

*“You or I could look at that tree and spot maybe two or three mangoes. But ask any of these girls, and they could see about twenty.” ~Rahulbhai, science teacher at the Kedi School*

Nestled in the rural farmlands of Dharampur District, Gujarat, you’ll find the yellow-and-pink-painted concrete walls of the Kedi School. It’s home to about 70 girls, as well as several teachers and staff. Calling Kedi a “school” is a misnomer—rather, the institution houses a community.

What first struck me about this bustling community is that each girl and teacher are exceedingly warm and compassionate. After just a few days, girls would crowd around me and ask me about America, or gather around me in my bed at night and giggle about my fear of bugs, or pull me to their classrooms so I could play games with them. We played games to improve their English, and my Gujarati—when I came to Kedi, I could barely have a conversation in my native tongue—talked about the differences between our cultures, and asked each other about daily life at home. I learned that many girls worried about being married after their graduation, because they each had aspirations to graduate from college and become employed. We showed each other a lens to a different part of the world, and this exchange is an interaction that I’ll never forget.

I was also surprised at the depth of the girls’ curiosity—a characteristic that I found refreshing, especially as a graduate of a standardized education system in America. These girls were not studying to pass exams, or constrained by the rigidity of a common curriculum; instead, teachers go beyond merely passing information. In class, students ask probing questions and engage in intellectual discussions sparked by activities that the teachers organize. One day, when I was in the eighth grade class, the girls asked me three very different questions, and were very determined to get answers: *Where would the Earth fall if the sun disappeared? Why is milk white? Why do we get nightmares?* I was stunned by their curiosity and inspired both by their knack for asking questions and the teachers’ aptitude for harnessing their students’ creativity.

This characteristic also shined when the girls traveled with me to interview villagers. As part of my research grant from the University of Pennsylvania, I had proposed to document the lives of tribal people in the Valsad/Dharampur district of Gujarat. This involved interviewing villagers from three different tribal areas on their lifestyle, including the customs they practice regarding marriage, religion, food, health, and education. Three different groups of girls traveled with me on these outings, translating the questions I spoke in Gujarati to the regional dialect of the tribal community. The girls explained to me how *Adivasi* rituals are practiced and helped me with the interviews by adding to my questions to establish a better connection with the villagers. Three girls even stayed with me overnight for a few days in a village, and they truly helped me immerse myself in the life there. I remember one night I was scared to go to the bathroom, because there was no electricity, and so the girls came with me! As I stumbled in the dark, they steadied me, all three of them holding on to my arms. We giggled softly at my clumsiness and clung to each other in the night, and I was so grateful for their presence and support. They taught me how to make rotis, pick out the trees with the best fruit, and not be afraid of bugs.

The most poignant part of my stay at Kedi, however, was the girls’ connection with nature. Behind the school building is a cowshed, fields for growing vegetables, and an orchard

for mango trees. I was awestruck by how they live in harmony with nature—from harvesting crops to milking cows to plucking the ripest mangoes. They work quickly and efficiently, laughing and grinning as they cook and clean. I admired their strength and resilience, their tendency to take on hours of physical labor. Coming from an upper-middle-class-suburb in Northeast America, I've never lived without a washing machine, hot water, or air conditioning. But living at Kedi, I lived more alongside nature than I ever have before. The teachers told me that the girls' greatest strength was their intuition, a feature that arises from their affinity with nature.

When I left Kedi after three weeks, the girls and I cried. Everyone at Kedi, including the teachers and staff, had imparted to me a lens to a different lifestyle, selfless warmth and compassion, and insight into the beauty and peace of living with nature.