

## **Just Another Country?**

*By Varun Myneni*



As a little kid, I always thought of India as just another country. Just another place where people lived, just like the United States. As I grew up and learned more about the world we live in, I reserved this notion of India in my head. In school we learned about the malnutrition in Africa and the infectious diseases of South America, but, for some reason, I

always thought of India as just another country. It took me thirteen years until I learned that India was far from “just another country.”

My name is Varun Myneni. I am a seventeen-year-old boy of Southeast Indian origin, born in the US Midwest and raised in the great city of Des Moines, Iowa. Today, I want to tell a story about my relationship with India.

One day, my sister Nithya and I were sitting at the dinner table with our parents when they started talking about the growing humanitarian problems of India. Namely, the drought in rural India and how it severely hindered the education of schoolchildren. At the time, my sister was nine years old and I was thirteen.

This shocked both of us—our perception of India was shattered. I visited India multiple times as a young child, but I only visited relatives in the large, gentrified cities. These cities were far from representative of the rural majority of India. In America, we are taught that education is an unalienable right, but in rural India the situation proves very different. Schools offer little to no clean drinking water to the students. We wondered how these schoolchildren could possibly attend a school without necessities as simple as drinking water or running water in the toilets. The

schoolchildren run home from school for clean drinking water early in the day and do not return. Schoolgirls have it even worse—during puberty, they are uncomfortable using unsanitary bathrooms that don't even have properly functioning toilets. They also go home for the day. Tardiness and absenteeism are common problems in rural Indian schools. Students drop out, and without an education they cannot work skilled jobs when they are older; instead, they are forced to help their parents out with grueling fieldwork and house chores. They get married very young and the cycle continues with their children. Their futures are cemented before they even know it. The children are smart and eager to learn but their circumstances don't facilitate education so much as survival.

I decided, then and there, that I wanted to do something about the problem. My sister, who had tears in her eyes at the time, empathized with the problems of the rural Indian schoolgirls. I told her that we should gather some money to donate to the schoolchildren, and in the blink of an eye she was



standing in front of me with a five dollar bill that she brought from her piggy bank.

I knew that we would need more than five dollars to make an impact so I reached out as many people—family friends, relatives, parents' colleagues—as I could, confident that they would recognize the severity of the cause. After weeks of fundraising, I amassed \$3,000 in donations: actually enough to make an impact.

I reached out to a family friend, Jay Sehgal, who I knew worked for a nonprofit organization. He linked me with his organization, Sehgal Foundation, that works to empower rural India. They matched the \$3,000 I had collected 1-to-1, bringing the total sum of funds to \$6,000: enough to construct one rainwater harvesting system in one rural Indian school. This would provide clean drinking water and functioning toilets for around 300

Indian schoolchildren. I knew that it wasn't enough to transform India, but I felt happy knowing that at least some children were getting clean drinking water at school. I knew that it would improve their attendance and ultimately lead to a better education. It was a start.

I repeated the same exact process the next three years. Three more rainwater harvesting systems in three more rural Indian schools. In total, I was able to raise over \$24,000, and more than 1,500 students now benefit from the generous donations of people who care deeply about improving the education and health of underprivileged children.

I thought I was making a big difference until I traveled to India with my mother, grandmother, and sister—only to find out that the money I'd raised wasn't even *close* to enough. I was fortunate enough to be able to see my projects in person, and I was ecstatic to see the difference I had made so far. When I traveled to the school in a small village named Lafuri (the school where my first project was implemented four years ago), I was overjoyed to see how well the water system was maintained. I could see that the community really cared about improving the education of the students. I drank from the water tank, and I was happy to taste water as clean as bottled water. I also had a chance to drink from the old water pump the school used before the rainwater harvesting system was implemented. This water tasted terrible. It was as salty as ocean water.

And when I thought I was finally beginning to understand the conditions these schoolchildren tried to learn in, I found out that the problem wasn't a lack of water; rather, it was an abundance of dehydrating salty groundwater that these children were forced to drink. When I traveled to the other schools where my projects had been implemented, I found the same problem with the saltwater. A healthy amount of sodium in drinking water is below 200 parts per million, and these children were drinking groundwater with levels exceeding 10,000 ppm. It was eye-opening, to say the very least.

If more people here in the United States could *physically* experience the conditions that the schoolchildren of rural India are forced to live and learn in everyday like I had the chance to, I know that they would be instantly compelled to donate to such an important cause.

After returning to the United States, I converted my initiative into a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the Water for Success Foundation, making it easier for people to find out about and donate to the cause. We work with the Sehgal Foundation, who match our funds and implement our projects. Please check our website at [www.waterforsuccess.org](http://www.waterforsuccess.org) and Sehgal Foundation's at [www.smsfoundation.org](http://www.smsfoundation.org). My goal is to involve as many people as possible, both young and old. That way we can provide India's rural schoolchildren with the education they deserve. Maybe—*hopefully*—one day we will make India just another country.