Photo Essay
Identity Crisis

Introduction:
This photo essay is my personal story. It depicts my emotional journey through the conflicts and contradictions I faced with my established identity, as I traveled to a foreign land to live, learn, and work. Through carefully selected images, both allegorical and literal, it conveys those vignettes of Indian life in which my cultural being and attitudes were rooted and how these came to be challenged everyday, leading me to fundamentally question, 'Who are you'?

The process of choosing a theme for the photo essay:
The most difficult part of creating this photo essay was narrowing down on a subject. I explored two or three themes before deciding on this one.

At first, I thought I would deal with the lives of two personalities, Mother Teresa and Lady Diana. Although their lives were separated by time, geography, upbringing and life choices, they had coalesced at some point in their work towards humanitarian goals and were tragically united in death. By dwelling on the irony of how the death of a 'saint' had been overshadowed by that of a 'princess' (and continues to do so after a decade), I thought I would make a statement on the priorities of our celebrity obsessed society. I researched both the personalities and made a collection of scanned and downloaded images, but was not entirely happy with the way it was shaping up. The images by themselves were not forceful enough and I realized that some messages are better conveyed through the use of sound, commentary and text.

The second theme was more autobiographical and came about through the serendipity of having received a bagful of all my photographs from home. Because it was so fresh in my mind, I thought I would do a personality collage illustrating my active interests, influences and growth through the years. A parallel theme in my mind was to portray perspectives on how I viewed myself as opposed to how other individuals and larger society viewed me. This theme was directly influenced by my exposure to multicultural issues working with Dialogues on Diversity. The idea for the present story emerged out of a brainstorming session with a friend over the above two broader subjects. It was my 'a-ha' moment as I realized that this was a story I was waiting to tell.

Finding and keeping my focus:
I began the process of creating the photo essay on my chosen topic by first writing down the contrasting impressions I had gathered since arriving in the US and then scouring the internet and magazines for pictures which best represented this. I discovered that the problem with working on a subject one feels so involved with, is that one tends to get carried away. At this point, it was important to distance myself and **take an objective view, keeping the audience in mind along with the potential of the media**. There were several images that held obvious meaning for me, but that was because I derived subtle taste, smell and emotion from the pictures. They may not convey the same meaning to others without such associations. Although a picture is worth a thousand words, it would still need explanation or risk misinterpretation.

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The second danger I faced was the tendency to force fit an image that I thought resonated Indian life, and often ended up losing focus. For instance, families of four or even five people traveling on a scooter or motorcycle are a common sight in India and I tried hard to incorporate it, but the resulting contrast was too deliberate and contrived. Thus, **critical evaluation and elimination** (though difficult) are important processes in maintaining the aim of the message.

A third pitfall I became aware of was the temptation to depict India in its stereotypical images of poverty, filth, pollution and crowds. Such images make for easy contrasts but are also the most disturbing. I realized that dwelling on these would lead me in another direction from my intended focus, but denying it would be untruthful as it was one of the major things which shaped my responses to poverty in America. I have tried to achieve a balance by touching upon this as an element of regular Indian life rather than a case in point.

My process of elimination happened through overkill in which I put together visuals for all the various themes in my mind. All the images revolving around a theme were put into one slide and then eliminating one by one. The choice of images depended not only on the subject of the picture but also the story it told in its details, its overall visual effect and how well the images juxtaposed with each other on the slide. For images that were equally good, I deleted and reinserted them several times until I was satisfied with one over the other. At times I found it useful to move on and come back to the visual at a later time or get a second opinion.

The Photo Essay:

Slide 1: My Identity:

The story of my identity crises begins with a definition of my identity within the context of contemporary India. India is a land of intense contradictions and extremes, not only of wealth but also in society and culture. The first slide depicts some of the apparent contradictions which flavor the modern Indian identity, where the sacred and the profane (image #2, of a renunciate with a cigarette in one hand, talking on his cell phone), the modest and the blatant (image #1 of a conservatively dressed woman taking an immodest billboard ad for male briefs in her stride) seamlessly coexist. These were some of the paradoxical scenes I encountered everyday and cherished without conflict as my own cultural outlook was founded on such a blend of the traditional and the modern (image #4 and #5 of me equally comfortable in modern and traditional roles). The central image (#3) of a young Indian woman with hands folded in customary Indian greeting with a traditional garment draped fashionably in the indo-western style epitomizes the emerging mindset which can effortlessly embrace both traditional values and western progressiveness. I identified myself with this generation of new India, where both meditation and the nightclub were a part of life.

The context for the visual is also set by borders representing the colors of the Indian flag.

References for images slide 1:
Image # 3: Scanned cover page, Newsweek March 6, 2006.
This image was modified using Paint to eliminate printed text on both sides of the figure and the address label, which obliterated lower left part of the image. To obtain a complete figure, a rectangular mask covering the right shoulder, elbow and palm was selected and copied. It was then flipped horizontally to obtain a mirror image and carefully placed on the left to appear as one image. The writing on the yellow background and flowing part of the garment was similarly masked by copying and pasting the background over it.

Image # 2: Image downloaded from internet.
http://www.temple.edu/humanities/india/India_Emerging_Power.htm
http://www.temple.edu/humanities/india/images/swami_000.jpg

Image # 1: Image downloaded from internet. Unable to track back original URL.
Image # 4: Digital photograph taken in Davenport, 2004 during a visit to USA.
Image # 5: Digital photograph taken in India, 2004 at a family wedding.

Slide 2: Stepping out and ready to take on the new world

This slide represents fresh beginnings as I traveled to the US from India to embark on a new educational experience. This is depicted by my Indian passport (image #1) and American student visa (image #2) specifying my student status and Iowa State University as my destination in the US. Image #3 is symbolic of my mood: optimistic, brimming with confidence, basking in the new surroundings, dressed to blend in and feeling quite at home. The passport cover has also been used to emphasize the blended Indian identity already defined above, which made the move to my new environs easier. There are no signs of nagging conflicts or questions. My expansive, all-accepting attitude is reinforced with borders representing the colors of the American flag, which also sets the context for the visual.

References for images in Slide 2:
Image 1: Scanned cover of Indian passport
Image 2: Scanned American visa specifying student status and destination
Image 3: Scanned advertisement, TIME, May 14 2007.

Slide 3: Beginning of Conflict

This visual depicts the onset of conflict as everyday experiences rearranged my world (image 1) and I faced internal resistance in coming to terms with a different order of things than I was used to (image 2). The sense of displacement and conflict has been accentuated by the use of just two images stretched lengthwise to fill the entire slide and the borders are now designed to divide the slide into an Indian half and an American half. The placement of images 1 in the Indian half represents the overturning of my known way of life and image 2 in the American is to show the difficulties in adapting to the new set of circumstances. The attempt is to depict a frame of mind where mundane things take on exaggerated dimensions and where perceptions are colored by conflicting emotions. Image 2 was also chosen because not only did it aptly depict conflict, but I thought it also served to create a pensive mood to contrast the trouble free image in the previous slide.

The next four slides depict the four areas of cultural divergence which demanded a realignment of my prevailing attitudes. Throughout these four slides, the impression of contract is maintained by the arrangement of borders dividing the slide into the Indian and American context.

References for images Slide 3:
Image 1: Scanned image, Newsweek July 9, 2007
Image 2: Image downloaded from the internet.
http://khya.typepad.com/khyas_journal/2006/12/index.html

Slide 4: Produce at your doorstep

This slide represents the very first inconvenience I felt under the new system, i.e. the marketing of produce. In India, the produce comes to you on wheels (image 1) or a vendor may set up shop a few paces from your house right on the road side (image 3). This is very convenient because while cooking, if an ingredient is lacking, one just has to wait and sooner or later a vendor will announce his arrival. Image1 emphasizes the effortless shopping where the older child is not even wearing footwear and has probably just stepped out of her house with her mother and is contrasted with image 4 which shows a much

different way of grocery marketing that requires some preparation and preplanning on the part of the consumer. On the other hand in the US, grocery stores are accessible round the clock. Moreover, levels of hygiene are high and strictly adhered to (image 2 – a Walmart employee arranging tomatoes with gloved hands). This is a concept that is non-existent in India (image 3), where vegetables on roadside and mobile carts gather the dust, pollution and germs of the surroundings. This was something which did not bother me while I was in India, but now I know I will cringe at when I return.

References for images in slide 4:
Image 1: Image downloaded from the internet.
http://www.angelfire.com/oh3/mfreeman/india.htm
Image 2: Digital image taken at Walmart Supercenter, West Des Moines.
Image 3: Image downloaded from the internet
http://www.pa-chouvy.org/Photos/Inde/Rajasthan/Jaipur/Jaipur2005.htm
Image 4: Digital image taken at Walmart Supercenter, West Des Moines.

Slide 5: Necessity vs. Mania

At first glance, this slide seems to be about long waits that people in both countries have to undergo (images 2 and 3). However, the contexts of the two queues (images 1 and 4) show the difference in their purpose. The long line in image 3 is for free pavement clinic run by an NGO called Calcutta Rescue, (image 4) while the queue in image 2 is to be the first possessors of an Iphone. This image is not intended to be judgmental through deliberate contrast but serves more of a poignant reminder to me of the poverty and lack of basic amenities faced by a large section of the Indian population. In this context, image 1 which is a sign held by a man in line for the Iphone three days before it went on sale, although probably not meant seriously, casts the concept of hardship and donation in an entirely new light.

Reference for images in slide 5:
Image 1: Downloaded from the internet and cropped.
http://www.thelastminuteblog.com/category/iphone/
Image 2: Downloaded from the internet.
http://www.juanaristy.com/2007/06/29/iphone-mania/
Image 3: Downloaded from the internet
http://basilicum122.googlepages.com/chapter8
Image 4: Downloaded from the internet and cropped.
http://www.calcuttarescue.org/

Slide 6: Chaos and Congestion vs. Orderliness

It is said that if a person can drive in India, he/she can drive anywhere else in the world. Image 1 depicts why. To get a sense of the traffic in India, one has to 'hear' it. In this context, I found this image (image 1) particularly well depicting of the chaos that typifies urban India. It shows a busy intersection in Bombay unregulated by traffic police or traffic lights. Moreover, the road is narrowed by mobile vendors, hand carts and parked cars encroaching upon the sides of the road. Jaywalkers are aplenty and the cow leisurely trudging down the middle of the road completes the picture of self-regulating chaos. Coming from such lack of traffic sense, the well regulated, orderly movement of cars in downtown Des Moines (image 2) feels like a boon, where driving is far less stressful. Images 3, which illustrates the struggle for the daily commute, are an integral part of the urban landscape in India. All through my college life, I have traveled in exactly these conditions depicted here – and believe me, there is always room for one more! However, after having gotten used to commuting in Ames (image 4), I wonder if my basic instincts will return or will I just stare in disbelief?

References for slide 6:
**Image 1:** Downloaded from the internet. http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/presskit/index.htm
Image 2: Digital photograph taken in downtown Des Moines
Image 3: Downloaded from the internet
http://www.itravelnet.com/photos/as/india/tamil-nadu/chennai/chennai-local-bus.jpg
Image 4: Digital photograph taken in Ames at the Cyride stop near Science I.

Slide 7: Paper, paper and more paper = slow moving bureaucracy
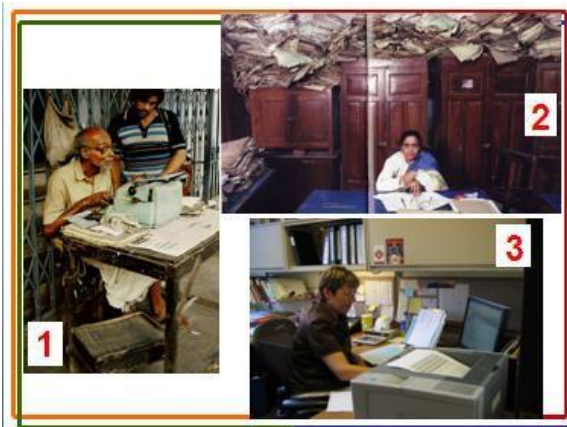
This is the final image of contrasts which eloquently depicts the characteristic paper-choked administrative setup in India. Image 2 is of a typical government administrative office where tons of yellowing paper technically speaks of meticulous record keeping going back probably a century. In reality it might as well be fuel for fire as it would need exceptional will power to approach even one bundle. When I went back to my college to get my records to complete the application to ISU, I witnessed exactly such a scene where the clerical staff searched closet after

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closet full of rosters to locate my records. 'Come tomorrow' thus becomes a standard answer and engrains a popular mental culture where things are expected to move inordinately slow. I came to ISU with such an image of official work and was utterly amazed at how promptly every office at ISU including the social security administration, processed my paperwork! Much of the difference in work culture has to do with computerization and image 2 stands in stark contrast with image 3 in this respect. Getting used to such well-oiled administrative machinery is making me intolerant of the laid back attitude of government and bank officials in India – and how long will it be before I lose my patience and ability to deal with them? Ending this image on a positive note, all is not lost in India, because as picture 1 illustrates, it gives some industrious old men a chance to make an honest buck by setting up a table and a old typewriter outside any government office (image 1).

References for slide 7:
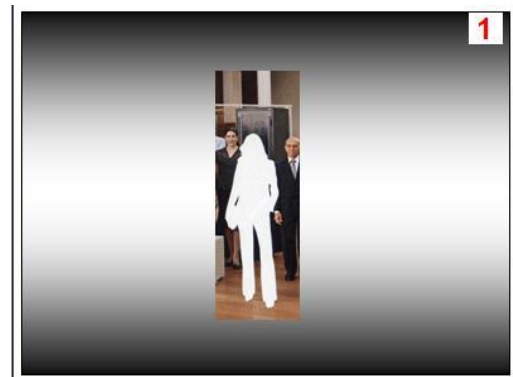**Image 1:** Downloaded from the internet
http://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Asia/India/photo683933.htm
Image 2: Scanned image. Newsweek, March 6, 2006.
Image 3: Digital photo taken at administrative office of Department of Curriculum and Instruction, ISU.

Slide 8:

This last visual symbolizes my search for a new identity. The conflicts described above show a changing mindset where at times I longed for India and at times I was glad I got out. In America, I cannot be completely Indian and will never be completely American. Caught in this quicksand, I ask myself, Who Are You?

The figure silhouetted in white, standing isolated, feeling cut off from the present circumstances and immersed in a field of indecisive grays embodies this fundamental question.

Reference for Slide 8:
Image 1: Scanned image, Newsweek Feb 19, 2007.