I really want some roasted vegetables, like some broccoli or something. But one thing’s certain: I’m definitely stopping at In-N-Out on the way home from the airport. I swear they built the Daly City location to serve weary travelers returning from far- flung lands.

I’m feeling much better today with an infusion of Advil and a steaming *kashayam*. The enumerators are all downloading the Meta Threads app, the new Twitter competitor. Excited, they ask if I’ve downloaded it. I say no, I’m trying to wean myself off social media. It’s been a multi-year challenge that I have consistently failed to do.

“Why man?” Veron blurts, nose still sniffly from being sick.

I explain that it doesn’t make me happy, so I don’t want to keep using it. This notion doesn’t seem to sink in for Veron. It’s just part of life for younger enumerators. I grew up before

the onset of social media domination, right at the cusp, so I guess it seems like more of a choice to me than a staple of existence.

We have a game treatment session in the afternoon—my first session since I've gotten sick. Of course, to challenge my immune system, it's raining buckets. As we're driving into the site in the jeep, Akash turns on the wimpy windshield wiper. It does absolutely nothing at all in the torrential rain. Like many of the sites, this site is only accessible through muddy backroads. The heavy, ancient jeep struggles as Akash guns it through puddle after puddle.

My sickly weariness is shocked out of me as we slide from side to side in what was once the road, now a river. On either side of the road, gentle hills lead down to settlements, cordoned off by flimsy vine-covered fences. I have a premonition of our jeep slipping off the road, slicing through the fence like paper and crashing through into someone's living room.

I grip the seat in fear. Whipping the wheel back and forth to keep us sliding in the right direction, Akash is full of glee. I grip the handle on the door. I can't help thinking about our lack of seatbelts. Also, rear-wheel drive is not optimal for this scenario. But somehow we make it to a small plateau where we park the behemoth. Red mud is spattered across the bow like blood.

Our offroading is not complete. A small stream, our hiking trail, leads down to the house where the subjects await. The combination of slick mud topped with grass and leaping water flowing over the top makes for an ice-like slipperiness. Again, my ugly yellow crocs are not the best tools for the job. Ducking into the taller foliage more than once for better footing, we emerge into the driveway of the house. We chose a different road due to weather concerns. To think that the road we took was the *safer* option…

Blissfully, the game session itself is not an adrenaline pumping experience. In fact, for many subjects, it's an exercise in futility. Much of this group struggles with basic literacy; they can't read numbers or words in Kannada. Our enumerators have all hands on deck, flitting between each subject and explaining their choices verbally. It is times like these that I wish I

could be another voice to aid the subjects: my inability to speak any of the many languages spoken here hamstrings me.

It's difficult to be a leader when you can't participate in most of the discussions due to the language barrier. When I do, it's inconvenient and slows down the dialogue because I need translation. In the sessions themselves, I am resigned to being a pack mule of our supplies and attending to the needs of our enumerators. I do the simple stuff—keeping time, making sure we follow protocol, filling out the receipts, and handing out the subject payments. Being a leader means letting others make the decisions, listening to those around you and trusting that they are capable and responsible.

I try to take a more active role in what I have a comparative advantage in—offering advice for when things don't go as planned in order to preserve our research design. But this can't be done on the fly. My contribution is strongest in my evening discussions with Akash about the day's work, reflecting. I am so appreciative that we have capable enumerators. We can credit Anushka, Pooja, Veron and Sush with any findings that we come across.

July 8

Although I took two days off this week due to sickness, another day off is much appreciated. It's a gloomy Saturday with light rain and dark skies. This morning, Akash took the bus back to Mangalore to visit the optometrist and get some new glasses, so Stanley and I are alone at home. It's too rainy to go outside.

I spend most of the day napping and staring at my laptop screen, exacerbating my headache. The monotony of the day is broken by Uncle, who goes outside to feed the dogs. They're yapping and crying for attention. I hear a high-pitched voice speaking in tongues outside, the dogs rattling their cages. I peek my head out the front door to see what's going on. Having unlocked their cages, Uncle is prancing with the dogs, speaking in a voice which must stretch the very fibers of his vocal chords. I can't believe his normally gruff voice is capable of

the intonations I'm hearing—it's like Jekyll and Hyde. I watch them playing for a while, incredulous. I blink, and head back inside.

Somehow, I find it comforting that adopting different voices with pets is a constant across societal boundaries. A quick google search confirms that we adopt high voices with our pets because we want them to feel safe, just as we would do with a baby. While the dogs are frolicking in the rain, Uncle cleans their cages with collected rainwater from the roof. After he's done, he herds the dogs back into the cages.

At first, the dogs being in cages troubled me. But Akash explains to me that these are not trained dogs, and if let loose entirely, they would be a menace to kids and other dogs. Indeed, clumsy Snowby, the biggest and youngest, gave Tingo, his father, a nasty bite on his head a couple weeks back. The scar is visible. It almost killed him. Although it's sad, caging the dogs is making the best of the worst. They get to play outside every day, and they certainly have plenty of love from their owner.

The rest of the day I spend further developing my headache over unraveling persisting coding problems for our project with Professor Jesse. At this point, I'm fed up, and I commit to annotating each line, describing the purpose of the codeblocks in detail. I feel like the protagonist in the Hollywood hit *Maze Runner*. If you haven't seen it, you guessed it—yep, I feel like I'm running through a big maze. Even ChatGPT seems to tire of my incessant questions. It's slow going. But after an eternity, I've at least identified where the issues are cropping up. I just try different ideas and rerun the code. Since I'm working on the USF server, I have to reupload my changes from GitHub after even the slightest alteration. It's the repetition of reuploading that really takes a toll.

I've gotten myself out of a pickle in math many a time through brute force trial and error, and computer science is no different. I'm kind of just lashing out at the endless void of possibilities at this point, but somehow something just clicks. To my amazement, the code works flawlessly. I've been waiting at least a month for this moment. I'm not ashamed to say I shed a

tear—nothing like some nerd chills. Most of the time, coding sucks. But these moments make it all worthwhile.

Of course, now that I'm on a roll, I look at the next file in the sequence that we're supposed to execute. Within the first segment I run into an incomprehensible error. Back to square one. I email Jesse and decide to rest on my laurels for a bit.

I can't wait for Akash to come home and tell him of my breakthrough, but he's still returning from Mangalore by bus. Pooja and Anushka arrive ahead of him. I quiz Pooja on her interview.

"How'd the interview go?" I ask.

"Well, I think I made it past the CEO round," she said modestly.

In my head there are a bunch of question marks.

"What's after the CEO round? The God round?"

She laughs. Seems like she got the job, just some background checks to go. I tell her that we're all proud of her, and she just about crumples under the praise.

When Akash gets home, I tell him the good news. He's positively elated; the issue has been stressing us out for weeks. Uncle prepares homemade chicken fry supplemented by some *parotta* from a local hotel—what people here call restaurants, which are mostly like cantinas.

I'm relaxing on the couch after dinner, full belly propped up. Piano music and singing wafts into my curious ears from Akash's room. *Is he singing?* I peek into his room. He is! I go grab Anushka who I know is a talented singer and drag her into Akash's room. I plop down on the edge of Akash's bed, opposite the expensive keyboard.

"I got front row seats. So when's the concert?" I ask.

"What?" Anushka is confused.

"When are you and Akash going to put on a concert for the foreign dignitaries?" Of course, Stanley and I are the esteemed foreign dignitaries.

Akash is enthusiastic. "Right now," he nods at Anushka.

She's flustered. "I can't," she shakes her head, smiling. "I have a problem with my throat."

That's an excuse, and we all know it.

"Ok, then… tomorrow?"

She agrees. I'm going to hold her to that. I head back into the living room and reestablish myself on the couch. Anushka joins, and Akash follows in her footsteps, carrying the keyboard. He sets it up in the living room, emboldened by my interest in the music. He plays a couple Hindi songs he knows by heart. They're beautiful! I love the patented voice wavering of Indian singing.

He encourages Anushka to join, and she does. Akash cites that they have to practice for the big concert tomorrow. They trial some songs they both know, and although they need some practice playing together, there's plenty of potential there. Anushka has a high, beautifully flitting voice which complements Akash's deeper tenor well.

"Can you read music?" I interrupt after one song ends.

"No—I never learned," Akash admits. "I've never had any formal training." This is hard to believe.

He continues. "The closest decent musical college is in Mangalore, and that's just too far."

Again, this speaks to how those in Kadaba cope with lack of access, even if it is a luxury such as musical training. Oftentimes I feel that constraints hone our skills in what is lacking. Akash is no exception to this rule. All the music he knows he's learned by ear and a feel for the piano. I played the trumpet for five years, and I tell him about my experience with music.

"I could never memorize any music—I always had to rely on sheet music," I confess.

It's funny how our brains are so different. Maybe that's why we're good friends. A few songs later, we collectively agree it's bedtime. I fall asleep looking forward to being serenaded tomorrow.

July 9

Hastily throwing all our materials into our backpacks, we rush out the door to make our 9AM session over in Renjilady. Akash double checks that I have all the necessary items.

“Attendance ledger? Receipts? Cash? Laptop? Speaker? Pens? Phones?”

I nod to each item in turn. But there’s one thing we don’t have this morning: a working jeep. The engine sputters and waffles, failing to ignite. After a couple minutes of opening up the hood and fruitlessly investigating, we stuff the six people into Akash’s diminutive car. I get the front seat.

We’re meeting Veron and Sush at a local breakfast spot in town. I have two Mangalore buns, sending a picture to Andrew of me and Stanley enjoying his favorite breakfast item. The restaurant is owned by an older graduate of Aloysius who is familiar with Akash. After a finance degree, he moved back to Kadaba. It seems like a flourishing business. When I compliment the food, he beams and places his hand to his heart in a gesture of respect.

Our team splits in two. Sush, Pooja and I head to our usual Sunday morning destination of Renjilady’s school for an interaction session. Akash, Anushka, Veron and Stanley take the car, so we take a tuk tuk. On the way, Sush asks about research designs other than RCTs. I tell him about natural experiments, trying to explain that this experiment design leverages observing a source of randomization occurring in the world at large, rather than doing the randomization of treatment ourselves, as we do in an RCT. I’m not sure he understands, but he’s getting there. I’m glad he’s curious about research design; it’s one of my favorite topics to talk about. He’s doing an MBA, but I could see him going down the research path at some point. He’s very patient with subjects and a great communicator.

The morning interaction session is a bit more difficult than normal. We’re under a strict time constraint because many of the subjects have a funeral to attend, and we have only eight phones for 18 subjects. Akash is running a game session at the moment, and has the other

phones. This would not be an issue if we had time to give each subject a turn of 20 minutes or so with the phone, but we don't. Stressed, Pooja and Sush ask me what we should do. We also have only two enumerators, and many of the subjects in this group are illiterate and need constant attention to make selections in the game. Putting our heads together, we decide to loosely pair subjects up, trying to pair those who are literate with those who aren't. With the literate helping the illiterate, we give each subject about 15 minutes each with the phone. Not a perfect fix, but it's the best we can do given our immense constraints.

The fifteen minutes have elapsed. Sush and Pooja collect the phones. In the meantime, I have filed our receipt for the payments we will make to the subjects and prepared the video on my laptop. Sush gives an introduction, encouraging the subjects to visualize how they might accomplish their own goals as the interviewees in the video tell their success stories. For the most part, they are not responsive. The upcoming funeral weighs heavy. We take our cue and pack up, handing out the payments and bidding them farewell. We express our appreciation for their attendance and emphasize the importance of coming to the last session for the endline survey.

We have an aspirations session next, but we have time to kill due to the shortened session. Sush gives Akash a call to report our status.

"You can pick us up in 20 minutes?" I hear Sush ask. "Ok, ok, ok. Sounds good."

"So, he's picking us up in 40 minutes?" I say, half joking. We all know how India time works.

After some deliberation, we agree to walk towards our destination. Stretching my legs is necessary, and it will shorten Akash's driving time. As cars whizz by, many of the drivers' eyes trace me walking along the roadside. One guy even leans his head fully out the window. I can imagine what's running through their heads: *What the hell is a foreigner doing walking along my road?*

We encounter an old man with a staff plodding down the path in front of us. As we pass him going the other way. He stops in place, staring, almost drooling, saying nothing. He looks like he's seen a ghost. I'm not *that* pale, am I? When we get out of earshot, we break down laughing. Pooja wipes a tear from her eye.

"Grandpa couldn't… understand what he saw," she manages between wracking fits of laughter.

We laugh some more. Sush and Pooja agree that he has probably never seen a white person before. He looked about 80. To think in all those years he might never have seen someone like me before is crazy to me.

Akash's peppy white Hyundai rounds the corner and stops in front of us. We hop in and head to the other concurrent session, which Anushka and Veron are finishing up. We pop out of the car, stumbling through the roadside brush because Akash parked flush with the edge of the dirt path. As he's telling us that his dad will be here in a minute, we hear the creaky rumble of the old jeep beyond the next turn in the road. Uncle has got the jeep back working. We're going to be early to our next session, but no matter. Best to work off Uncle's schedule and not waste his time.

I've only been to our next session's location once, which was when Pooja and I traipsed through the dense foliage of the banana plantation and got scared by the snake. The journey to the jeep is far less eventful than that memorable, anxiety-inducing hike. We get out in front of a big house under construction. There's a white sign with black writing in Arabic on one of the in-progress porch pillar supports. My first ignorant American thought is that it resembles the Taliban flag, and I get a jolt of fear. I ask Sush what the sign means.

"It's to ward off evil eye," Sush explains. "Bad things happen when people look too long and hard at things."

In Hinduism, *drishti*, or evil eye, is the belief that evil can be transferred through a glare from one person to another person or another thing. In this case, the sign wards off malevolent

glares that may impact the house's construction. I find it interesting that this sign is written in Arabic, which indicates that it is a Muslim household—further evidence of how pervasive Hindu traditions are throughout Indian society, among Muslims as well.

Even though we're early, several women wait in the ramshackle house where our aspirations session is set to take place. Killing time, I take pictures with the two young boys who giggle, looking at us. They put on their straight faces for the pictures, but promptly resume giggling and rush off to tell their parents about the pictures.

The session itself is pretty quick. Sush gives the introduction, we watch the video, and we let them discuss pathways that they see for themselves based on the video. In the discussion, the group tells us pretty much exactly what we want to hear. They say that the video inspired them, that it motivates them. But to what end? They omit comments related to future pathways. We encourage them to get specific about their steps, but our request doesn't really get home to our subjects.

We have lunch at a popular casual restaurant in town. I have fresh parotta and chicken pepper curry. Because we have just one small car at our disposal today, Akash needs to ferry us in shifts to our next session. He leaves Pooja and Stanley to relax in a local cantina while Veron, Anushka, Sush and myself pile on top of one another into the cramped car.

The brimming back seat is probably an amusing sight to the two subjects who await us. They have bad news—nobody else is showing up today. The rest of the subjects have a previous commitment that preceded today's session. They have ironed out the matters of balancing their group's checkbook regarding outstanding loans earlier this week. It would have been nice to know about this, but there's nothing we can do now. We can't have a meaningful session with two people, so we give them their subject payments of ₹100 rupees and head home to regroup. It's the least we can do to cover their transportation costs. Akash drops us and heads back out to snag Pooja and Stanley. While the subjects' absence may ultimately put a kink in the data, I'm happy to get some rest.

We slump on the couches underneath the blessed breeze of the fans. I close my eyes. Suddenly, it's 2:30 PM—time to get ready for our last session. Akash drops Pooja, Veron, Sush and me at the site before looping back to drive Stanley and Anushka over to their session. I am fond of this site due to the comfy couch and colorful fish tank. It's just a game session, and we have plenty of manpower to help the subjects out. We spend 20 minutes with each one. Finishing the procedure before Akash's group, we wait around and chat . Many of the subjects ask me for a picture, and I'm stuck smiling for photo upon photo until Akash shows up to take us home.

It's a blessing to resume our leisure after our stressful Sunday. Akash proposes that we watch a horror movie. We oblige, and he suggests *Smile*. He throws it up on the TV. Long story short, it's a movie about an evil entity that makes people smile as they kill themselves in front of other people, then possesses each witness. It's a gruesome chain of blood. Halfway through we pause to let the movie buffer a bit, and I turn to Pooja who is positively cowering, minimizing sensory input by scrunching up her body, closing her eyes and clasping her ears. She peeks out from her safety precautions.

"I am going to have to recite so many prayers after this," she wails.

"You know this is based on a true story, right?" It's probably the most outlandish lie I've ever told. But she's not exactly in the best headspace. She just kind of wavers and shudders. She likes horror movies, but can barely watch them. A few minutes later, I reassure her that it's all made up.

After the movie finishes, we're all a little shaken by the gory, disturbing violence. Perfect time to stuff our faces at a local restaurant. Tonight, we travel 30 KM to *Royal Mexico*, one of the best restaurants in the region.

"So they have Mexican options?" I venture, kind of in disbelief. Al pastor tacos are always rent free in my head, but withdrawals of the succulent grilled marinated pork are hitting hard today.

They all laugh.

“That’s just the name,” Akash explains. “It’s an Indian restaurant.”

“Why would they name it that? Do they have any connection at all to Mexico?”

“No,” Akash keeps chuckling.

“That’s like naming a restaurant in SF *India Real*, then serving exclusively Mexican food,” I insist, overthinking a silly name as I am wont to do. “That would be so misleading.”

The enumerators and Akash agree that they’ve never thought about the name before—it’s just a name after all. Thinking further, our other frequented restaurant is *Hotel Milan* and they aren’t serving a single atom of Italian food. The restaurant names referencing foreign lands emphasize the lack of other varieties of cuisine available in the area. They can get away with calling their Indian restaurant *Royal Mexico* because there is absolutely zero chance that anyone has ever considered that it might be a Mexican restaurant. It’s all Indian food out here, as far as I can tell. My mouth is still watering at the thought of my coveted Al Pastor, deliciously succulent marinated pork. Or would I mix things up and get Carne Asada? That would hit the spot. But who am I kidding? Every time I step up to the Taqueria counter I am called to the church of Al Pastor.

My daydreaming is cut short by the sound of coarse dirt underneath the tires as we pull into the *Royal Mexico* parking lot. We gather in the air conditioned dining room, where an additional 5% charge is added on top to pay for the costs. I’d probably be alright with paying 20%. Something brings me to ask about crime in Kadaba and how it compares to Mangalore.

“There’s far less crime in Kadaba because people believe in God strongly here,” Pooja answers. “People here are much more concerned with reputation and community.”

“Why do you think people are more religious in Kadaba? Where does the pressure to believe come from?” I ask.

“Nagging parents,” Anushka rolls her eyes. That’s personal.

“The pressure comes from belief,” Pooja says.

The logic here is a bit circular, but I get it—there's not really any other options than to believe. The spiritual underpinnings of Indian society are a constant across India; most everyone believes in something. Once you grow up believing, and everyone else around believes, there's no incentive to deviate from belief. The opportunity costs of abandoning your belief are far higher than continuing to believe. For one, there's the religious consequences of becoming a non-believer. But perhaps more important is the loss of acceptance and conformity within the community at large. You'll be labeled an outsider. Deviating from the status quo of the group is not common here, as we have observed in the self-help groups with their lack of individual agency and the mutual reliance on the group. To not conform is to lose out on opportunities and connections.

The enumerators contrast Kadaba with the chaos of Mangalore. They tell me stories of creepy criminals being perverts and thieves. There's less interconnectedness and co-dependence in cities, and Mangalore is no exception. That loss of tight-knit community in cities means there's fewer checks and balances to potentially tarnish your reputation and label you as a malefactor.

Royal Mexico is a hit. It has an extensive menu, even some American fast food: fried chicken, chicken sandwiches which are referred to as "burgers", and french fries. I contemplate trying them, but I decide to stick to my garlic naan and spicy mutton. And maybe a side of *alfam*, a grilled chicken recipe emanating from the Middle East.

"We took *alfam* from the Middle East, made it better." Akash makes a sprinkling motion. "We added a nice *masala*."

"So the *masala* is just kind of like the sauce, like a general term," I state. Akash rejects this notion sternly, but he's unable to articulate his feelings, brain whirring.

"More like a spice blend?" I volunteer.

The enumerators hesitate, then cautiously accept this definition. I think the word has more significance behind it culturally than just “spice blend”. The *masala* defines Indian cooking; it’s close to sanctity.

I finish off my meal with a ginger lime soda. Good for digestion, my guides insist. And I’m glad for it, the trip is awfully bumpy as we wind back home on the meandering roads. Blessedly, I avoid car sickness.

July 10

I’m lounging on the couch in the living room watching videos before breakfast. Pooja paces around the dining room, talking on the phone to someone. She covers her mouth and begins to jump around. She covers the microphone.

“I got the job! I got the job!” she whispers hoarsely, trying to not squeal. She scoots over to the couch and gives me a big hug, knocking my airpods clean out before continuing her excited dance. I congratulate her, but she’s already in the other room, telling everyone she can find. I’m very proud and I tell her so. She’ll be a customer service representative for a Canvas-like student portal service, earning a fantastic salary for the region due to its remote nature. She gets to work from home with her mom, as well.

“Your mom will be so proud,” I say when she comes back into the living room.

“I’m so relieved,” she breathes out. “I won’t have to hear ‘Do you have job yet?’ from my mom.”

It was her first interview process. In the US, to get a job after interviewing for only one company is pretty unheard of. I’m glad her job search was a relative breeze. I wouldn’t wish the job search on my worst enemy.

In the afternoon we have an aspirations session with a lackluster turnout from the subjects. We wait 30 minutes after the session is due to begin, hoping that more subjects will show. The considerate homeowner serves us some refreshments, even remembering my black

tea preference of no sugar and no milk. Seven out of 13 have arrived, and the subjects doubt that the rest will be making an appearance, so we choose to start the curriculum. We watch the video, but it's sweltering something fierce out and nobody is particularly enthusiastic or engaged. Stanley and I are occupied with swatting waves of military-grade mosquitoes. Sush sparks some discussion on the video, but it's short-lived. It's a strange parallel that articulating pathways is a roadblock for many of our subjects. We leave dissatisfied, our negative thoughts held partially at bay by some sweet biscuits.

On the ride home, I query Sush and Pooja about the root of the attendance issue.

"Most of them are very busy," Sush begins. "They have temple visits, other functions to attend. We are not their priority."

"Do you think our ₹100 rupee payments are motivating our subjects to come?"

"No," they concur in unison.

"They don't care about money from this, they'll get it on their own," Pooja continues.

"Would paying them more make a difference?"

Pooja thinks on it for a moment.

"Not really," Sush says. "200-300 is fine, but more would not be a good idea. You can't give 500 in a humble way."

We insist that all our payments are gifts to avoid the qualms the subjects would have about being paid directly. Paying them in cash would be offensive to them. They are operating under the belief that they are doing a favor to us, and expect no payment. But paying subjects for experiments is a crucial tenet of international regulation in economic experiments, so we call the payments gifts instead. The subjects only really take our gifts to avoid disrespecting *us*. What a convoluted tightrope to walk.

Pooja builds off Sush again. "If we start giving too much, news will spread. Do you remember that one beggar?" The sick man had come to our Renjilady session and we had given him some money. "There would be a lot more," she maintains.

We pull into the driveway and rush into the shade of Akash's living room. I plop down on the couch to relax. Sush has been thinking about what we talked about earlier.

"Are you busy?" he asks.

I take my headphones out. "No, what's up man?" I say.

"I think I know why the subjects aren't coming. They are not coming maybe because they are uncomfortable but we force them to talk."

This makes sense; not everyone likes to speak in a public gathering. I get not wanting to share your experiences, especially with curious foreigners who you don't know. I've been getting overwhelmed with people staring at me, but perhaps the subjects also feel overwhelmed by our incessant questioning as we delve into their personal experiences.

I wonder if our game treatment groups have a higher attendance rate, given the minimal intrusiveness. Yet more, maybe people are hesitant to consider an increase in their individual agency, and thus are uncertain about our intentions with the aspirations treatment. I wonder if this might affect our results.

Sush confirms their lack of interest in financials with an anecdote he heard from one woman today. For this woman, to get to the location of the session costs about ₹70 rupees each way. We pay ₹100 rupees, meaning that she is *paying* ₹40 rupees to come to the session.

"They come to learn, not for money," he says. "They come to meet new people, they come to help us. They go back home and tell their families about us. I'd say only about three out of 10 come for the money."

The sense of community and altruism is stronger than financial motivations here. Akash has expressed that paying subjects is not the most optimal way to entice subjects to come in the past, and now I see why. I think the International Review Board which requires payments for experiments should see beyond cash payments. It's just another Western-centric notion that people are best motivated by cash and it is best to compensate them as such. After two months here, I can corroborate that most subjects would be more than pleased with receiving a

blessing, a speech showing our respect or spending more time with us. The ravenous materialism which plagues the US falters in Kadaba.

July 11

Today marks the beginning of the last week of our experiment. All that's left to do is fill out the endline surveys with the subjects. Since we now must revisit the control groups, the workload this week is already 25% greater. But on top of the additional groups is the additional time required per session to record responses to the lengthy surveys. That said, we anticipate things going more smoothly than the first week, because we are more experienced.

The endline survey itself is around 60 questions with multiple parts to some questions—about 10 questions less than the baseline. There's fewer questions because we have elected to not re-record the subjects' demographic information. It's unlikely that any of the subjects changed religions in the past five weeks, for instance. The rest of the endline is almost identical to the baseline, with changed numbers in the numeracy questions. We want the questions to be as similar as possible in the baseline and endline in order to measure changes in the subjects when we compare the two sets of responses. With the isolated treatment groups, we hope to see that the treatments increased financial literacy and aspirations relative to any changes that may have occurred in the control group.

The familiar burden of countless surveys in my backpack weighs upon me as we march up to today's first session. We are impressed with the turn out from the subjects. This week, every single group member came. The surveying goes much the same as the baselines, with Akash and the enumerators surveying group members in Kannada while Stanley and I help where we can. With the shorter survey and increased experience, the enumerators fly through the work, corralling the members into groups of three and four. Some subjects are able to fill out the survey themselves, but most rely on help.

After the session concludes and I slip the surveys back into my backpack, we begin the formalities. Several subjects offer their thanks and appreciation for being part of the experience. One, grinning, jokingly asks if we can stay for another five weeks. It's nice to be appreciated. We are presented with flower bouquets, a full lunch of chicken biryani for each team member and a two liter Sprite for the group. Stanley and I are invited to say a few words. Pooja translates as we thank the subjects for their commitment and love they have shown towards our study. We keep it brief. Akash says a few words as well. We shake their hands, and one woman even blesses me. We lug our gifts back to the van and retreat to the house for a respite before our second session.

The second group we visit also comes in full. We are very encouraged by the increases in attendance this week. The sample is small thus far, but strong attendance this week is crucial to the power of our results. The enumerators finish surveying the subjects without a blip.

We talk movies on the ride home. Akash and I both love movies that are real mind benders, ones that make you think. That is, we like the most stereotypical movies for young men to enjoy. Akash's favorite movie is *The Dark Knight*, with *Interstellar* as a close second. I bet you could have guessed. They're basic choices, but I can hardly contest them—I am an absolute sucker for a good space movie.

In that vein, I suggest that we watch *Contact* tonight, the 1997 inspiration for *Interstellar*. It's a tad long, but I figured it would be great for Akash to see how Carl Sagan continues to inspire science fiction even today. I'd forgotten that the movie actually has some relevant themes to our India trip. It explores the balance of science and spirituality, emphasizing that spiritual belief can drive us to explore the world of science further rather than stifling scientific inquiry. Just because something is not supported by the scientific method does not mean there cannot be elements of truth to inform further study.

As Kadaba continues to develop, I believe the region can leverage deep communal ties spurred by spirituality to accelerate development. We've already seen this in the self-help

groups when it comes to financial matters. I hope that this trend continues as Kadaba becomes more integrated with technology and science.

July 12

Our normal morning session has been rescheduled to tomorrow morning, so today our subteam of Sush, Pooja and I join the wider group at a new location for me. It's a control group. The home is midway up a steep mess of a muddy hill—not ideal terrain for worn-down crocs. I pick my way up carefully, breathing out a sigh of relief. The mud does not claim me today. I slip off my clogs and step on the driveway, mind elsewhere. Bad move. I slip on the slick lichen-covered concrete as if it was a banana peel in Looney Toons, landing hard on my wrist. A throbbing pain swells, but recedes as I spy possibly the smallest cat I've ever seen. It's the size of a kitten, but definitely stunted. Anushka tells me it's been malnourished. There's also a black and light brown puppy that looks like a baby German shepard. The two tiny animals take my mind off my wrist as we coo over them. The challenge of this group lies in their differing comfort with different languages. Some prefer Kannada, others Tulu. Our protocol is for the enumerators to complete the survey in small groups of three to four, but this becomes difficult if within the small group there are different language preferences. The enumerators brute force the issue, often re-explaining the questions in two languages. In the future, we should divide the small groups by language preference.

Our second group means business. All subjects have gathered before we arrive, and we're only a couple minutes late. Anushka marvels at the attendance book. Not one person has missed a session in the last five weeks. Last week was canceled due to a scheduling issue, so we're going to have to show the video and hold the final discussion before the endline survey. This is a slight concern. I worry about short-term spillover effects from the video into the endline survey. We are hoping that the video inspires the subjects to have greater aspirations, of course, but perhaps taking the endline survey right after might catch them feeling especially

inspired with high aspirations. In our other groups, subjects take the endline one week after the final video showing. I encourage Akash to check for this effect in the data, and he concurs. Much of econometrics is performing various statistical checks to demonstrate to another person the validity of your results.

Watching the video sparks lively discussion. We learn that the present group members also are part of a finance group which provides them additional loans, but is not as charitable as SKDRDP. This organization aims to garner a profit off of the high interest rate loans they provide the group. They can rest assured the group will repay their loans due to their track record. Although the high interest rates are a bit predatory, the loans are beneficial after all is said and done. They helped the group make it through the difficulties of the pandemic, which strained many of their small businesses due to supply chain issues. The subjects agree that they only scraped by by the will of God. Based on this statement, the group appears somewhat fatalistic about their situation. But their actions say otherwise. This group is incredibly motivated to improve their lives.

As we make the payments to the subjects (₹200 rupees each for the endline survey), I fill out the payment receipt we require to create a paper trail for the economics department to validate our spending. Part of this entails getting the signature of the leader of the group. I point out one woman to Akash.

“She’s the leader of the group, right?” I remember her from two weeks ago for her resounding singing voice. Akash asks in Kannada. In turn, she points at another woman.

“Not this week,” Akash explains. “The president rotates every week. The secretary and the treasurer remain the same, though.”

I had no idea; I thought leadership in the groups was static. I’m impressed. This rotational system promotes cooperation and equality, allowing everyone’s voice to be heard. I imagine this is a valuable tactic to build and maintain community.

On the drive home, Veron points to a bulbous hill that overlooks the extensive forests of Kadaba.

“We go?” Veron asks, gesturing. He’s fond of question-statements, where he makes a confident suggestion in the form of a question.

Akash yells back at the team from the driver seat over the grinding jeep.

“Everyone wanna go?”

“Sure,” I say. The rest of the team agrees. Akash pulls into the isolated church at the trailhead. The trail is a muddy mess, overgrown and rocky. It’s not raining right now, but dark clouds loom. Best to get moving.

We hike down into a streambed, then up again. Periodically the trail is marked by shrines to various saints.

“Is this some sort of pilgrimage?” I wonder aloud.

“Yeah, kind of,” Akash admits. “Every year, it’s tradition for members of my church to climb to the top, praying at the shrines along the way. At the top, there’s a big cross. A few years ago, our bishop went up and back down 14 times in one day, praying at every shrine.”

I relish the chance for a sliver of exercise. Veron scurries back and forth, taking a timelapse. I keep trudging on, setting a pace. The switchbacks meander up the side of the hill, occasionally granting us an open view at the forests below. The clouds dark, the lush treetops glistening with recent rain and the open sky behind shining fiercely, I’m compelled by the birds-eye view. There’s not much sign of human life below from here—just a roiling green expanse that looks like a great sea. Breathing heavy, we summit the big hill. Maybe “small mountain” would be a more apt description.

The cross at the top is sturdy and white, raised on a tiled dias. Beyond, we get the best view yet. The overlook reminds me of the Santa Cruz mountains in California, the way the hills roll and hide beyond mist, one after another. While we take pictures and appreciate the scene, the clouds churn and rain begins to fall, not in drops but in sheets.

Fortunately, Akash has seen this coming. He's called in the evac team—his mom's friend's son Naijin, who is like a brother to him. He guides us to his white 4x4 luxury jeep. Well, maybe it's not luxurious exactly, but it puts our usual jeep to shame. He takes us back to our ancient jeep, insisting that we stop by his house for some tea and snacks. We oblige, following behind him through the tempest. The visibility is next to zero, and the road has become a river. The meter-deep earth channels beside the road are brimming with rushing water, spilling out onto the narrow road. Inside the jeep, water is coming in from all directions. I've never gotten wet inside a fully enclosed vehicle before. It's as if we are driving along the bottom of a turbulent ocean.

Our jeep swims well through the roads despite its age, and soon enough we arrive at Naijin's family compound. We kick off our shoes in the rain, rushing inside. We are soaked. I feel bad that we've brought human puddles into their home. Even so, Naijin's parents and grandma don't seem to care. In India, guests are gods, as they say here. I am directed to a flower-printed couch across from an arch adorned with intricate wood carving. It's so detailed and dark that it resembles oiled stone. There's a power and imposing force to it.

Akash and his family friends sit and chat while I pick out various words: American, Luc, Stanley, San Francisco, financial literacy. He's explaining our presence and the experiment. This is how most conversations go. The conversation moves on, with Akash giving me the English summary as brief asides.

Naijin's family is close with the late bishop of Akash's church who sadly passed away in 2018.. With this connection comes wealth and influence. The bishop owns a sprawling 40 acre farm which Naijin's dad is entrusted with managing. While he doesn't own the land, the bishop allows him to reap the profits in exchange for upkeeping the land. Naijin invites us to go check out the farm, and Akash is excited by the idea. After some sweet black tea, we jump back in the jeep to go explore the farm.

On the way, Akash breaks down the lore of the property. Before she passed away, the bishop's mother owned the land. Back then, it wasn't quite a farm—she grew crops to survive, living off the land with a harmonious flock of livestock. Akash explains that she was obsessed with gardening and the beautification of the property. She lived a simple life despite her wealth. A ramshackle house was her only shelter, but she was happy. Instead of sitting in the bank, her riches went toward the betterment of the community in the form of gifts of land.

"She was a saintly woman," Akash reminisces.

When she died, the bishop chose to name the property *Jannat*, or heaven in Hindi. As our jeep crests the hill overlooking the land, I realize what inspired the name. Coconut and areca nut palms wave peacefully in the distance on the border of a gentle river. The waxy leaves of plentiful cashew trees sparkle in the light rain. Adolescent bamboo shoots reach for the sky in well maintained rows. It's a land of bounty—calm and seemingly out of time. I have a strong urge to own and cultivate lands of my own one day. *Jannat* indeed.

July 13

Our Thursday morning session gets off to a predictable start. Sush and I eavesdrop as the Dubai engineer mom shares the latest about her son to Pooja. Apparently, she's arranged a couple of potential brides for him to meet in distant Bangalore.

"If you can read eyes you know she's exaggerating," Sush whispers. The doting mother is embellishing in order to impress Pooja and stoke jealousy, presumably.

As we pull Pooja away to begin the session, the elementary music class decides *now* is the best time to bang the drums as loud as they can. Horns accompany them in a rambunctious melody that lacks an experienced touch. For the enumerators' sake, as they struggle to communicate with their subjects, I wish a couple of the young drummers would spontaneously decide that the flute was their true calling. Even with the cacophonous music practice, Sush and Pooja push through and complete the surveys in a timely manner.

Sush and I talk after about how the talkative subjects set the answers for some members of their group. Oftentimes, one woman will pipe up and the rest will agree, especially on the numeracy testing questions. Many issues crop up from the desire to conform. For one, we may not be getting the subjects' true answers. Second, we will have less variation in the data, which may limit the power of our analysis. There's not much we can do about this though due to the time constraints of the session and our limited number of enumerators.

For lunch, we head to a local veg restaurant in town. We plan to visit a temple later, and it's customary to not eat any meat before entering the holy place. The restaurant's menu consists of two choices of entree—white rice with an assortment of sauces, or red boiled rice with the same assortment of sauces. Both come with an optional plate of fried onions, which resembles calamari. I'm really hungry, but neither of the options have any nutritional value. It's just empty carbs. To make matters more frustrating for my hangry self, the rice is cooked to near mush. I have a couple fried onions and choose to skip eating anything else. Anushka agrees that it lacks flavor. I'm going to avoid this cantina again if possible.

I drag my disgruntled self to the next session, which is at a local preschool. Normally, we sit outside on the patio, but today they invite us inside. Tiny plastic chairs for the students are stacked in the corner, the walls above adorned with educational posters in both English and Kannada. I look at the Kannada posters, trying to guess at their meaning. One of them is definitely the rules of the school, probably listing tenets such as "sharing is caring".

My attention is torn from the posters by a commanding woman beginning the introductions. A staccato rhythmic clapping follows as she introduces each one of us.

"She runs the preschool," Akash whispers to me.

I can see it. She has the even-four-year-olds-listen-to-me aura, a rare trait indeed. A prayer is chanted, then our enumerators take attendance and get to the endline surveys. Again, they are outnumbered—we have two groups under one roof today. Due to the lack of manpower

the survey answers appear somewhat homogenous, with subjects parroting other subjects' stated answers.

After the presentation, we are given the usual bouquets of flowers and a light meal which we pretty much have to eat. Today's fare is cabbage and onion puffs—a folded pastry with a viscous veggie filling. Akash admits that his stomach is hurting.

"You think you could eat for me?" he begs.

I oblige. My turn to take up the mantle of respect-demonstrating eating. The puffs are quite good. I have two, chowing enthusiastically. I even ask for a black tea. Akash approves, and it's clear that the preschool principal is pleased as well. We've met the quota.

We make a hasty exit, citing our scheduled temple visit in a couple hours. We have an hour to go home and get ready. Not sure what to wear, I ask Akash.

"Maybe a nicer shirt," he suggests. "You look very Western in that t-shirt."

"I'm not sure I can hide my Western-ness, but sounds good."

I change into a short sleeve button down and the other men wear similar outfits. Anushka and Pooja put the boys to shame, donning long two-piece dresses with flowing sashes called *saree.*

"This is the first time I've worn this in months," Anushka says, examining her outfit.

"Would you wear this to a business event, or just ceremonies?" I ask. I'm curious to understand where the *saree* falls in the Indian dress code. Auntie always wears a similar *saree* to her job as a lecturer.

"No, mostly weddings and fancy events," she replies. "I'd wear a *kurta* for business. Office wear."

So the *kurta* is business casual, where the *saree* is formal. We hop in Akash's Hyundai, four in the backseat. The others grant me the privilege of sitting in front. I'm getting used to preferential treatment, and honestly I can't wait to go back home and just be ignored. At this point, being insulted and yelled at sounds refreshing.

It's a 45 minute drive to Kukke Shri Subrahmanya Swami Temple. The temple region is introduced by a towering ornate arch over the road, with slower traffic inside. There are speed controls in the form of barriers half-blocking the roads, much like slow streets in San Francisco. Unlike SF, many cows mill about, ruling the road. They don't seem to notice the cars, but each vehicle slows to avoid the majestic animals.

Our first stop is at a smaller temple to Ganesh. There's no pictures or shoes allowed, so we are sure to leave both in the car. Light rain dots my shirt as we walk up the stone stairs into the temple entrance. A black statue of Ganesh, the elephant god, dominates the temple interior. We walk around the statue in customary fashion, the Hindus of our group ringing the hanging bells.

"What are they for?" Veron wonders, pointing at the heavy bells.

"To let the god know you are there, to let them know you have come to worship," Pooja answers succinctly. We make a small donation, and walk back to the car down the slippery stairs. We loop around the road and make our way to Kukke Shri Subrahmanya Swami Temple itself.

The promenade to the temple unfolds before us. Far down a wide, carless street sits the multi-tiered temple, crenelated and gleaning white, framed by a swollen dark green hill behind, which looks like a cloud. The perfect white of the temple contrasts starkly with the leafy background. Nabbing a lucky parking spot in front of a souvenir shop, Akash hands me a small towel-like white shawl with sparse green, red and gold stripes on the fringes.

"You're going to have to take off your shirt when you enter the shrine," Akash tells me. "Cover yourself with the shawl."

I nod yes. It's interesting that the holiest of places requires shirtlessness, what Westerns would consider the least formal attire, barring complete nudity.

"You can also just go completely shirtless," Akash notes.

"I'll show off my six-pack," Veron gloats. He definitely does not have a six-pack.

“The white whale himself will be presenting his one-pack,” I vow, bowing.

We stroll down the middle of the street, snapping pictures of the distant temple and ourselves. Eventually, the facade looms above us, thick pillars guarding the entrance. There are no shoes allowed, so we walk down an adjacent alley to the shoe check. The sullen attendant provides us with an empty sack to throw our shoes in exchange for just five rupees. Barefoot, we pick our way down the dirty alley, washing our feet in a man-made stream at the base of the temple building.

Inside, it’s not what I expected. The closest comparison I can draw is an airport out of the 1960s adorned with religious symbols. There are lengthy queues and help desks, with worshippers lying around on the floor in small groups as if waiting for a flight. Stray dogs lounge in similar postures. The languishing people are waiting for the next service to begin. It looks like they’ve been waiting a long time.

We walk past the crowds, down the gullet of the temple to the shrines. We breeze through long empty lines marked by metal stanchions, like thrill seekers at an amusement park on a rainy day.

“We are lucky to come on such a calm day,” Anushka acknowledges. “Mostly it’s very busy.”

Apparently Thursday evening is not exactly peak time.

“The weekend is crazy,” Pooja adds. “Many people faint in the lines.”

With high summer temperatures, the corridors undoubtedly get to unsafe temperatures with unprepared tourists catching the brunt of it. I’m glad Akash had the foresight to go on an off-hour.

At the end of the queue there is a checkpoint manned by two older men. They instruct us to remove our shirts. I take mine off and straighten quickly, knocking my head against a heavy hanging bell. Pretty sure that’s not how the bell is meant to be rung. I’ve never had my bell rung

by ringing a bell before. The attendants narrow their eyes and I grimace, ducking into the shrine's room. The innermost shrine is dedicated to the lord of serpents, Kartikeya.

Like other temples, the shrine room is rectangular, with the vast majority of the room occupied by a smaller building in the center. Worshippers walk around to the other side of the mini-building, such that the entrance is no longer visible and the spectacle of the shrine dominates the scene. The shrine to Kartikeya lies down a slim passage within the inner sanctum. The gold of the shrine glistens in the candlelight, creating an ominous atmosphere. We don't get much time for viewing as we are pushed along by other visitors. We finish our loop back to the entrance, exiting and putting our shirts back on.

Before leaving, we check out the lesser shrines. For security purposes, many shrines on the outer reaches of the temple are kept under lock and key. The pure gold they are made of would make for a hefty fortune for a daring thief.

There's much more to explore in the temple's outer grounds. We cross a bridge over a babbling river, riddled with cairns made of impressive numbers of rocks.

"Making a tower of odd-numbered rocks in the river is said to manifest a hope or dream for the builder," Akash explains.

Veron moves to check out the river, a playful gleam in his eye. Akash halts him.

"Only go down if you have pure, honest intentions," he says.

I give Veron a flat stare. We move on into the gardens.

The gardens are the embodiment of the word lush. Intricate black statues depicting gods, bright flowers and coconut palms are the main event, with perfect grass filling the empty spaces. We stick along the wet concrete paths. The gardens are surrounded by a wall of soaring arecanut palms, the tallest I've seen.

"The soil is so fertile here," Akash observes. "That's the only way arecanut trees grow that tall. They must be 20… no, 30 years old, at least."

Their skinny trunks shift in the breeze. For some reason, at their base, there is a rusty playground. There's no kids right now, but I assume it's for kids to entertain themselves while their parents experience the calming atmosphere unencumbered by wild youths. It does seem a bit out of place in this holy site.

When Pooja tells me they also have to eat veg after going to the temple, I groan. I don't want any more overcooked rice. Akash selects a well-known restaurant that is quite upscale. I have my doubts about veg restaurants in general, but this one blows me away with some of the best food I've ever had. Unlike the lunch spot, the menu is extensive. I order a hulking plate of garlic naan that I consider prostrating myself in front of, a side of *palak aloo*, and a rich and spicy spinach curry with potato chunks. On the side, we have some chili fried *gobi* (cauliflower) and mushrooms which pack blasts of tingly flavor. The meal is topped off with the tiniest bottle of Coke I have ever seen, which contains far less fluid than even an eight ounce can. Veron insists that it tastes different somehow. I think it's the presentation.

On the way out, I show the team my protruding tummy, full of countless slices of naan.

"See? A one pack," I point.

My vendetta against veg restaurants has been proven unjustified. I'll never forget this meal.

July 14

I wake up early, but stay in bed until late. It feels like the beginning of the end for me in India as there's just one session. We have less than a week in India remaining.

I skip breakfast, barely making it to lunch. I've taken a liking to red boiled rice, the big juicy kernels reminding me of orzo pasta. The rice is topped with a dark green chicken curry. One thing I've come to realize about rice meals in India is that the ratio of rice to curry is much, much higher than in the US. Here, it's expected to receive a massive plate of rice with just a dollop of curry to mix with the rice. The dollop is mixed into the rice sparingly, coating it but not

drowning it. I'm used to eating curries on their own, often with no rice, so this is a big change. I guess that it may be budget constraints that limit people's consumption of curry, favoring the more cost-effective option of rice to satisfy hunger.

Our afternoon session is unremarkable. We have the full team, which is overkill for the 10 subjects. We're a well-oiled machine at this point, or at least the enumerators are. I just try to do my best to help with the logistics and basics.

After completing my responsibilities, I chat with Uncle about sports. I tell him I play soccer mainly, with a side of basketball these days.

"Did you play cricket when you were younger?" I ask. It's the biggest sport in India.

He shakes his head.

"In the US, we have a similar game called baseball," I say. "It's like cricket if only one slice of the field is in bounds. And there are a circle of bases instead of two. And…"

Trying to explain baseball in the cricket context is difficult despite the simplicity of the game. I give up. I've been told that my American accent is difficult to understand. Uncle has a good command of English, but it's heavily accented to the point where I often have to ask Akash to translate. He can read English to what I judge as a collegiate level, but he can't understand me well, and vice versa. We persist in our conversation, both speaking in simple phrases for the benefit of the other.

"Did you play any sports?"

"Kabaddi," he responds. "You know it?"

"No, what's that?"

He looks astounded that I don't know kabaddi. He tries explaining, moving his hands around in erratic directions. I absorb zero information. I realize how little information Uncle must have gathered from my own overview of baseball. He whips out his phone with enthusiasm and shows me a video of several players standing around another opposing player, who stands alone. Alone, the cornered man jolts into action, trying to touch the opposing players. In an

instant, the group of players mercilessly tackle the lone man, piling on top of him. I'm surprised by the sudden outburst of violence.

I look up the game online. Scrolling through Wikipedia, I learn that kabaddi is the national sport of Bangladesh, and is popular in South Asia at large. It's a bit like playing tag, but with quick bursts of pain sprinkled on top. Kabaddi is played on a court similar to a volleyball court without the net. There is a line down the center where the net would be if it was a volleyball court, dividing the two teams of seven. Taking turns, one team sends a "raider" into opposing territory. The raider's goal is to tag as many enemies as possible and return to their own team's side without being tackled. If the raider is tackled, he is out and he remains off the court. But if touches enemies and is able to return to his side, the touched players are out and the raider's team gets to bring back however many players were touched by their raider. It's reminiscent of Capture the Flag, but on a small court, and instead of a flag, touching defenders is the objective.

I try to act out what I've absorbed from my brief research to Uncle. It's an awfully violent game. They don't wear any protective gear and tackle their opposition with zero regard for their safety. To me, Kabaddi seems like a sport invented by a bunch of bored testosterone-filled boys looking to inflict violence in a competitive setting. To be fair, that's a lot of sports. I think I'll stick to soccer.

July 15

We planned to go on a hike this morning, but it's called off due to extreme weather. The monsoon is firing today. I'm not too fussed, as the hike was said to be infested with leeches. I've dealt with the bloodsucking creatures in lakes before but never on dry land. Staying home sounds like a decent option when faced with the prospect of fending off vampiric parasites all day. To tell the truth, I was looking forward to chronicling our hike, but today I'll settle for conducting a comprehensive study of each of the family's dogs.

Snowby is the biggest of the lot, but he is also the youngest and dumbest. He's 11 months old, and has yet to properly wire his brain to make his limbs do as he wishes. Akash tells me he's a mix of Rottweiler and Lab. I see it. His coat is the light brown and black of a Rottweiler, but his smiley, dopey face is a Lab's. This morning, Uncle lets him out to play on the patio. Scrambling out of his cage, he jumps around the patio around the exposed rebar. Snowby, being Snowby, has the zoomies. But he does not have developed motor skills. He bounds up to the three stairs which lead up to the front door, but slips on the rain-covered tile and rams full speed into the short wall to the right of the stairs. If I slipped like that, it could well be a fatal injury. For Snowby, it's just another day in the office. Tongue wagging, he lopes up to Sush, who is standing outside with me. He raises his muddy front paws and plants them firmly on Sush's chest, soiling his black button down. Sush looks down, exasperated, mouth hanging open. Snowby chooses his next target: me. I'm not having my shirt soiled today. I need to do laundry and this is my last clean shirt. As he goes to jump on me, I step to the side and push his neck down and to the left. He rolls on the cement, yawning with his legs in the air. Snowby is a one-puppy wrecking crew. The enumerators, especially Pooja, fear him due to his size and rambunctiousness. I love him for his energy and gleeful countenance. Snowby has the loudest bark, the deadliest bite whether he knows it or not, and the happy-go-lucky spark of youth.

Toby is the antithesis of Snowby. He's a sleek, medium sized Indian breed reminiscent of a skinnier Lab. His fur is coffee ice cream and whipped cream. He is skittish, wary and kind of mean. If he were a person, he would open the door with the chain lock still on and say, "Whataya want?" in a New Jersey accent. He doesn't bark much, but he whines incessantly. Snowby's bark is loud, but Toby's snarky, piercing whine cuts the air like a blood-curdling scream. Did I mention he does it every morning at 5 AM until Uncle feeds him? He's ruined a good night's rest countless times. My canine alarm clock. I think it all emanates from neediness. He always wants attention. I've let his annoying, preening screech of a whine get to me more than once, though, and this morning is no exception. I'm trying to read in the living room, and

my ears are being blasted by Toby's endless barrage. I open the door and look him in the eye through the bars in the cage. Something primal takes over and I growl fiercely. "Shut… up!" I let it all out. He stops whining for a second as I stare daggers at him in his sparkling brown eyes. There's a real hint of intelligence there. Then, on cue, he resumes his crying. But when Uncle lets him out around lunch time, he's awfully bashful. I hold out my hand. He wags his tail, licking my hand and then slowly retreats. I feel bad for yelling at him. In the end, Toby just wants to be loved.

Tessy is the prim princess of the pack. Another unfamiliar Indian breed, she resembles a large fox with her brick-colored coat complemented with vanilla accents. She has floppy ears which are emotive, perking up when something captures her interest. Despite her designer-dog appearance, she is not high maintenance. Tessy is timid, but always wagging her tail, inviting pets. She'll invite you to play by extending her front paws and arching her back. When I'm walking up to our rooms from Akash's living room, if she's out of the cage she'll usually circle me from afar before asking for some ear scratches. Today, she's a bit less coy. She jumps up the stairs with an elfin grace, then sits expectantly. I pet her for a while as she bows her polite head. Soon enough though, her playtime is over. Auntie has to drag her back to her cage. She resists, trying her best to maintain her dignity. Of all the Shaji family dogs, Tessy would adapt to being an American house dog the fastest. Any family would be lucky to have her. That is, she would be if she could overcome her irresistible urge to repeatedly pee on the sandals of a certain team member who shall not be named here.

Tingo is a hardened stray who has found a comfortable retirement under the Shaji eaves. He came onto the Shaji family scene years ago begging for food scraps in their front yard. In exchange for a couple chicken bones from time to time, he became the stalwart guardian of the Shaji family. He is not a big dog, but what he lacks in size is made up tenfold in grit. His mangy golden-gray coat decorated with battle scars is that of a hardened infantryman.

But for all the hardships he's seen, his tail is quick to wag and his ears are ripe for some scratches. Akash sees Tingo's tail wagging as he approaches me.

"That means he will die for you," Akash says.

"That's love," I respond.

Tingo also plays the role of father to the three younger dogs. He is mature and responsible, where the others are rash. The other day, Snowby wrapped his jaws around Tingo's head and bit down, not knowing his own strength, creating a gaping puncture wound on the crown of Tingo's head. But for Tingo, it's just another scar added to the collection. Just a week later, it's almost healed. Tingo has many roles in the Shaji household but he plays them all with a sense of *dharma*. He's tough as nails with a tender heart.

July 16

Our last busy Sunday of field work is illuminated by blinding sunshine that shines much brighter than our resolve. It's Pooja's birthday today (the big 21), and I think we'd all rather be celebrating than filling out surveys. In our first session of the day at a Renjilady school, it's a blessing that Pooja, Megha and I have Uncle to help us this morning. Although we are happy that we have full attendance, we only have two active enumerators to collect 20 endline surveys in 90 minutes. A 10 to one subject to enumerator ratio is reduced by Uncle's engaged enthusiasm. I don't know what he's saying over in his little group, but he produces hearty laughs from his subjects as he checks the boxes for them. One woman has to leave early for an emergency. She doesn't say what it is, but we encourage her to head out right away and be there for whatever might be happening. Even if she hasn't completed the whole endline, the first few questions on financial behavior have been answered. We pay her the full ₹200 rupees and thank her for her time.

We may only have two enumerators, but we do have resident survey wizard Pooja on our little subteam. With Uncle and Megha's help, we manage to collect the responses for all 20

people in just over an hour. We thank them for their time, and I hand out the subjects' payments with slight bows and *danyavada*'s. I am sure to hand out each payment with my right hand, as is expected.

We rush over to help Akash's larger team at another local school. Upon arrival, we note the disappointing attendance figures. This was our previously largest gathering of SHGs with about 90 subjects. It's a control group, so these subjects are just taking the baseline and endline surveys. Apparently, 21 subjects are missing due to a miscommunication from the same troublesome representative we have been running into issues with all month.

Frowning, I'm standing at the top of a small flight of stairs which overlooks the busy enumerators who are recording answers at pace when I feel a light tug on the back of my shirt. It's the diminutive special needs boy who I met in the first week with this same group! He's so happy to see me, and I feel the same way. His gleeful smile expands as I pat him on the back and wrap him in a hug, kneeling down.

"*Namaste*," I say. "How are you?"

He doesn't speak English, but I think he understands what I'm getting at. He hops up and down, nodding. The other children move in for attention as well. I shake their hands and give them a respectful greeting.

Due to the lack of subjects today, we've overstaffed this gathering with enumerators. The survey collection is completed soon after we arrive. Since we have our own special driver (Uncle), the others tell us to go rest back at the house while they pack up. They will return in the hulking jeep.

On the way home, I wish Pooja a happy birthday for probably the sixth time. It always makes her smile.

"Are you excited for your new job?" I ask.

She winces, anxiety blooming.

"Yes, but mainly nervous."

I tell her that I was anxious when I started my first real job, but it quickly passed into the monotony most adults are all too familiar with. I cried after my first day at my old job because my nutty coworker grilled me on my salary and made me feel like I hadn't negotiated properly. By the time I quit, I could hardly bring myself to care at all.

"You'll do great," I say. "Your work ethic is great and just think: plenty of people are bad at their jobs and keep them. Look at our favorite representative, she's messed up the scheduling every time and they haven't fired her. Don't you think you can do better than that?"

She laughs.

"Yeah probably."

It's kind of callous to be comforted by the incompetence of others, but anything to get over the initial anxiety of working. She seems a bit more optimistic about it. Oftentimes, just talking to someone about your worries alleviates them.

Returning to the house for a spell, we collapse onto the couches, feeling deflated from the heat. I close my eyes and time slips by. I'm half asleep when Akash and the other team returns. We have some samosas with ketchup and some vegetable puffs as a makeshift lunch, and head back out for a session shortly after.

I've never been to this location before, as it was a control group that was handled by a different subgroup of enumerators last time. The shelter where we set up is halfway up a gentle sloping hill, with jungle creeping on all sides. Like most of the outdoor spaces, the patio is concrete with a tin roof supported by pillars of mud brick. A friendly cow brays from the forest, munching some tasty underbrush.

We have the full team at this session, but the enumerators become outnumbered by subjects in short order. People showing up at different times makes collecting multiple surveys at once difficult. There's the added issues of differing language preference and literacy levels compounding, but our enumerators take it in stride. I'm set up at a plastic table for overseeing the survey collection and handling logistics issues.

30 minutes in, Stanley and a couple of the enumerators break off to another session. Apparently the representative thought that the session was at noon, but it was scheduled for 1 PM. We go with the flow. This scheduling change and general hubbub leads me to forget that I am supposed to lead a subteam to another location at 1 PM myself. Uncle's focus is unflappable, though. He alerts me that we have to leave in short order, and I'm grateful for his memory.

Our subteam scrambles to the next session at a familiar location in Renjilady. We are welcomed with warm smiles. Pooja does not wear a smile, however. She has a determined cast to her.

"This session's going to be quick," she remarks.

I can only get out of her way. Ringed by 10 people, she flies through the 70+ questions at record pace. She completes the 10 surveys in just 20 minutes. The subjects look like they have been blown away by a strong wind; the pace was electric. The snacks aren't even ready yet, so we are forced to relax in plastic chairs while the tea is prepared. I am not feeling like another piping hot black tea right now, but I can't refuse. I'm also handed a yellow sweet which has to be deep fried sugar. I manage one bite but then refuse to eat more, decreeing that I feel a bit sick. The subjects seem disappointed but I can't bring myself to eat anymore of the treat. With some final goodbyes, we excuse ourselves. I think the subjects are startled by our urgency.

We rejoin the larger group at a school which is a linear flight of buildings painted to resemble the cars of a freight train. If I was five years old, I would have done just about anything to go to a school that looked like a train. I spent many happy days alone in my room building complex wooden train track systems. There's no time to admire the architecture, though. I hand out the surveys and pens to the subjects who are sitting against the wall of the outdoor corridor of one of the buildings. It soon starts raining in typical flash flood style. We move inside to a dark, dirty classroom. It's not as appealing as the facade. In fact, it kind of feels like you're in a train car. I notice a lot of the subjects looking my way, so I move outside, standing underneath

the eaves. Uncle is outside making some calls. I don't know how he can hear anything, as practically horizontal raindrops soak our feet. The spectacle of the tempest and the sound of the thunder is a meditative experience. Soon enough, we are ready to move on to the last session of the day in Valya.

I greet the subjects and the fish in the tank, simultaneously removing relevant materials from my bag. Veron enlists me to help him tick the boxes of several women's answers as he asks a larger group the survey questions. While I've been aware of the echoing of answers while doing data entry and hearing complaints from the enumerators, I see firsthand how severe the information cascade between subjects is. In Veron's group, there's one woman who knows all the answers to the numeracy questions. The rest just parrot her answers after the math whiz of the group announces hers. They also copy most of her answers in the aspirations session. There's not much we can do about this problem due to our limited manpower; we don't have time to sit each subject individually and test their numeracy. We've been marking the surveys of the copiers where clear mimicking was occuring. In their theses, Akash and Ester will have to come up with a solution to this problem. Many robustness checks of their results will be in order in the data analysis phase.

The rest of our wider team joins us as we wrap up. The hosts have prepared snacks for us in unbelievable quantities. My favorite is a plate of crunchy chip-like nuggets that are coated in masalas and toasted to a crisp. It's like a spicy Indian Chex Mix. There's also a pile of dough balls that resemble donut holes but are crumbly and are ten times sweeter than any donut. I avoid these—India has a sweet tooth that the US cannot hold a candle to. I smile as a woman hands me a steaming black tea. They even remember that I prefer black tea with no milk and sugar.

After copious amounts of pictures and final goodbyes, we stumble out of the front door and into the waiting jeep. We're all starving and wilting from the chaos of today. Our team makes a quick pitstop at home to drop our belongings, then we're off to Hotel Milan for the

squad's last supper. By the time we sit down in the austere family dining room of Milan, we're all fidgeting in anticipation of our impending feast. Under Akash's guidance, I try a new gravy with my garlic naan—some sort of oily green sauce with clumps of what I figure must be cilantro and spinach. Of course, I also order a plate of *alfam*, the crown jewel of tonight's meal. I feel that I have just begun to scratch the surface of Indian cuisine. I avoided experimenting until recently to avoid stomach issues, and although this led to me only getting sick once, I can't help but imagine all the dishes I haven't tried yet. I wish I started into the expanse of Indian cooking earlier.

The meal is boisterous and jovial. As we laugh and relish the little community we have crafted over the past month, the pile of chicken bones on my plate grows to a towering mass . I've been unconsciously eating with my hands today, and my fingers are covered in greasy masalas. This is "finger-lickin' good" that puts KFC to shame. We top our meal off with some ginger lime sodas which are said to aid in digestion.

There's a melancholy feeling of finality during our meandering drive home through the Kadaba forests. The mist shrouds makeshift roadside lamps swarmed by orbiting bugs. It's night, but the dark, winding roads make me feel the weight of the emerging twilight of our experience in India. I'm going to miss it here. People as fortunate as us in the US are often quite unhappy, and I've been reveling in the collective hope and spiritual atmosphere that is pervasive throughout Kadaba. While I came here to teach aspirations to others, I have learned a key lesson for myself. Aspirations don't have to revolve around wanting something more. A simpler life is a worthy goal, but is almost unthinkable in the bustle of the hive that is Western society. How we can lead a simpler life is a more important question than how we can advance our standing, especially in the age of unfettered consumerism and climate change.

I've been depressed in the past. During those times, I have felt like a feather drifting through the updraft of the privileges afforded to me by my birth. I have fretted over not wielding my privilege to its most benevolent ends in these dark moments. I am not deserving of what I

have. But no one is. I think life is just about doing your best for others while still taking care of yourself first. Raising others up does not have to be an exercise in self-sacrifice. It can be an iterative process of working on being your best self and sharing the gift of your presence with others.

Seeing the pervasiveness of suffering, the frequency of funerals, and the challenging living conditions in Kadaba has given me so much context into my own life. The importance of gratitude has almost been often stressed in my communities, but I think one can only be truly thankful if you experience the absence of what you're allegedly so grateful for. I'm thankful for the health of my family. I'm thankful for the temperate weather of SF and the ability to exercise safely in said weather. I'm thankful for my friends who laugh at my most inane jokes and make even worse ones in return. I revel in the new perspectives I've gained. Turns out the continuous, heavy doses of culture shock for nearly two months does a thing or two to your ol' brain.

When we get home, my emotional reflections cease—it's time to celebrate Pooja's birthday. Uncle has bought a chocolate cake that is almost identical to the generic Safeway chocolate birthday cake. In the family room, Pooja is utterly absorbed by something on her computer. In the dining room, in plain sight, we're setting up the plates and putting out the cake, lighting the candles.

"She doesn't even know," Daniya, her best friend, giggles. "She's not expecting it I guess."

Even when everyone gets up to sing, she's still locked in on the content of her laptop. We have to confront her directly. She takes her headphones out and the surprise is sprung. Her smile lights up.

The Indian happy birthday song has some extra verses referencing the grace of God. I stumble through these sections, but try to belt out the familiar phrases. To my left, Uncle bellows out the melody with the touch of an experienced singer. The flat drone I can hear emanating from my own lungs makes me feel self-conscious, but I sing away all the same. Pictures are

taken and a round of applause fills the room. Pooja clasps her hands. I think it's a pretty good birthday after all.

July 17

It's a relief that we're nearly done with our fieldwork sessions—just one more afternoon session for our team. Of course, survey collection is followed by data entry which defines this surprisingly temperate Monday morning. I'm getting quite fast at survey entry, punching the corresponding numbered codes from the questions into the spreadsheet with my left hand as I read and flip the pages with my right. The enumerators have adopted an alternate strategy, however, where one person reads the codes aloud while their partner types them in. This is a totally valid strategy, but it makes me completely unable to hear myself think. I'm the type of person who can't count if someone next to me is counting aloud. I turn up my headphones and buckle up to finish my slice of the work as soon as possible. Before I know it, we've entered all the data we collected from yesterday. The spreadsheet is filling out nicely.

After lunch we head to have our two final sessions. They're occurring in the same time block, so we split our group in two. Akash leads one group to Renjilady, while Stanley and I lead the other to the heart of Kadaba. Uncle drops us off in an alley in front of a flimsy metal gate. We pick our way across the slippery driveway towards the house.

"Be careful," Pooja and Daniya call out to me in sync.

"I know," I say, somewhat annoyed to be babied. Of course, as the words pass my lips, I nearly get a face full of concrete, recovering in a rush of adrenaline.

This brief spike of worry is an omen of things to come. As we're setting up, a lively argument outside swells to a full-blown shouting match.

"Is that Uncle?" I utter. It definitely is. I understand none of what is being said, but I'm certain it isn't pretty. My first thought is that I'm so glad there are no guns here in India. Arguments such as this definitely have more sinister possibilities in the U.S.

Our team sits there for a few extra seconds, unsure of what to do. Sush gets up.

“I’m going to make sure everything’s ok,” he assures us. I trust him to keep a cool head.

“I’ll wait here,” I say. “Probably better to not introduce an unexpected outsider.”

Soon enough, I can hear Sush raising his voice as well. I’m surprised, he’s usually so calm and collected. The rest of us continue sitting until Pooja’s and Daniya’s curiosity gets the best of them. They’ve been peeking around the corner trying to gauge what’s going on, but now they join Sush outside. Stanley and I share a nervous glance. I try to lighten the mood.

“All I’m saying is I’m glad Veron isn’t here,” I joke.

Stanley laughs grimly.

“Yeah, we’d already be throwing punches,” Stanley replies. Making fun of Veron’s antics is a staple of our team’s camaraderie.

Manasa and Megha follow the other women shortly after. Probably good to have some women to break up the flurry of male testosterone. Stanley and I are left alone with the subjects. We don’t speak the same language, but I try to ask what’s going on using hand signals. They just shrug and roll their eyes, as if to say “Men…”.

Pooja returns from the scene, visibly shaken.

“You should probably go over there,” she says to me. I can tell that she hates confrontation.

I ask her what’s going on, but she’s only able to produce an incomprehensible word salad. Walking over I’m not sure what to expect, or what I’ll be able to offer. I try to give the air that they are interrupting our work.

Shutting the gate behind me, I turn to take stock of the scene. Uncle and an angry guy are yelling in each other's faces, gesticulating omnidirectionally. To my surprise, Sush is locked in another dispute with another man. He has his hands pressed together, attempting to stress a point that his opponent is not heeding.

I see their eyes dart to me. There's a moment of hesitation. Guests in Kadaba are treated like gods, and I suppose that acting so uncivilized in front of visitors paints a bad example. Unpleasantries cease in short order after I make my presence known. They offer final angry remarks and speed away on their motorcycles.

Uncle makes one final rude gesture, shaking his head. He's unfazed. On the other hand, Sush, like Pooja, clearly despises confrontation and is shaken up. His eyes are glazed, mind elsewhere.

"You good, man?" I ask with a voice crack. I clear my throat. "What happened over there?"

Sush lays it out for me. Yesterday, when it was pouring rain, Sush and Uncle joined a SHG's session which was at the base of a muddy hill. They parked the jeep by the house, which Sush admits was a mistake. When they went to leave, the jeep had sunk a couple inches into the flowing mud. To get the jeep out of the mud and back up the hill was a messy ordeal. The men who confronted Uncle were friends of the property owner who claimed that the jeep had destroyed their driveway, tearing up the ground with the off-road tires. They demanded that Uncle come fix it this instant, as apparently they couldn't use it.

"I told them we were in the middle of an important research meeting," Sush recalls. "I told them we'd take care of it right after. But they wouldn't listen. That's when I got frustrated. I must have a split personality or something."

I reject the notion that he has a split personality;everyone gets frustrated sometimes.

"Those people shouldn't do that, it's *completely* unacceptable. They don't do that here. They just wanted to get a rise out of me," Sush continues to himself, trying to justify his anger. I try to comfort him but it's no good. The yelling match has made him sad.

Our session begins at last after everyone has settled down a bit. Pooja and Sush sit on the sidelines, leaving the surveys to the other enumerators. After all their hard work in previous sessions, they've earned a break. Especially after the argument.

There's only a few subjects present so we finish in short order. Akash will probably have to return to this group next week after we're gone and collect the absentees' endlines. We take pictures with the subjects and return home, tired from our spat. We tell Akash about it, but he's already heard from his dad.

"Sometimes disenfranchised people do that around here," he says. "They just wanted to make a scene, their driveway was definitely usable. When people feel there's nothing going their way they lash out at others."

Frankly, I'm surprised there's not more of these small-scale conflicts—it's the first we've seen. The relative absence of conflict speaks to the tight knit community of Kadaba and how reputation is vital to life.

We have formed our own tight knit community in the form of our team, but now it's time for our enumerators to return to Mangalore. School is starting in a few days for most. Anushka even "bunked" (their word for skipping class) today in favor of spending the last day with us. We take plus or minus a billion pictures as a team. Our smiles are all worn out by the end, our cheek muscles receiving a serious workout. I offer one final smile to each of our enumerators, thanking them sincerely. They've been the backbone of this team, as well as the brains more than several times. I'm not sure if hugs are socially acceptable in Kadaba, but I don't care. This one's for me. I give them each a big squeeze with a hefty pat on the back. With final goodbyes, they're off to the bus.

I'm not sure how I feel with our fieldwork completed. As a team, we had settled into a productive rhythm, and to have the flow broken so abruptly feels uncomfortable. You know that feeling of taking pictures and being unsure what to do with your hands? That feeling now defines me as a person. Despite my immediate lack of purpose, we have a couple more days to hang around as our flight home is set to leave on the night of the 20th. I'm not one for tourism, and there's not many sites to check out in the local area, but there are plenty within a three hour drive. We'll have one full day tomorrow to explore. I plan to take advantage of it.

I'm sitting on the couch, defeated by the day. Uncle approaches with a gleeful grin.

"Your statue is ready!" he announces.

Akash fills in the details. A family friend has picked up the statue, and we'll go retrieve it at their house and have a nice meal at Royal Mexico after. I'm excited to see how the statue turned out. We spend an hour or so resting, then jump in the Hyundai and head west towards Uppinangady, taking the half completed freeway. I point to the overpass under construction, where work on the project seems to be stalling.

"Uncle, I think they need you," I say, referencing his civil engineer career.

He shrugs and raises his eyebrows. Akash pipes in.

"The project is being stalled because they want to complete it when the next election cycle comes," he explains. "Completing the freeway right before will give them something to brag about and it will be fresh in voters' minds."

Overpasses seem to be a symbol of progress in Dakshina Kannada; the faulty overpass in Mangalore that inadvertently produces the lake because of poor design and this one near Kadaba are both tools used by politicians to show their efficacy: ,the aim of each project is more about political advancement than actual good. I wonder if this happens with other civil projects. This bureaucracy must be a nightmare for civil engineers like Uncle to grapple with. There is a discrepancy between the goals of the leaders and the engineers. Surely this keeps the friction high. Uncle looks frustrated just looking at the project.

After a time, to break the silence, I ask Akash about the family friend we're visiting.

"She's a friend of my mom from her school days," he says. "Her husband and her are wealthy landowners."

To make room for the wide freeway, the surrounding hills have been hollowed out, digger machines chewing them into great bluffs. The vertical scratch marks in the earth make the foreboding cliffs resemble great red orange waves. On top, though, the land is planted with

areca palms and tall green grasses. Erosion will probably present problems for the farms above and the freeway in the coming years. Long term consequences are rarely thought of in pursuit of massive scale industrial products that have immediate benefits.

Akash makes a sweeping gesture at the cliffs.

“All this is theirs,” he declares. I’m waiting for him to tell me their land stops somewhere. But he doesn’t. They own so much land, but it looks like a lot of it has been cut into by the freeway.

“Aren’t they mad that this freeway is being built right next to their land?” I wonder naively.

“Actually, they are the opposite,” Akash asserts. “The government was forced to buy this land at high prices because they needed it to build their highway.”

“Won’t all the traffic produce a bunch of pollution and reduce the land prices, though? In the US, people would be *pissed* if a freeway was built next to their house.”

“The lands are up on the hill, so the direct pollution won’t get to them much. And the land prices will actually skyrocket due to the freeway. There is no economic activity here, maybe one or two hotels within 20 KM. There’s nothing. But the freeway will bring people, and shops and stores will be made to fill the demand.”

In the US, rich people don’t want people coming to their neighborhoods. In SF, for instance, there’s no BART access in the Western reaches of the city, where many rich people live. Biased residents worried about the prospect of “low-life” city folk being mainlined into their backyards. They feared an increase of crime, and probably a drop in their property values as a result. In India, it seems that the rich want these transportation corridors to be built to spur economic growth in their regions. This is a far healthier outlook, but I admit there are plenty of differences in these scenarios.

We pull into a gas station at the base of the cliffs, which the family also owns. At gas stations there are typically three to four employees, but at this one there has to be ten or more. We are served quickly, and Uncle asks for directions up to their house, which is visible from

below. The workers point us to a muddy path in between an empty lot full of semi-trucks and the gas station. The earth is torn up, but the Hyundai manages to navigate it with a few clunks and uncertain moments. The steep hill path is paved with stones, leading around a boxy house with an imperious air at the summit.

"That's the guest house," Akash says. Stanley and I look at each other. These people are loaded.

Their own residence is a sweeping country estate brimming with potted plants and an expansive cow barn filled with many braying bovines. Walking up to the front door of the home, we are greeted by loud barks from a German shepard and warm smiles from our hosts.

"*Namaste*," I say. "*Hegidira*?"

I've just said "Hello, how are you?" which is the extent of my conversational knowledge in Kannada. I've found that just saying these two things endears me to just about everyone I meet. I imagine it's nice to know that a foreigner took the time to learn a couple words in your language.

"*Chennagide*," the husband responds, shaking my hand with a welcoming vigor. That's a businessman's handshake.

We are ushered inside and given many snacks—deep fried salty vegetable nuggets, crispy burnt tortilla-like thins, some homegrown mango with pepper and black tea blended with spices. I don't understand the ensuing conversation, of course, but I try to keep my posture decent and a smile on my face. I do catch a few words of English that Akash sprinkles into the conversation, though. I'm guessing it's the usual discussion of what we're up to, with updates from our hosts as well. After we've eaten all the snacks to the hosts' satisfaction, Akash turns to me and brightens.

"Do you want to see the cow? They've invited us."

"What?"

I've seen a lot of cows here, why is this one *the* cow? Our hosts lead us to the cow barn where there are more than a dozen cows tied to their pens. There are many different breeds and colors of cow to observe—a veritable taurine menagerie. Then I spot *the* cow.

He's easily the largest bull I've ever seen in person, the arch of his back reaching my head level. His brown hair is rich like chocolate, accented with darker black patches. The small horns and floppy ears give him the look of an unnaturally large goat. But goats don't have camel-like humps on their back like this cow does, a mountain of flesh protruding from between his hulking shoulder blades.

"His name is Shiva," Akash tells me. I'm in the presence of a bull named after *The Destroyer* god in Hinduism.

The host pets his head with love, beckoning us to follow suit. I've had some sketchy run-ins with temperamental cows in the past, and its name, basically "the lord of destruction", makes me hesitate. That goes out the window when the cow begins to nuzzle back against our host's brushes. It makes sense, the god Shiva also is known to be benevolent and protecting. Shiva closes his eyes, enjoying the affection. There's a certain dignity to him that I haven't seen in cows before.

Our host guides me up to a raised concrete step from which I can pet Shiva from a better vantage. He lowers his head and accepts my touch. His bony head alone weighs 100 pounds, if not more. I pet him like a dog, scratching behind his eyes and under his chin. I have a mounting urge to tell him he's a good boy. He is definitely a good boy.

Akash tells me he's a zebu cow, a species hallowed in Hinduism for being a living representation of plenty.

"Smell his head," Akash orders.

"What?" I say again.

"Just smell his head," he insists. He rubs the top of his head (which is strangely moist) and takes a whiff, breathing deep.

Screw it. I give Shiva's head a sniff. It's a soft odor, pleasant and sweet. Apparently, cattle pheromones inform reproduction and social behavior. I'm guessing the female cows go crazy for Shiva's pheromones. He has good hygiene, too—he's washed twice a day by the caretakers. No wonder he had such a regal air. He's treated like royalty.

It's time to keep things moving. We are pulled away from Shiva, who is sad to see us go. We say hello to some other cows, who are bitter and sultry in comparison to the king of the cow barn. I go to pet a pretty gray one with shiny horns. It lets loose an explosive stream of urine. I dodge out of the way of the resulting splash. Best to head back inside.

The hostess is waiting for us indoors, with a package wrapped in a scuffed cloth—my statue. She reveals it to me with a flourish. About eight inches tall, it depicts a chubby elephantine Ganesh making some hand gestures, or *mudras*. The stone is squat and heavy, painted matte black. It reminds me of a miniature version of the gargantuan Ganesh statue in the auxiliary temple of Kukke Shri Subrahmanya Swami Temple. A worthy addition to the collection indeed. That is, if it doesn't weigh down my bag too much for the customs agents' tastes.

We say our goodbyes and thank our hosts for picking up the statue. We're all hungry from the long day, and Royal Mexico is calling our names. Our hasty exit is spoiled by the hardened mud of the outlet road, which gives the little hatchback a flat tire. Uncle curses, but upon inspection, we can make it to the restaurant just fine.

We pull into the restaurant parking lot, the car limping to the finish line. There's an auto body shop in the restaurant complex, so Uncle drops us off before beginning discussions with the waiting workers. Looking at the menu, I'm tempted by their unusual American items (french fries, chicken sandwiches) but there's not much time left to have authentic Indian food, so I opt for the classics. Unsurprisingly, seeing garlic naan on the menu prompts a primal urge within me and I have no choice but to order it. I supplement the ambrosiac bread with a gravy I've never tried and some *alfam*. I try a mint soda for dessert, and it's a bit too on the nose for me. It's

basically a plain soda with a metric ton of miniscule shredded mint leaves thrown in. It produces a color reminiscent of split-pea soup, which is rather unappetizing. The taste isn't bad, but after stuffing myself to the brim it doesn't calm my stomach in the way I desired.

Despite being in the AC family dinner room inside, we can hear the rain pounding the earth outside. Once the car is fixed, we surrender ourselves to the storm for a brief instant before ducking into the safety of the car. The visibility is zero on the drive home.

"How can you possibly drive in this weather?" I ask, squinting out the front windshield. "How do you even know if you're on the road?"

"It's just a hunch," Akash shrugs.

July 18

Today I get my wish to do a bit of sightseeing around the region. That is, we continue to stretch the definition of rational driving in the form of a trip to Madikeri, a small mountain city to the south of Kadaba.

"It's my favorite place on earth," Akash daydreams. "Whenever someone from India asks what SF is like, I say Madikeri but dry. Also, Anushka's from Madikeri, and her grandparents still live there."

Although it's less than 90 KM from Kadaba to Madikeri, the drive takes more than two hours due to the steep mountain roads with many switchbacks. Harris, a friend of Akash's parents, has agreed to drive us. Akash is tired of driving these past two months, and maneuvering a manual car up a mountain is not a relaxing endeavor. Harris has a stern, serious cast to him, and quickly proves to be calm under pressure on the winding roads. He doesn't speak much English so communication is hard. Often, we ask Akash questions at the same time in different languages.

I stare up at the emerging cliffs as we begin to climb the steeper roads to Madikeri. Some of the cliff faces are shaved bare as if Godzilla took a bite.

“There are many landslides here,” Akash pipes in nonchalantly. “The bad ones cut off the roads and prevent people from seeking aid. There are many floods as well.”

“Great,” I groan. Not the most comforting thought.

Trying to brighten the conversation, I ask what the culture is like here. As the air thins, more hardwood trees are evident, with expansive grass fields in the valleys below. There is still plenty of jungle-esque foliage about.

“The people here are hard,” Akash says. “They are sometimes considered rude and mean to outsiders. But once you get to know them they will die for you. Very protective. Like Tingo.”

I laugh.

“They have seen hardship,” Akash continues. “And as a result they are very close.”

The tight-knit communities of India are obviously not only found in Kadaba.

Our climb continues. The air thins as we pass 1 KM in elevation, and I find goosebumps on my skin for the first time in India. It’s nice to be cold for a change. There is a shrouding veil of thick mist all about, but somehow the air still feels drier. We’re approaching Madikeri now, and the number of roadside shops is increasing. Many of the signs advertise Coorg Coffee and Coorg Chocolate, and Akash emphasizes that the district is indeed known for its coffee and chocolate, but also for its pork delicacies and unique climate.

We veer off the main road down some pavement tributaries. Akash tells me we’ll be going to a local waterfall attraction, Abbey Falls. Situated on privately owned land, the local government compelled the landowners to open the falls up to the public as a tourist attraction.

We pull into the parking lot, which is full of trash blowing around in the gentle breeze. All the buildings are dilapidated, needing repairs. The fee to go see the falls is just ₹10 rupees, and the quality of the infrastructure reflects the cheap cost of entry. There’s a cracked concrete path enclosed by a rusty chain link fence, with creepy, carnival-like animal statues which double as

trash cans dotting the way. It begins to drizzle, but lasts just a minute or so. A few seconds later, water falls from the sky again. I groan.

“It’s starting to rain again,” I mope, wearing just a tshirt. I’m not looking forward to being wet all day.

“Actually, that’s just the wind blowing water off the tree leaves,” Akash notes.

It felt just like rain to me. I have no clue how he can tell the difference. But sure enough, the sprinkle ceases in moments.

The downhill pathway opens up onto the scenic viewing point of the falls. It’s not a tall waterfall per se, but it is powerful, like water being ejected from a dam. The flow is an unappetizing brownish white, somewhat marring the serene scene. Also diminishing the aesthetic is a broken and tattered rope bridge, lying slack in disuse. As I step down onto the viewing platform surrounded by black railings, I glance up to check out the canopy.

Above, a vast web stretches across the length of the path, a motionless black spider at its center. I’d say Southern Hemisphere arachnids are in a class of their own, judging from my limited experiences in Australia and now India. This one’s body is only the size of a big cashew nut, but its maleficent legs spread out in a terrifying, devilish formation. It looks like it might be able to catch a small bird on a good day. I point it out to Akash and Harris, and they both scamper underneath its domain with a quickened step. I follow. Akash, Harris and I take some pictures with the falls, but the scene is not awe-inspiring. There’s lots more to see in Madikeri though. I don’t get discouraged.

Walking back up to the car has me feeling the altitude. I haven’t done any physical exercise in almost two months due to our circumstances, and I’m feeling the repercussions. I step back through the puddles forming in the parking lot, rancid trash blown around by the wind spoiling the scene. I’m happy to get in the car and move onto our next chapter.

It begins to rain harder. Akash isn’t sure if it’s possible due to the weather, but we are aiming to go offroading in a jeep to a local mountain peak. We drive a few minutes to its base.

Several guides await customers. Akash talks to a guy in a tracksuit and flimsy flip flops. Evidently, he's not discouraged by the weather. We pay him and he invites us to a jeep not dissimilar to our ancient jeep back in Kadaba, albeit in much better condition. It's covered in colorful writing which I'm guessing says "Madikeri Tours" or something.

Harris and Akash force me to sit in the front, where I'll get the best views, but the swirling, dense mists limit our ability to see beyond 40 feet or so. Akash tells me to hang on tight, and I grasp the metal handholds tightly. The guide, still wearing his flip flops, smiles over at me and pumps the gas down the bumpy road.

"We're not at the real offroading yet," Akash promises. I relax my grip.

We drive past a number of remote houses which are akin to those in the outskirts of Kadaba. Instead of jungle, though, there are open grass fields bordered by steep hills and valleys. The road was once fully paved, but it has fallen into disrepair. Asphalt chunks top the dirt road like flagstones. It makes for a jarring cruise.

After a good 15 minutes of driving uphill, we slow for a manned checkpoint. We are entering the protected park proper now. This, of course, comes with a small fee. Akash digs around in his pockets and procures a few rupees for the attendant. He gives us a little ticket and we get back on the road.

I'm not ready for real off-roading. We're not driving on a road;we're driving on a pile of rocks arrayed in an excuse for a path. There's no seatbelts, of course, so I'm clutching the railings for dear life. The jackhammer sensation from the bumpy road proves a worthy test of body tension. Maintaining a position which balances not getting flung through the windshield and not smacking my head against the metal bars supporting the canvas canopy above is an Atlassian task. I find a body arrangement where I'm at little risk of the aforementioned perils. The compromise is that my knees are repeatedly smashed into the dashboard.

There are no doors in the front seat of the jeep, which gives the driving rain free access to the left side of my body. The right half stays completely dry. In a lull of more identifiable road, I turn back to Akash showing my wet and dry sides.

“I feel like Harvey Dent,” I tell the avid Batman fan. I try to smile evilly with just the wet side of my face.

He laughs. I go back to gripping the handles with white knuckles.

The jeep rattles along the ridgeline. To each side are steep drop offs into the mist. We only get a hint of what’s beyond, but we do get a sense of the yawning distance to the valleys below. The glimpses of trees look like toys. I gulp.

We reach our destination, a plateau with some picnic tables and some shelters. Akash suggests we hike to the peak, but Harris and I are hesitant due to the increasing rain. Soon enough, it’s pouring. But it’s not the warm deluge of Kadaba—Madikeri’s rains are sharp and chilling.

The jeep provides shelter as we attempt to wait out the rains. First five minutes, then five more. No change.

“You hungry?” I ask Akash, hoping that he is too.

“Yeah, let’s go back,” he relents.

Of course, halfway to the park checkpoint, it stops raining, leaving us to the cool mists. We pull over to the side of what might be considered a road by some (but not me) and check out a vista at a windy bluff. There’s not much to see due to the dense mists, but it’s nice to stretch my legs after being jolted around in the confines of the jeep for the past half hour. It starts to rain again. The weather’s conspiring against us, so we head back to the outpost.

I’m shivering now, hair standing up on my arms. The journey back is largely uphill for the sketchiest stretches of the knobby road. The tires screech on the slick rocks, almost prompting me to experience cardiac arrest. Akash is just grinning.

“It’s one of my goals to drive this myself,” he says. “I love off-roading.”

“What’s stopping you?” I manage.

“You need permission from the park, you need to be a really good driver,” he replies.

I look down at our driver’s worn flip flops, gaining a new respect for him. He punches the gas. We make it back to the starting point with not a scratch. Akash gives him a few extra rupees and I’m happy to return to the shelter of the car.

As we honk and wind through the Madikeri traffic, I begin to see where Akash is coming from—the rolling hills, the ubiquitous stunning overlooks and the ever-present fog remind me of home. That said, there are constant nudges that we are not in SF—namely, the cacophony of car horns and the wildly reckless driving.

When we reach our quarry, the restaurant, I’m still soaked.

“Will they serve me like this?” I wonder.

“Of course,” he says, never in doubt.

Being destroyed by the elements is a fact of life here and there will be no discrimination towards soggy clientele.

Akash knows instantly that the host speaks English, and asks him for a table. He would never jump to English in Kadaba, but things are different here. The host directs us to a gracious waiter who guides us to our table.

I need a hot drink. Akash suggests we get some jaggery coffee, which is coffee with cane juice concentrate known as jaggery. Like most sweet drinks I’ve had in India, it’s far too sweet for me, but the warmth it provides is invaluable. Looking at the menu while I sip the sugary beverage, I am intrigued by their pork options. So far in India I haven’t noticed pork on any menus, which could be due to the Muslim presence in Kadaba, I guess. Pork is my favorite meat, so I’m elated. When I was a little tyke, I had such an obsession with pork that when asked my favorite animal, I simply replied, “Pork.”

Akash suggests a spicy pork dish to begin. The steaming dish soon comes out from the kitchen. Thin slices of fatty meat are lathered with thick, spicy masalas. It tastes great, but the

richness of the fat is a bit much. None of the fat has been trimmed off making it overwhelming after a few bites.

For my main course I order a pork curry and some unfamiliar crisp grain rounds that Akash recommends. To my disappointment, the pork curry contains very little pork. Instead, the curry is saturated with cubes of pure pork fat. I have a few bites but I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack if I keep eating. Between the sickly sweet coffee, the spicy pork and now the pork fat curry, I'm feeling queasy. I get the feeling I got the tourist cut of pork today.

My stomach turbulence is exacerbated by our drive to the next destination: a nearby Buddhist temple. The altitude is not helping, either, but thankfully the temple is in the relative lowlands. Once we descend a few hundred feet, the surrounding environment is not too different from Kadaba, but with open fields for commercialized agriculture. The houses are big, the cars a bit fancier. Akash explains that this is a relatively wealthy region. When the British invaded, these Kodava people resisted with ferocity. Once they were finally subjugated, the British saw their fight as a virtue, and the Kodava people became favored by the colonists.

"There's black soil here," Akash says. "Amazing for growing crops."

Perhaps this was another reason the British favored these farmers—their lands were fruitful, making them assets to the empire. In the end, though, these people were among the first to join the revolt against the British. Not even years of subjugation diminished the fight of the Kodava people. The very attribute the British labeled virtuous led to the breaking of the chains.

The area around the temple is probably the most touristy I've seen in India. Nearly every store peddles souvenirs and trinkets related to the temple. There's a tourist bus chugging along in front of us, so it's slow going. The white bus has a life-size depiction of Peter Griffin from Seth McFarlane's *Family Guy* on the back. Peter pumps his fist in jubilation, saying something in unfamiliar letters in a speech bubble. I point it out to Akash.

"He's saying, 'Have a super day,'" he translates.

“Is *Family Guy* popular here?” I haven’t seen too much evidence of American pop culture spilling over into India thus far.

“Yeah, there’s a very famous dub that was done in Malayalam,” he explains. “There’s many fans now in Karnataka and Kerala.”

Akash shows me some Instagram reels of the Malayalam *Family Guy* dub. Even though I can’t understand any words, the voice actor’s spot-on Peter Griffin accent is hilarious. We spend the remainder of the drive smiling at different clips. I can always see the scenery on our way back.

The temple parking lot is a swirl of foreigners excited to see the temple. Conveniently, there’s a gift shop between the temple grounds gates and the parking lot. Akash and I can’t resist but to look around. This is a great chance to get some gifts for my family, but I have limited luggage space. I am hypnotized by a sweeping swath of scarves that hang above the gift shop entrance. I ask to look at one, and an employee grabs the one I want. Looking closely, I’m surprised to see that it’s made of yak wool. My mom will love the novelty. Akash buys another umbrella just in case.

We join the tide of people wandering into the temple grounds. We walk across a concrete courtyard painted with pretty designs and patterns. We walk underneath an archway of what can only be a dormitory, and into the inner garden courtyard of the temple itself. Hedges and other manicured plants frame a rainbow building adorned with gold accents.

It’s sunny, but light rain showers sporadically strike and recede. We take several pictures in front of a spouting golden fountain before checking out the interior of the temple. The scale is immense, three humongous golden statues prominently displayed at the front of the temple, visible from all corners of the square interior. The ceiling and walls are painted with colorful mandalas and religious figures. The floors are gleaming gray tile with dark red accents. We aren’t allowed to walk freely around, so we settle for pictures within a cordoned off area. Within, many robed children and Tibetan monks go about their business. They are all dressed in

burgundy robes with orange sashes. Foolishly, I didn't realize until now that this was a Tibetan Buddhist monastery.

Due to our limited area of access, there's not much to do inside, so we continue strolling the grounds, looping around the temple. Lawns that rival a golf course putting-green carpet the view of the serenity of the Tibetan Monk school. Kids frolick inside on the balconies.

"That looks real nice right about now," I acknowledge.

"It's a simple life," Akash notes of the Tibetan monk lifestyle. "It's the key to happiness."

Is the simple life the key to happiness? If it is, most people in the US have little chance of achieving happiness. What about the doctors and ambulance drivers? Can they never be happy despite the necessity of their profession? I spiral into these existential questions. Can I ever be happy as a budding economist? I will probably never lead a simple life, as the Tibetan Monks know it. Is happiness even the most important thing if I have committed myself to the betterment of others?

The more I ponder Akash's assertion that happiness stems from simplicity, the more I realize how far down a "complex life" path I am down. But would I change my path? No, I wouldn't. I guess there's something simple in moving towards your goals. Focus towards a goal is simple, no matter how complex your goals might be. Finding simplicity within the complexity is the best we can do.

On the walk back to the parking lot we encounter a group of dogs who preen for our attention. One of them is a spitting image of Tingo.

"This must be Tingo's brother," I proclaim, stroking the stray's ears, nonplussed by the fleas he surely carries.

The perky dog doesn't ask for anything but pets. In return, he calls his friends and clears a path in the parking lot for me and Akash. Harris, who has decided to stay in the car, starts awake. After a quick stroke of his hair, Harris starts the car and we're off to the main attraction of today: the elephant camp.

The temple was the most touristy place I'd visited in India— for about a whole hour; our next stop, the elephant camp, quickly usurped the temple's spot. The parking lot, lined with vibrant trinket shops, bustled with various livestock. Cows and goats and even an uncommon horse wandered around, depressingly picking at trash left by inconsiderate visitors. We zigzagged through a crowd of people to reach the back of the budding line which trailed down the embankment of a river, ending at some small boats with outboard motors. These will be our ferries to elephant island.

We are glad we had the foresight to bring the umbrellas. Intermittent rain showers cause us to reopen our umbrellas as soon as we store them. After a blustery wait, we are granted boat passage to the island, which is a single hill covered in massive trees, sand and brown dirt. Small, pretty cows walk with us up the hill to the camp.

I lay eyes on the big gray beast as we crest the hill. First, we see the top of the head, wrinkly like an old man. Then, its ears, emotive and expressive. Then, the tentacle-like trunk, thicker than you'd think and muscly. Its tusks are the same circumference as my thigh. The rest of the body is obscured by a concrete pen with low walls. A diminutive man stands atop the wall, his hand resting on the side of the bull's great head. The wall has to be four feet tall, and he still doesn't even come close to matching the strange creature's height. He shouts something down to Akash, which of course I don't understand. I probably wouldn't have heard even if it was in English, as the spectacle and scale of the animal in front of me has me awestruck. The obvious power is balanced by grace and gentleness in its mannerisms, with giant, intelligent, tan eyes taking us all in as we do the same to him. Akash turns to me.

"He's offering blessings," Akash says, gesturing at the elephant. "₹50 rupees for each of us."

"The elephant is going to bless us?" I'm nervous but super excited.

"I'll go first," Akash replies reassuringly.

The handler barks something at the good-natured elephant and he raises his trunk and places it on top of Akash's head. If the titan loses control of its trunk for just an instant, it could kill Akash. I've seen elephants lift humongous logs by their trunk, it could probably tear off a human head without a second thought. Still, I figure the thought of such a close connection with an elephant is probably a moment of a lifetime.

A second passes and the elephant is prompted to take his trunk off Akash's head. Akash is smiling ear to ear, savoring the feeling.

"Your turn," Akash says, beckoning me to stand in the blessing spot.

Removing my hat, I shuffle over to the blessing spot. I am given a straight-on look at the elephant. I can't think about much besides how easily those big tusks could just end my life in the blink of an eye. I laugh nervously. The beast raises his tree-trunk-sized trunk and rests it with care on my head. The weight settles in, forcing me to bend my knees.

Everything else fades. *What am I doing?*

The gravity of the moment is cut by the elephant ruffling my hair as it retracts his trunk back into the pen. An expectant hand extends down to Akash, who is taking pictures of my humorous interaction. The handler wants his ₹100 rupees.

Akash hands over the payment, about $1.20, as an afterthought.

"Best dollar I ever spent," I grin, heart racing.

As we look on, another group of people gets blessed by the friendly elephant. The handler doesn't ask for payment from this group. Akash's eyes narrow.

"He scammed us," Akash proclaims.

I could care less.

"*Still* the best dollar I ever spent," I retort. He can't help but shrug and agree.

I stand on my heels just watching the handlers interact with the other elephants in the dusty pen. The blessing elephant is not the only one that's remarkably well behaved. An older female has a funny pile of hay atop her head, like a tuft of disheveled blonde hair. A couple of

youngsters train with the handlers. I see shackles on their feet which limit their movement. It's really sad to come to terms with the fact that these great animals are nothing more than prisoners.

Walking further into the captive elephants' domain, the feeling of wonder is replaced further by melancholy. Along the path there is a circular enclosure where less behaved elephants stand in chains. I can see the anguish and despair in the beasts' defeated posture.

Often in India I've found myself questioning their treatment of animals: the dogs in cages, elephants in chains. There's a certain American superiority complex that lingers inside of me. I think, "We don't treat our animals like that." But then I remember our factory farms. In the US, animal cruelty is simply hidden from view for most Americans, but we are all a part of it. India might have some issues with mistreatment of animals, but they treat certain animals as sacred. Cows are revered, not to be slaughtered, and killing a peacock, the national bird of India, can result in a longer prison sentence than murdering a person.

One elephant picks at his ankle cuffs.

"That's the exact same motion I make when I go to take off my shoes quickly without my hands," I say, eyes locked on the humanizing mannerism.

"These have been recently caught," Akash narrates. "This place domesticates them."

"Why do they domesticate them?"

"As a tourist attraction, I guess," he shrugs. "But also because they are very destructive to peoples' homes and stuff when they are wild. In Kerala, especially, there are many stories of elephants evading capture and causing chaos."

He details the legendary adventures of wild elephants that launched themselves into folklore. A few years ago, one such young bull in Kerala evaded capture from the authorities after he conducted multiple raids on rice merchants, feasting on the grains. As such, he became known as *Arikomban*, or rice-tusker. When the Indian authorities attempted to seize him, he

went on a rampage, killing six people. Despite being hit with multiple tranquilizer darts, he continued to evade capture.

"The forest is the elephant's domain," Akash details. "They know it better than you, and they will use that to their advantage. And they are violent. It is very difficult to take him down, because you have to get close to shoot tranquilizers. Even if you hit him, he might still come kill you."

He carries on, explaining that eventually a massive crew of 150 forest officials were dispatched to take *Arikomban* down. They managed to make him woozy with five tranquilizer darts. Apparently, it's only possible to orchestrate captures such as these with the aid of allied domesticated elephants who fight the outlaw elephants and corral them. We often think we are masters of the animal kingdom, but *Arikomban* proves otherwise. Even when he was finally captured, it was only possible with the aid of other elephants.

Our discussion of local elephant lore is interrupted by something out of Disney's *The Jungle Book*. From out of the brush an elephant emerges with a handler astride the broad back. The lumbering colossus thuds past us. A group of followers forms, trailing the spectacle like pilot fish to a shark. The procession continues down to a small beach, where the elephant and rider wade into the river. The elephant spins around playfully, spitting vast quantities of water all over with its trunk. Its ears wave as photos are snapped by the masses. Sure, there is an element of animal mistreatment in the camp, but here all I see is unadulterated joy between man and elephant. I choose to remember these surreal moments of awe uncut by the sad realities of domestication.

It's time to get back to Kadaba. We've had a long day, and I can see why Akash didn't want to drive. We zip through Kodagu past many coffee and cacao plantations. The dying beams of the sun cut through the tall cacao plants, pink and orange light engendering a memorable scene. I'm thinking sleepy thoughts, and I rest my head against the window.

Harris is not afforded the same pleasures of a nap due his chauffeur responsibilities, so we stop for some famous Coorg coffee. I have the caffeine tolerance of a newborn baby, so I pass—I'd be up all night. But Akash and Harris both have a cup.

The energy in the car is raised, and I find myself caught up in it. As is par for the course, Akash and I discuss eccentric paper ideas. I launch into a far-fetched paper idea that combines history and developing economics.

I've always been fascinated by space, astrophysics and imagining what sort of crazy stuff we might find out there. I'm no stranger to science fiction, as you might expect. I'm reading *The Expanse* currently, which is a sort of political drama/thriller space opera by James S. A. Corey chronicling the relationship between the peoples of Earth, Mars and the asteroid belt. The cynic in me often questions the realism of science fiction books, which is not exactly logical given that it's entirely fictional. But *The Expanse* does a great job of making things believable, no matter how outlandish they may seem when viewed out of context. My interest is piqued by the relationship between the fictional Mars and Earth societies, and I find myself wondering about how a Martian colony might eventually develop its own economy beyond reliance on Earth.

But what historical events could I lean on to better contemplate what this developing economy might look like? My mind jumps to the American colonies, the consequent conflicts with England and the ultimately blossoming economy that the US boasts today. I can think of a few potential parallels. I'm inspired to look further into early U.S. history to find potential parallels between these historical events and think about how we might develop a successful Martian economy one day.

Akash takes this far-fetched notion with a grain of salt, but admits it's a cool idea. We brainstorm various parallels, but neither of us is a history buff. I resolve to pitch my rudimentary idea to a history professor and see what they think. Akash takes the floor and talks to his perception that dominant political ideologies seem to flip flop between liberal and conservative.

He wonders what prompts this switch, and we discuss potential research designs to no avail. An issue on this scale and over this amount of time would be incredibly difficult to unpack, given the insane levels of endogeneity at play.

The conversation dries up as fatigue sets in and Akash's coffee wears off. Still, Harris manages to get us home safely through the winding dark of Kadaba's backroads. Auntie and Uncle are waiting for us as we pull into the driveway, the little hatchback fighting its way up the steep cobblestones. Before we know it, we're having a snack at the dinner table—savory banana chips and peanut *chikki*.

Auntie and Uncle ask me about our adventure, and I launch into a wide-eyed, somewhat manic rant about how crazy it was to interact with animals as big as elephants. They smile and laugh.

"We have big animals in America, like grizzly bears and moose and stuff," I admit. "But we have nothing like elephants, they're just so massive. Absolutely crazy experience."

It becomes obvious that Auntie and Uncle have no idea what I'm talking about when I make comparisons to grizzly bears and mooses. So, I spend the next twenty minutes or so showing Auntie and Uncle pictures of all the crazy wildlife we have in the U.S. The ones that make them raise their eyebrows the most are the elephant seals and the sequoia trees. I think a lot of Americans have an impression that everywhere else in the world, especially the global south, has scary dangerous wildlife around every corner. But take a look in the mirror. We go hiking around coyotes and mountain lions in the Bay Area alone. Up in Montana, practically every animal you come across could dice you up. That's not to say that the snakes and elephants of India, for instance, aren't dangerous. Just look around and come to terms with how fantastical the wildlife is in your own backyard.

That said, I'd say the elephants probably beat out any wildlife we have in California.

Elephants are pretty freaking crazy.

July 19

I'm not the biggest procrastinator of all time. But when it comes to packing, I could probably win an Olympic gold medal in speed packing—given all my practice tossing everything in my bag at the last minute. One time, when I was middle schooler, I managed to forget all my clothes while speed-packing for a multi-day family road trip. Let's just say I've learned from my mistakes. Not in terms of packing in a reasonable manner—just better at my speedy, idiosyncratic packing strategy.

We're set to leave at 11 for Mangalore, but I lay in bed until the last minute. Turning a brighter, new leaf, I've at least gathered all my belongings in my room to throw into my suitcase. There's a sense of finality to every action I take. That's the last time I'll ruthlessly murder a bug crawling over my bed. That's the last time I'll ever probably ever use my green puffy jacket as a pillow case. That's the last time I'll take a cold shower in our bathroom. I've had a multitude of life-changing experiences in India, but I'm excited to get back home.

I have a pile of medications that I've accrued over the trip. Skin lotions, diarrhea and malaria pills, a bunch of suspiciously conglomerated Advil all into the bin. I look at the bottle. *Store at 68-77 degrees F. Avoid excessive heat*. Well, that's impossible. Probably best to toss that. And probably everything else too. I take great pleasure in dumping all my medications in the trash. I can only hope I don't get diarrhea today or tomorrow.

After stuffing my clothes and shoes in my suitcase and throwing all my belongings in the car, we say a quick goodbye to Auntie and Uncle, who will be joining us in Mangalore for our last day. The real goodbyes will have to wait.

The trip to Mangalore is uneventful besides a tollbooth debacle. Like most people commuting from east of Mangalore into the city, Akash's regional license plate makes him exempt from toll fees.

But today the toll booth operators have other ideas. A white Mercedes SUV in front of us spends about three minutes in a tense conversation with the toll booth operators. Judging by the

exchange of card and reader, the driver is doing everything in their power to draw out the transaction as long as possible. Horns begin to erupt behind us, and soon enough Akash is leaning on his horn as well.

“There’s just no way it should be taking this long,” I grumble.

“He has the license plate too,” Akash gestures. It’s a white and black elongated license plate with a big KA for Karnataka on it.

Once they finally let the gate up for the Mercedes, it speeds away in an instant. As we inch up to the tollbooth, I can see Akash brace himself for a flood of unadulterated frustration. What follows is not in English, but I can safely assume that the dialogue is a back-and-forth about the injustice of the toll fee. Akash ends up paying the ₹50 rupee shakedown. It’s just not worth our time.

“If I had the jeep, I’d blow right through the gate,” Akash mutters, disgruntled.

“Not in your parent’s Hyundai?”

“Definitely not,” he concurs.

Reaching Mangalore, I get strong waves of deja vu. We check into our nice hotel, which I still can’t believe costs only 50 dollars a night. We retreat back to our rooms for a quick nap, but I’m peckish. I didn’t have breakfast this morning due to my poor time management packing skills. Just thinking the word “carbohydrates” prompts salivation.

Before I can rally the troops towards food, Stanley takes the words out of my mouth, suggesting the Indo-Chinese restaurant we went to in our first stint in Mangalore. We catch a tuk tuk to the city center. It’s just a couple minutes away. I find myself digging my nails into the seat of the worn fabric of the seat as the driver curls perilously around larger vehicles.

Next door to the restaurant, which is on the lower level of a small-scale, single boxy building mall, there’s a clothing store. A mannequin wears a Stephen Curry jersey, which is surprising to see; the reach of athletes as marketing implements is crazy to think about. Stanley

and I are both avid Warriors fans. It's a nice reminder of where we're from and where we're going home to.

Last time here, we ordered way, way too much food. Most restaurants have reasonable portions, perhaps slightly smaller than the often gluttonous U.S. portions. But *Hao Hao Chinese Restaurant* challenges my observations, an outlier. The amount of rice in some of their dishes could ask questions of an NFL lineman.

"Do you guys wanna get some drinks first?"

"Before? After we eat, yes," Akash says. "You can't fill up your stomach with drinks before eating."

I never really thought about it that way. In the U.S., it's a cultural norm—your waiter asks if you want to get started with some drinks. You say, "yes, just water for me. Oh, screw it. I'll have the $17 dollar orange juice." I never gave a lick of brain power to why this might be, but when Akash questions it, it seems obvious. Drinks certainly have an elevated profit margin, so it's best to get the customers rolling on the profit-making items before they're too full. They'd love for all the guests to just fill up on expensive drinks and avoid food entirely.

This time, I'm going to get my money's worth. So much for ordering a light meal. I have no drinks, not even a sip of water, but pile on the dumplings, noodles and fried chicken. After we collect the bill, we've all probably gained 10 pounds. There's nothing to do but to go nap off our food comas in our plush hotel beds.

The afternoon is consumed by a journey through the labyrinthian mall. Our enumerators vastly exceeded our expectations, and we feel that they've earned gifts from us. The male enumerators are easy to shop for—we basically get them the first nice shirts that are reminiscent of their respective styles that we see. As Akash, Stanley and I are inexperienced shopping for women's clothes, shopping for the women is a challenge. Womens' sizing is an enigma to me, so we just do our best. After an hour of pouring through the options and

consulting with many employees, we settle on a black sweatshirt emblazoned with “California” for Pooja and a floral kurta for Anushka.

There’s nothing like a flustered shopping experience to induce hunger. We find ourselves drawn back to McDonald’s, the homeland. I need to try the India exclusive Maharaja Mac, India’s version of the Big Mac. Of course, it’s chicken. And also of course, the spice palette or the *masala* is incredible. My first bite returns me to my study abroad escapades in Australia, where I ate probably 40 too many chicken Big Macs there at the expense of my weight. The U.S. McD’s doesn’t have any chicken double burger equivalent. I’m glad to punch my ticket to my chicken daydream before I return.

I’ve also punched my ticket to needing to go to sleep as soon as possible. I’m shocked to notice that the AC of the hotel room makes it harder to go to sleep. How far I’ve come in just 50 days.

July 20

We’ve agreed to meet in the lobby downstairs at 8:15 for our 9AM talk at St. Aloysius, but it’s 8:55 before we begin the short drive over to Akash’s alma mater. I’m neurotic about being on time, so I’m wrestling with shoving down my fear of being *tardy*—my least favorite word. Akash gets a call from his professor asking him where we are, as we’ve agreed to show up early.

“We’re almost there,” he says. “It will be two minutes, sir.”

This seems to abate the professor’s concerns and he hangs up. We’re definitely more like 10 minutes away, but such is life. Time conventions are different here.

When we get there, a critical mass of audience members has yet to manifest. My anxiety over being *tardy* slides away as attendees from the student body and faculty trickle in. Some stop to say hi to Akash. He greets each newcomer with enthusiasm and a rich smile. He’s a legend around here, and he loves the spotlight.

Formal introductions begin shortly after the principal arrives, Reverend Dr. Fr. Praveen Martis SJ. You'd be hard pressed to find someone with more titles, and he carries himself as if all those titles are as light as a feather. Dressed in a clean white robe, an aura of dignity and sanctity emanates from him. A hush falls over the gabbing students as the Reverend calls the gathering to order.

The director of the Humanities department steps up to the lectern to welcome the audience, as well as introduce the principal and us. Of course, this takes several minutes. Formalities conclude as the principal himself steps off the carpeted dais where Stanley, Akash and I sit next to the director of the Humanities department and a couple economics professors. There's definitely an element of imposter syndrome here; we are among distinguished, accomplished professionals.

The principal fixes the microphone to his height and begins his speech. He lauds our experiment, our core team, and our willingness to involve the St. Aloysius students who became our trusty enumerators. To try to transcribe any of the director's or principal's words would be a disservice to his eloquence and steady, calm presence. The imposter syndrome rises in my gut as he employs flowery metaphors and fancy words. *What will they think of my pitifully short and choppy explanations of our experiment?*

After a loquacious welcome address, the principal returns to the crimson carpet of the dais and shakes our hands. We stand to acknowledge our thanks, and he hands us each a rose and a small wrapped gift as cameras flash in the audience. Finally, he directs Akash to the lectern. I have seldom seen brighter smiles all around.

Akash begins the presentation, covering his experience applying to international graduate school programs and how he ultimately made his decision to USF. For some who were at the first presentation, it's a review, but there are many more new, expectant ears in the audience for whom this information could be important to.

It's my turn next. I do my best to recreate their expressions of gratitude and offer some words to speak to the high value of their university and the people I've met here. I stumble over my words as I'm speaking to their eloquence and their ability to wing an amazing speech. I guess they've got plenty of practice with all the ceremony and formalities ingrained in their culture. I laugh nervously and clutch the microphone a little tighter as my eyes dance over the many audience members.

I begin the meat and potatoes of my segment, which is a primer in the history of experimentation in economics, the core concepts that we leverage in our experiment designs to find causality, and the structure of Randomized Control Trials. There are some confused faces in the crowd. I talk fast and my American accent is difficult to understand for many here. Public speaking is not my favorite, so I'm happy to hand it over to Stanley, who discusses the specifics of our experiment itself.

He hands it back over to Akash who offers some heartfelt closing remarks. There's raucous applause, and he dips his head in thanks. There's a brief question and answer back and forth, but soon the gathering devolves into an informal soup of socializing. Many people come up to us to shake our hands and thank us. A few even offer us food and gifts. Veron gifts us each a mid-sized package. By the end, our hands are completely full and I'm sweating under my burden of gifts as we inch our way out the door, caught up in one pleasant interaction after another.

We resolve to have our goodbye lunch at Savoury, a restaurant in the mall next to McDonald's. Anushka insists it has some of the best garlic naan out there; I'm excited. But there are mixed emotions on the walk over. We are satisfied and weary after a job well done, but part of me wants to do this all over again, even if it wasn't the most *fun* experience minute by minute. I think back to a presentation a high school teacher, Craig Butz, gave at our all-school assembly on the differences between fun and rewarding. Fun is a gleeful, fleeting wind, but something rewarding is a stone that builds the mountain of positive life experiences. My

fieldwork experience in India was both fun and rewarding, but the magnitude of the rewarding aspect dwarfed that of the fun.

I'm also feeling sad that this chapter of my life is coming to a close. It pains me to see my melancholy mirrored in our enumerators. We shared an experience that will shape the rest of our lives, and there's some raw emotion there that would be wrong to disregard. In that spirit, I'd like to acknowledge the virtues of our core enumerators.

Sushrith—You are wise beyond your years. The earnestness and sincerity with which you approach every social interaction is inspiring to me. You have a calm way about you that makes people listen to you and be better for it. You emerged as the undisputed king of the aspirations treatment groups, and if we do see any effects of the treatment in the data, it will be in part due to your rhetoric and communication skills. In truth, I learned from you far, far more than you learned from me. The one thing I'd like to impress upon you is that you should believe in yourself and not doubt the compass of your heart. Now, it's your turn to strive for your own aspirations, and I implore you to do so unwaveringly. Whatever field you end up in, be it as a CEO of a company or an author of romance novels, you will shine bright.

Pooja—Your compassion, empathy and strength forge a combination that is unparalleled. I know you've been through a lot in your life, and these hardships have made you into someone far stronger than me. You showed me that emotional vulnerability goes hand-in-hand with courage. When you set your mind to something, when I see that furrowed brow, I know to just stand out of your way and let you excel in whatever it is you are doing. There are so many times I leaned on you to be the adult in the room, and you delivered every time; you're dependable as they come in all respects. In addition, you strive to make every connection a meaningful one, and I can attest to the fruits this attitude bears. That is, you are a great friend to everyone you meet, including me. You are an inspiring, balanced flurry of courage and vulnerability. As you are a force of nature, always remember that the only person who can slow you down is yourself.

Veron—Of all the enumerators, I see the most of myself in you. The jokester, the pragmatist (on occasion), diving in head first to any problem that comes your way. Equal parts hilarious and annoying, passionate and deliberate. Like Pooja, you have the uncanny ability to put your head down and find a great solution to any problem. You made the dull moments lively and the lively moments livelier with your quick, loud laugh and silly nature. But you also can be intensely serious when duty calls; you have a strong, stubborn work ethic when you're focused on something. You make great decisions in seconds where I would waffle back and forth between options only to reach shaky conclusions. I saw so much growth in you over our two months together. I'm so proud of you. You temper silliness with intensity like no one else, and that makes you a trustworthy, decisive, charismatic leader.

Anushka—You are the serene ocean that guided our fragile vessel of a project to success. Level-headed, smart, and soft spoken, you are easy to talk to and a joy to be around. You can take a joke, dishing one right back with quick wit. And you know it's guaranteed to be delivered with an ice cold straight face that makes everyone laugh. I always look forward to talking to you and hearing about your anime suggestions. To tell the truth, I don't like anime much, I just enjoy seeing you light up when you talk about something you're passionate about. From a lived experiences perspective, I relate to you the most of the enumerators—the overbearing stress of grad school, your family life, your agnosticism towards religion. It's easy to see why Akash takes so much pride in calling you his best friend. If there's one thing I could say to you, it would be to take more risks. Bite big mouthfuls out of life. Find out what you really want in life and chase it to the ends of the Earth. Wherever you go, whatever you do, people will gravitate to you and be honored to call you "friend", me included.

My sentimental reflections are mitigated in part by our decadent lunch. Once again, Anushka's right—Savoury's garlic naan is something else. I couple it with a rich, oily dark green curry that Akash recommends. The food comes as we're discussing the nature of fried ice cream. We dive in with reckless abandon.

Mid-bite of naan, I nudge Akash in the side, getting his attention without the use of my full mouth or greasy, saucy hands.

“We’re forgetting something,” I say.

He perks up, chewing with a raised eyebrow. I pause half for dramatic effect, half because I’m guzzling down a massive bite of curry-slathered naan.

“*Alfam*,” I finish.

“Yes, of course. The last supper,” he says, lighting up. wipes his hand and signals the waiter over.

After an hour of high-spirited conversation and several desserts and sodas, it’s time to get the check. Anushka has class, but she’s resolved to bear the consequences of being late. We take around ten billion pictures before heading out. The other denizens of the restaurant are looking at us, probably puzzled by our eccentric mix of tomfoolery and sadness.

The walk back is bittersweet. It feels like we’re walking to another experiment session, laughing and burdened with stacks of surveys. But this time, my only burden is my inescapable feeling of folding a good book closed without marking the page. The weight is heavier than any number of surveys.

Returning to the St. Aloysius parking lot, there’s multiple rounds of hugs. We give our gifts, and they’re glad for the gesture, but I’m not sure we hit the fashion mark. That’s why you always pass along the receipts too. We take one last picture together. Pooja can’t hold back small tears.

“We’ll come to your wedding,” she says. “And you better come to ours.”

Akash maneuvers the car out of the bustling lot. Waving bye hits us all extra hard. It’s tough to come to terms with the fact that I may never see these good colleagues, friends, family again.

But we have more goodbyes to say. Uncle and Auntie have come all the way from Kadaba to help us get to the airport and wish us goodbye. We meet them in the mall, where they plan to grab a bite to eat after their afternoon journey to the city.

The food court doesn't have many options that appeal to Akash's parents. I'm surprised when Uncle settles on Subway, ordering a truly unidentifiable sandwich. I have no idea what he ordered, but it doesn't look promising. Auntie and Uncle split it.

They've never had Subway before, and it becomes immediately clear that they do not like the sandwich one bit.

"Do you like it?" I ask Auntie, just trying to spur conversation.

She shakes her head, mouth downturned in moderate disgust. I look at Uncle, who scowls before I can even ask. I guess hating Subway is universal. I keep my mouth shut.

Uncle's already standing up before he finishes his unsatisfying sandwich. He stuffs the last few bites in his mouth and we're on our way back to the hotel to retrieve our bags. Once the staff hands over our belongings, I spend a few minutes fretting over the weight of my bags, doing my best to disperse the mass to ensure they are all under the weight limit – only to realize they are all at least 20 pounds under the limit. I just… It's been a long day. I think the hotel staff are glad to have us finally out of their hair.

Soon, the entire country of India will be granted that same wish—our evening flight to Bangalore is set to leave on time. Uncle and Auntie have generously offered to send us off, driving us all the way to the airport 30 minutes by car outside Mangalore.

As Uncle winds through traffic at high speed, I chuckle to myself thinking about how ridiculous driving here seemed at first. I've come to believe that driving in India is strictly more efficient than in the US. It's weird that the US, for all our obsession with deregulation and individualism, has such airtight and limiting traffic rules. It's weird that people don't employ their horn for communication besides anger, really. It's weird that people operate under the assumption that others will follow the rules. I think that's the source of almost all accidents in the

US: a lack of communication coupled with the expectation that others will also be abiding by the strict rules.

We arrive with plenty of time to spare. I'm not missing this flight; it's already a logistical nightmare. Missing this first leg would probably have the same time loss repercussions as throwing my passport in a woodchipper. The time comes to give Uncle, Auntie, and Akash our goodbyes. It's another emotional moment. Without Uncle and Auntie, our project would've fallen flat.

So to the Shajis—If, as you say, guests are gods in India, you treated Stanley, Andrew, the enumerators and me like gods among gods. When we first arrived, you were considerate enough to work us up slowly into the advanced culinary palates of Kadaba. You were always conscious of my dietary restrictions, what we wanted to eat, and our ubiquitous medical issues. Your attentiveness to our every need was incredible, and I'm thankful for every second you allowed us to stay in your lovely home. Each morning when I came downstairs, you would see a sleepy look in my eye and ask if I wanted black tea. You don't know how much simple gestures like this allowed me to feel at home in such an unfamiliar environment. My only wish is that I spoke Kannada, Malayalam, Tulu or Hindi beyond a couple words so I could understand the depth of your humor. There were so many times Uncle's dry humor made everyone, including me, laugh uproariously even when I had absolutely no clue what was being said. You were both so curious as to our lives and interests, and I hope you know this made us feel welcome and accepted. You showed me boundless love, and I hope that next year, when you come for Akash's graduation (fingers crossed) I can repay the favor. For now, though, I hope it's enough to know that you are the most gracious people I have ever met. I am honored to know you.

A hug for Auntie, a hug for Uncle, a hug for Akash. Sad smiles all around. Too quickly, Stanley and I are off through airport security. A representative asks us if we will fill out a survey, and I decline. Another requests to take our picture for the airline's promotional material. We decline again. They appear sad and confused, probably thinking that Americans are rude. But

I'm just super exhausted from constant attention. I want to leave that part of India behind, that's for sure.

Our flight to Bangalore is uneventful. A family beside me munches on some limp airplane sandwiches. I pass, still full from our feast of a lunch. It's a clear night and far below, some thinly distributed lights wink out as people turn in for the night.

July 21st

I manage to sleep nearly all the way through our next flight to Qatar. The Doha airport is exactly as we left it, tan desert outside, sleek and gleaming black and gold inside. We have a few hours layover, so I make myself busy by exploring the airport. I find myself wandering in the luxurious duty free shops, surely looking out of place with my worn out clothes and dirt-stained yellow crocs.

In an unexplainable moment of weakness, I have an urge to buy a nice cologne for myself. I have never worn cologne in my life, and I don't really plan on using it going forward. But rural life has me lusting for a spell of consumerism beyond food. I want to spend money. So I do. The thrill was in making the purchase itself, not the product. I look down at my slice of luxury. I'm kind of disgusted by my impulsive consumerism. *When in Qatar…*, as they say.

Boarding the plane, I find myself sitting next to a mother and a son who is absorbed in his iPad. I never talk to people on planes, preferring to be polite but otherwise occupied. Nonetheless, I find myself talking to the mom.

She's from outside of Mangalore. Uppinangady, just west of Kadaba. When I tell her about our project and our collaboration with St. Aloysius, she stops me. Without a hint of surprise in her voice, she tells me she did her MBA there. I sort of thought this would be a bigger deal; evidently, St. Aloysius is a common connection in the region. I tell her about the great opportunities they afforded us, and how we hope to run further projects in conjunction with USF and St. Aloysius. I'm more excited by this prospect than she is I think.

She moved to the US with her husband for work. These days, they live as a family in Saratoga, a wealthy, small city in the South Bay. I wonder if, in twenty years, this could be one of our enumerators. But would I want that for them? That's up to them. I hope they get the choice to travel the world, at the very least. Everyone should be offered that privilege. I'll be the first to tell you it can be life changing, reshaping your perspective—just be prepared for a few bug bites, some unsightly skin rashes and several bouts of gut-wrenching food poisoning.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

Epilogue

Gandhi once said that "the soul of India is in its villages." Having gazed into the heart of Kadaba for 50 days, I can attest that it has its own soul of sorts, spellbinding and deeply collective. I was struck by the stability of the region. There is a sense of community in Kadaba that is not present on the same scale in the US, as far as I have seen. People look out for one another, taking pride in caring for one another. There seems to be minimal xenophobia between religions, as ancient Hindu traditions weave the people together. While religious conflict may be tearing India apart, I can't envision such strife cropping up in Kadaba.

I was also struck by the normality of the region, the low variance in happenings. Unlike the crazy hubbub that is SF, not much out of the ordinary happens in Kadaba. There's a certain peace in that, a simplicity. I saw so much joy in the people of Kadaba where I least expected it, and I believe the simplicity of life there plays a large part.

Indeed, the normality of Kadaba extends beyond the lack of earth-shattering events. Kadaba is a choice example to serve as representative for an average place on Earth. Not rich, not too poor, home to different religions in the most populous country. I was privileged enough to catch a glimpse into how many, if not most people live, far away from the insanity that I live out in a WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) country like the US. Perhaps it was the very normalcy of Kadaba that was so intriguing to me.

To leave my WEIRD tendencies behind was a great challenge, and I often failed, inserting my own biases into scenarios, subconsciously thinking I knew better than our subjects, being frustrated by cultural differences that didn't make sense to me. In IDEC, one of the first questions we address is the definition of development, the "D" in IDEC. The way my unconscious American biases—centered on personal achievement, materialism and efficiency—shaped how I approached our development work within the confines of our experiment made me question the validity of even asking this question. Development is not a one-size-fits-all undertaking. What is development to some cultures may be regression to others. No one person or country gets to decide what development is, it's up to each community to decide on their own definition and their consequent aspirations. For those who have resources, knowledge or time to contribute, your responsibility is to provide resources to those less far along in their own goals such that they see their aspirations as achievable. It's the job of development economists to provide an encouraging nudge, and to let people nudge you in return.

In this vein, I don't necessarily believe that religion will recede as development occurs. The very foundation of the Kadaba culture is on Hindu tradition, and this common ground sews people together in a quilt of spirit. Because of this, if development occurred in their image, I doubt they would edit their rich cultural history and traditions out. It is only by Western ideals that we view religion as a barrier to development. I have seen the vigor of the community of Kadaba, and I know that it will be through these ties and collective motivation that people rise from poverty to build homes, to get educated, to realize a life of opportunity for their children. Religion and spirituality are the backbone of the community of Kadaba, and because of this, to diminish spirituality would be to disincentivize collective action.

India is home to countless languages, and I wonder how much I missed out on by not speaking a single one. But it's a fruitless question, even if I spoke Kannada fluently, I'd miss out on most of a given conversation's contents. The frequency with which the Shajis, the

enumerators, and our subjects bounced between four, five languages in one conversation makes it all seem like one language. The same goes for the religions of Kadaba. Competing religions harmonize under Hindu tradition as Indian languages resonate from Vedic Sanskrit. It's beautiful, crazy, complicated, awesome.

So when I finally set my luggage back down in my apartment back home, I've gained a new appreciation for life, for those in my own community who speak my own WEIRD language. Running our experiment in Kadaba was a life-changing experience, but I love my stupid culture for all its massive shortcomings. Ultimately, it's gratefulness that brings quivering tears to my tired eyes.

Namaste.