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India Blog Series: A Migration of People and Perceptions ^[1]

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Some are calling it, ‘the great migration,’ a ‘rural exodus,’ or simply... ‘urbanization.’ It is the movement of people around the world into urban centers that has both pros and cons and sparks a flurry of debate in favor and opposition of such movement. For many, this transition is a necessity. Rapid development and industrialization have forced the movement of populations into cities to replace the loss of rural occupations. For others, the transition offers new opportunities for business, education and eventual quality of life improvements. In India, this transformation is increasingly apparent as 2011 census data indicate that urban population has increased by 91 million. A BBC story in late September offered a critique of this finding, pointing to the detrimental effects on India’s cities and the inability to cope with urban population demands. But what do these transitions really mean for India?

When I think of India, I think, ‘vibrant.’ I think, ‘cultural.’ I think, ‘diverse.’ While I am certain that I am not alone in my perceptions, there persists another set of assumptions about the nation. At last week’s Zocalo Public Square talk “Is India Rich or Poor?”, author Patrick French discussed these assumptions that often dominate the spectrum of foreign audiences’ knowledge of India: India is poor, spiritual, and continually associated with Pakistan. Other common negative ideas of India that emerged from the discussion are that it lacks infrastructure, and perpetuates class inequities. Where are these perceptions coming from? And why do they dominate the conversations surrounding an emerging market where the economy has seen such significant gains in the last decade?

Patrick French says India is Rich and Poor

Following reforms in the 90s, economic growth skyrocketed. But poverty, crime, education and gender inequities are likely to come with the territory where economic growth outpaces the social and urban planning necessary to address these issues. Many industrializing nations experience these challenges as the source of their prosperity shifts and migration from rural areas to urban cities and towns begins. **The source of many negative perceptions of the nation’s growth seems to lie in the belief or assumption that it is unprepared to deal with these urban issues that its economic reforms and growth bring about.** It is confusing for outside audiences to see monetary growth, but social weaknesses. It is here that we see one of India’s greatest public diplomacy challenges. If the plight of urbanization is apt to soil the reputation and overshadow the progress made by a developing nation, then India must be increasingly concerned with the perceptions that arise from the issues in its urban centers.

So, I am left wondering if a strong positive image of India can be painted through the actions

of its municipal planners and local programs; a public diplomacy strategy that capitalizes on the soft power derived from urban innovation and problem solving. If economic growth is most apparent in urban centers, perhaps India could demonstrate its progress by highlighting the efforts it is making to address these urban issues. The potential to improve India's soft power may rest on its actions at the city level. **Increasing the visibility of local actions** and development programs could counter existing negative assumptions and moderate the conversation of extremes that currently challenge India's self-identity: rich vs. poor, old vs. modern, etc.

I have experienced India only vicariously through the music, food, dance, movies and novels available in Los Angeles. These have helped shape my understanding of a country that I have not yet stepped foot in. Yet, however romanticized my perceptions may be, my vision of India is still tainted by literature and media coverage with poor projections of India and its transition. India's national rise has become synonymous with 'rural exodus' and extremes in income distribution. **The challenge will be for India to project itself as capable and successful** in managing these extremes and urban problems to enable the transition in people's minds and impressions that has lagged behind India's progress.

Jessica Castillo is a longtime municipal civil servant in the Los Angeles area and second year Master of Public Diplomacy student. Her research interests include urban issues, tourism, public diplomacy of non-state actors, and the Latin American region. She will be participating in India: Inside Out, a student-led research project in India this December. For more on the project, please visit www.indiapublicdiplomacy.com.
