Strengths Despite Constraints: Memoirs of Research in a Slum in Calcutta

This narrative focuses on a powerful experience I had with Raquella, one of the respondents I met during my research in a slum in Calcutta. This encounter allowed me to identify strengths in Raquella that she did not identify herself. To enable readers to understand the context within which this strength emerged, I first share some observations, interviews, and thoughts related to what it was like to live in a slum. Then I will present Raquella's story reflecting her strengths and constraints. Finally, I will tell you about my experience with Raquella and my struggle to make sense of it; and end the narrative with some words on strength based social work practice, teaching and research.

By Mahasweta M. Banerjee

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On a hot and humid afternoon in June 1995, I drove toward Dhobiatalla Bustee, a slum in east-central Calcutta. The further I went from home and the closer I got toward Dhobiatalla, all familiar landscape of Calcutta changed. Gradually, everything looked, felt, and smelled different. The roads became dirtier, narrower, and more winding. The buildings displayed no architectural character. The air was filled with a putrid stench indicating that raw leather was being treated somewhere close by. I saw cow-dung cake- smeared walls, plastic bags heaped on street corners, rickshaws and hand-pulled carts, and poor people. I became apprehensive,wondering what it would be like going into an unknown territory. My entire body became rather tense, yet anticipation tingled all over. I turned a corner, and, sure enough, saw the large empty lot behind which lay Dhobiatalla.

I was going into Dhobiatalla because I wanted to study the interplay of strengths and constraints in the lives of people living in a slum in Calcutta. Having worked as a social worker in Calcutta, I was somewhat familiar with the many constraints slum-dwellers faced and lived with—dark and narrow alleys, unhygenic and overcrowded living conditions, unavailability of civic amenities, unemployment, poor health, illiteracy, and alcoholism. Approximately 20% of Calcutta's population lived in slums (Calcutta Municipal Corporation, 1994). It seemed that despite the known constraints, slums had some things to offer—strengths—that I was not familiar with. Similarly, perhaps residents had strengths that enabled them to survive, live, or thrive in a slum.

Overall, I wanted to find out what it was like to live in a slum. More specifically, I wanted to explore: a) how individual and community strengths influenced individuals' achievements and quality of life in a slum, and b) the impact of a micro-enterprise program on slum residents. I have written two papers that focused on my specific interests (See Banerjee, In Press; 1996). So, I will not discuss these aspects of my research here. This narrative will focus on my overall interests; that is, what it

was like to live in a slum and how people lived in a slum within a strengths-constraints framework. At the heart of this narrative, however, lies a powerfully thought-provoking experience I had with Raquella, one of the respondents I met during my visits to Dhobiatalla. This experience allowed me to identify strengths in Raquella that she did not identify herself. To enable readers to understand the context within which this strength emerged, I first share some of my observations and understanding of what it was like to live in a slum.

PREPARING FOR ENTRY

Before going to India, I reviewed the literature to find out what was already written about strengths and constraints. I found that some researchers (Acharya, 1988; Dahiwale, 1989; Sandhu, 1989; Sharma, 1989) had studied what it was like to be poor and the problems faced by people who were poor in India. Although these quantitative studies examined problems or deficits of people, they also suggested that people who were poor had many strengths such as ability to care and share, to encourage, and to provide support to one another. Additionally, I found that the strengths perspective (Rapp, 1993; Saleebey, 1992; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989) believed that identifying and working with clients' strengths was more promising than focusing solely on their problems and deficits. However, it appeared to me that the strengths perspective had not been sufficiently developed to address poverty. Nonetheless, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) had identified and worked with the strengths and the assets of poor communities, and found that a strengths orientation had many potentials for addressing poverty in the US. Moreover, poverty is said to be more similar than dissimilar in developed and developing countries (Sen, 1995; Lusk & Stoesz, 1994; Midgely, 1990). Therefore, it seemed to me that if the strengths perspective worked with poverty in the US, it should work with poverty in India also. However, prior to conceptualizing how a strengths orientation would apply to addressing poverty in Calcutta, I wanted to find out whether poverty and strengths co-existed in a slum.

Initially, I was at a loss in choosing a slum where I could study both individual as well as environmental strengths and constraints. Intuitively, I knew that poor people living in a slum would have personal strengths, but I was unsure if the slum environment would have any strengths. Because I was interested in finding out how a micro-enterprise program worked, I contacted the Director of the Institute for Motivating Self-Employment (IMSE) and requested access to one of their program sites. IMSE was a non-governmental social service agency with a national reputation for its pioneering work in micro-enterprise development in rural eastern India. Dhobiatalla became the study site because it was the only slum in Calcutta where IMSE operated its urban micro-enterprise program.

Through maximum variation purposive sampling, I interviewed 40 residents of Dhobiatalla both individually and in focus groups in the slum. I used an interview guide, took still and video pictures, and observed the slum by visiting it at various times of the day and the week. Also, I informally spoke with many other individuals to get varying perspectives on living in a slum. I shared my preliminary findings with the respondents and the Director of IMSE; both corroborated the findings.

THE SLUM

In English, Dhobiatalla means a place where washer-men, or people who wash clothes to make a living, live. After visiting Dhobiatalla a couple of times, I was rather surprised when I did not see any "dhobis" (washer-men) or laundries or clothes being dried—typical images of a place where washer-men live. When asked, a resident leader informed me that the original name of the slum was "Dholai Talao," which literally translated into English means a "Beating Pond." The story was that many years back, criminals, alcoholics, and junkies lived in this slum. These men would take a cab to come home, but unable to pay the cabdriver his fare, they would beat him up and throw him into a nearby pond. Thus, cab drivers gave it the name Dholai Talao, a place where you get beaten up and thrown into a pond. Obviously, the name had a very negative connotation. Over time, residents

worked hard to change this image of the slum and the name has been transformed to Dhobiatalla. Later, I saw three ponds nearby, but no "dhobis" at Dhobiatalla. Perhaps, there was some truth to the story I had heard.

I vaguely remember the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1964. Apparently, 35 Muslim families afflicted by the 1964 riots took refuge in this god-forsaken fringe of Calcutta and slowly built their homes. During a similar riot in 1992, Dhobiatalla was burned to the ground. In 1993 IMSE started a loan extension program for micro-enterprises at Dhobiatalla to help residents restart their lives after the riot. Before beginning its program, IMSE surveyed Dhobiatalla and found that 1,006 families lived in a two and one-half acre land area. Assuming family size to be six, IMSE estimated that 6,000 people lived in Dhobiatalla. Dhobiatalla's residents were primarily Muslims, a minority population in India.

LIFE IN DHOBIATALLA

First Impressions

Walking through a large and desolate lot, I was im-mediately struck by the hustle and bustle along with the con-gestion in Dho-biatalla. In the main entrance way, everybody was busy doing something. I saw the startlingly black figures of working women and children who seemed like moving sculptures of soot. Soon, I learned that they worked for a battery recycling unit. I slowed down and saw women beating used batteries with a hammer and separating two aluminum items that came out from the batteries. Later, the aluminum items were collected and resold. The workers were paid an outrageously low wage. There was a lot of carbon inside the batteries and by mid-day, the workers were black with soot. I saw young soot-covered girls running around, their shy smiles very white against the soot. Some workers and the local doctor told me that the carbon was harmful for their lungs and their skin.

The main path was about six feet wide and pocked with potholes filled with monsoon rain. Even narrower side alleys jutted out randomly to the left and the right of the main path. There were houses scattered all over, most of them one-room and one-story. A "majhar" (sacred burial ground of a Muslim saint) and an unfinished mosque sat to the right of this pathway. I walked by two unassuming looking one-room schools that were next to the mosque. Some large, leafy "neem" trees were refreshing spots of green next to the dusty action. Near the gray concrete structures that loomed over the anxious micro-entrepreneurs, there were three tube-wells, the primary source of clean drinking water for Dhobiatalla's residents.

A bit bewildered by the unfamiliar landscape, I turned to the reassuring presence of the IMSE social worker beside me. She took me over to a small group of people who were busy cutting rubber. "This Didi (respected elder sister) has come all the way from America to talk with you. She wants to ask you some questions about your life, strengths, and difficulties," she said. I winced at the first part of this introduction because I would have preferred to be introduced by my name than as a "Didi" which connoted status hierarchy. However, within the cultural context "Didi" was acceptable because generally people do not address one another by their name only.

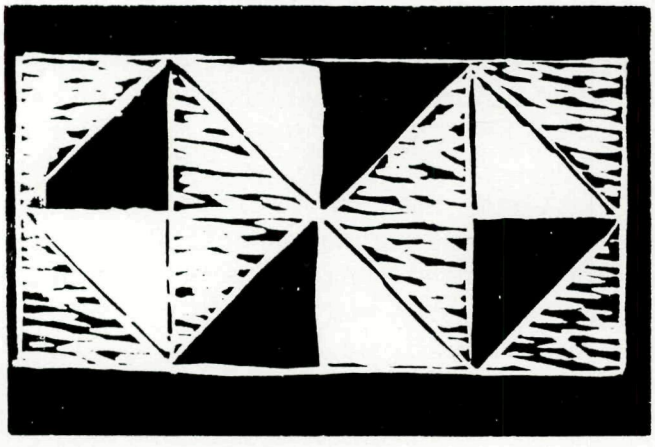
Wealth and Poverty

Within a very short time, I realized that a class system operated at Dhobiatalla. One day, I was standing and talking with a group of men and women on the main strip of Dhobiatalla. While I was talking with Raukat Ali, an elderly Muslim mason, a middle-aged, well-dressed woman suddenly stopped by and interrupted our conversation by introducing herself as Hira Bibi. I spoke with her briefly and then went back to talking with Raukat Ali. To my surprise, Raukat

Ali stopped speaking and allowed Hira Bibi to dominate the conversation. At first, I could not understand why an elderly male who traditionally had much more power than women would defer to her. After I visited Hira Bibi's home, I understood that socio-economic status played a key role in power, so much so that an elderly male subjugated his position of authority to a younger female because she happened to be the richest woman living in Dhobiatalla.

Just as there was obvious poverty, relative wealth was evident also in Dhobiatalla. Hira Bibi invited me to her home when I asked her for an interview. Upon entering her home, I was very surprised. She had two large fully and tastefully furnished bedrooms, a kitchen, and a private bathroom. Obviously she was very rich within the context of a slum. In fact, Hira Bibi's home was like any other lower middle-class home in the larger societal context. Further, she rented out many of her homes in Dhobiatalla. How did she accumulate so much wealth? She was one of the original residents of Dhobiatalla; she had moved in after the 1964 riots. Things were miserable in the earlier days, but her recycling businesses paid off; she diversified her businesses and employed local residents. Why did she continue to live in a slum when she had such a high income? Hira Bibi said, "Didi, could I possibly earn so much outside this slum? I couldn't run my businesses in proper Calcutta . . . I am happy here." She enjoyed being the queen of all she surveyed at Dhobiatalla!

Later, I categorized class into a four-tier system based on income, which ranged from a high of 7,000 rupees (US $233) to a low of 100 rupees (US $3) per month, and home ownership. The upper class owned numerous (10 - 20) homes, which they rented out, and a recycling business large enough to employ local residents. The middle class owned a one-or two-room home and either worked in a factory outside the slum, or owned a small business in which family members were involved. The lower class rented and worked in local businesses or owned an even smaller business such as selling fruits, vegetables, fish, and so forth. The poor lived in very low quality rental homes and were seasonally unemployed. The upper class of Dhobiatalla were extremely poor in relation to the upper class of Indian society, but were extremely rich in relation to many slum residents.



I visited homes only if invited. Thus, I visited a few upper-class and middle-class homes, but I did not visit any lower-class or poor homes because I was not invited into one. I don't know if it were I or they, but I felt unwelcome in poorer homes. They appeared embarrassed about their homes and I did not want to add to it. Standing at these doorsteps, I peeked in. It seemed that the upper and the middle-class homes were very similar but the lower-class homes were different. The lower-class homes were relatively smaller than the richer homes, with numerous family members, a clutter of utensils, and a general sense of disorganization. By and large, in these homes the walls were covered with pictures of Hindu Gods or film stars; sometimes clothes hung on a string which stretched across the room. Many did not have a bed or any other furniture.

I was told that some residents made a living by lending money to poor people when they needed it. They charged an extremely high rate of interest, 200% per year, for the supposed favor. These money lenders were very opposed to IMSE and its loan extension program at Dhobiatalla because of the autonomy it granted to poor residents. Many local residents brought up the issue of not having money and relying on money lenders at times of trouble. Mina Mondol shared one such story.

Mina, an elderly Hindu widow who sold fish to make a living, said, "This summer it did not rain very much, rivers and ponds dried up, and fish prices soared. I was afraid I would not

be able to make any profit from selling fish if I bought them at the prevailing high price." Thus, she had no income that summer and "lived on water for four months."

A few other residents echoed similar stories of not having enough to eat. Many residents were very small and thin; ill health was rampant and environmental health was terrible. Let me share a remarkable story of how residents addressed hunger. Mohammad Iqbal,the middle-aged Muslim leader who told me the story of the slum's name, told me that he could not bear to see his Hindu neighbors starve. He said that a widow with six children lived next door. Everyone in the family worked; yet there were days when this family did not have anything to eat. On such days, Mohammad Iqbal's family ate less and shared their meal with this family. Others told me of sharing meals with neighbors and beggars. I saw charity being given by residents.

Unity in Diversity: Regionalism and Religion

Mohammad Iqbal's disclosure that he shared meals with a Hindu family was an important feature in his story because historically Hindus and Muslims do not get along well. In India, race is not an issue; nonetheless, there is divisiveness as well as unity. The concept of "race" as used in the United States does not exist in India, where the term "race" is associated with sports, especially running, but not with ethnicity. Currently in India, divisiveness is rooted in regionalism and religion. Of course, caste is an issue among Hindus. However, as a majority of the slum residents were Muslims, caste was not an issue.

Despite sharing the same religion, many Muslim residents were divided because of their place of origin. People from Bihar spoke negatively about residents from Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, and vice versa. Given this sense of separate identity, I thought they would have strong negative feelings toward the Hindus. However, they did not openly express any anti-Hindu feelings. I was not sure how much of this was a result of social desirability bias because it was obvious from my name and appearance that I was a Hindu.

When it came to discussing religion, I heard stories that I would never have imagined. Armina Begum, a young, divorced Muslim mother of three, said that she prayed to the Hindu Goddess Kali when she wanted something. "What does it matter if Kali is a Hindu Goddess? I am a poor woman. I pray to anyone who listens to me and helps me." I heard the same sentiment from Hindus who prayed to "Pir Baba," a Muslim saint. They said, "Hindus and Muslims are brothers." I felt very reassured upon hearing this because I had worried about how well they would accept a "Didi" who came from America and was not a Muslim.

Further evidence of integration between Hindus and Muslims came from stories about marriage dowries. Many told me stories of marrying off their daughters recently; some grumbled about the huge expenditure they incurred for their daughters' marriage. I was shocked to hear about dowry in Muslim marriages, because as far as I knew, every Muslim marriage had a prenuptial agreement, which was very progressive compared to Hindu marriages. Dowry is a peculiarly evil Hindu social custom which has been outlawed, but still accompanies most arranged Hindu marriages. When asked how dowry, a Hindu custom, was infringing on the lives of non-Hindus, I was told, "When we live in a diverse society, we adopt others' ways." I was outraged that dowry had been embraced by non-Hindus in the name of unity in diversity; exploitative customs had many ways of invading life.

I met Mulchand Mia, a man in his mid-40's, who was illiterate and sold fruit to make a living. He had seven children and had set the date for his eldest daughter Reshma's wedding. The combined family income of Mulchand Mia, his wife, and children was about 1,740 rupees monthly. Mulchand Mia said that he would have to spend about 20,000 rupees on Reshma's wedding.

Among the costs for marriage was an item—a marriage negotiation fee of 300 Rupees—which surprised and angered me at first. Armina Begum, a neighbor, had arranged the marriage and had asked for a brokerage fee. I was immensely angry that a family friend would charge a fee from a poor family when she knew

how expensive it was to marry a daughter. Armina laughed and said, "It's a low fee." Later I got to know 25 year-old, illiterate, divorced Armina, who identified physical stamina as one of her strengths. Armina made a living by buying, cleaning, and selling discarded ball point pen refills. Her three children, aged six to ten, also worked to supplement the family's income which was about 500 rupees per month. This meant that Armina's family income was 200 rupees less than the official Indian poverty level of 700 rupees per month. After getting to know Armina better, I understood why a family friend would charge a marriage negotiation fee—Armina needed the money for her family's survival.

The First Time I Saw Raquella

On a day soon after this, I sat on Hakim Mia's doorstep from afternoon until evening talking to people and observing their life style. I saw women and children clustering around a tube-well washing clothes, cleaning utensils, and even bathing. I noticed a tall, lithe woman squatting on the tube-well ground and quite unselfconsciously washing herself. That is how I saw Raquella for the first time—incredibly self-possessed, bathing fully clothed by splashing cool water on her body, soaping her arms, neck and face, and pouring more water again. We did not talk, but I became very curious about bathrooms in the slum. Folks around me told me that there were few bathrooms in the slum. Those who could afford, owned their own bathrooms, others rented bathrooms, and still others like Raquella bathed publicly.

Respite and Interim Lessons

Although rather slowly, I was learning not impose my middle-class values on understanding life in a slum. I realized that some aspects of life in Dhobiatalla appeared incorrect or unjust, but they were actually very functional when viewed from residents' perspectives. Very often, economic necessities of living propelled these apparently unjust behaviors and actions. Further, I learned that life in a slum is a refracted mirror reflection of life outside. I saw a mirror reflection in the way Dhobiatalla's residents lived their life—working very hard, caring, sharing, comforting one another. Residents had many strengths—capacities, resources, abilities, aspirations, talents. Yet, the mirror had been severely cracked by a lack of economic resources which made the images refracted, even wretched, sometimes. Just when I thought I had come to grips with understanding what it was like to live in a slum, an encounter with Raquella pulled this comfortable rug from underneath my feet. Raquella, one of the most wretched among the wretched of Dhobiatalla, behaved in such a fashion that I had to stop and reevaluate my nascent and simplistic understanding that economic necessities drove behavior in Dhobiatalla. Before I tell you about my experience with Raquella, let me first share Raquella's story of strengths and constraints.

RAQUELLA'S STORY

"I am intel-ligent," said Raq-uella, a Muslim woman in her mid-thirties. Instantly my gaze snapped to her face. Her slanting eyes stood out prominently against her hollow cheek bones. Her dry brownish hair was pulled tightly into a severe knot, as if to underline her look of sharp efficiency and stark poverty. I did not imagine that a poor, illiterate woman would identify intelligence as her strength. Intrigued, I asked Raquella to elaborate. Pulling the edge of her brightly colored, cotton-printed saree over her head, Raquella continued in a deep and husky voice:

My father died when my brother and I were very young. My illiterate, unskilled mother... came to Calcutta with us and begged for a living. There were many days when there was nothing to eat. My stomach would churn with hunger. Often, I would stand on others' doorsteps hungrily staring at people eating. Sometimes, I volunteered to help, in whatever way I could. In return, the householders gave me the excess water that they threw away after cooking rice. Rice water, given in charity, was my staple diet for many a

day in my childhood. I was not happy. My mother was helpless, my brother too young. I tried to find a way out of this hell. I would watch people ... what they did, how they made a living.... Slowly I figured out a way. ... I sell spice at Dhobiatalla. No one else sells spice here. I figured that since spice is essential to our cooking, I could make a living by selling spice.... I took out a loan from IMSE.... No one helped me. Things are better now because I am smart....

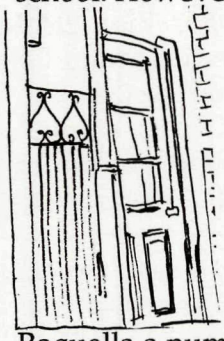
Living on rice water was the pit-bottom of poverty in Indian culture—things couldn't possibly get any worse. And yes, Raquella was definitely smart. Her decision to sell spice was a smart entrepreneurial move by any standards.

Raquella seemed to enjoy talking about herself and she talked a lot. "Sometimes, I also buy rotten mangoes from the market. Mangoes that you will not eat. I buy them at a low price and sell them cheaply here. People buy them." When asked about her monthly income, her eyes and her thin cracked lips broke out into a smile that said, "Oh! You foolish woman!" Immediately, I knew I had made a major mistake. I thought I was being pragmatic by asking about her monthly income instead of annual income. Slitting her eyes which intensified her gaze at me, Raquella said, "Oh, some days I earn 20 rupees, other days I earn about 50 rupees. Some days I don't earn anything.

Next, I asked Raquella about her family, her husband and children, and her life in general. Pulling the edge of her saree over her head once again, Raquella readjusted her posture, took a deep breath, and slowly replied:

My husband works as a construction laborer. You know how it is. Some days he has work, other days he just sits at home.... He drinks, gambles...with my money. I hide it. He beats me. Ask people around. Honest, he beats me. What can I do?.... I have two children. My daughter is five and my son is two years old. My youngest baby died within five months of birth. He had rickets. I work hard because I have to feed my children. My husband does not worry about feeding us.... I have to pay someone five rupees to baby-sit when I go to get spices for my business.... Life is hard.... My house is not nice at all. It is a make shift home. The roof leaks. The floor is damp in the rainy and winter seasons. I want a better home.

Raquella's children were with her and she was nursing her two-year-old as we talked. The children were severely malnourished and underdeveloped. Her five-year-old daughter appeared about two, and her two-year-old son appeared less than six months old. Both attended a preschool in the slum where they got breakfast, snacks, and clothes. Raquella dreamt of the day when her children would graduate from high school, get nice jobs, and eventually live in a nice home in Calcutta, far away from this slum. Raquella proudly asked her daughter to tell me what she had learned at school. Slowly, shyly, and softly, the child replied, "A, B, C . . ." Compared to Raquella's childhood, her children were better off; they ate one meal at home and attended school. However, Raquella believed a better home



was the answer to her family's health problems. She pleaded, "Didi, please build some homes. I will move anywhere I have to. I can pay a higher rent because I will expand my spice business with another loan . . . ." I visited with Raquella a number of times during my six-week sojourn at Dhobiatalla, but Raquella never invited me home.

The Video Camera

Often, Raquella volunteered to carry the bags that I took to the slum. Generally, I took a duffel bag containing writing paper, pens, a camera, a water bottle, and my wallet; sometimes I also carried a video camera in its own case. Raquella's request to carry my bags was culturally conditioned and acceptable, but it reflected a status hierarchy. Initially, I ignored her request politely. One sultry evening, I was very tired after a long day's work. Again, Raquella offered to carry my bag. Since I felt more comfortable with her, without thinking I let her carry the video camera because she pointed toward it when making her request. Before I knew what was happening, Raquella had disappeared, and she had vanished with my new video camera. I went into a state of shock.

The project grant money was too little to pay for a video camera. Nonetheless, realizing its value to my research, I had bought a video camera. Standing on the main strip of Dhobiatalla, I looked around—Raquella was nowhere to be seen. I did not know what to do. About 15 minutes passed—I kept dragging my feet on the main strip, unwilling to share my concern with anyone. I was afraid that letting others know about Raquella's disappearance with my video-camera would jeopardize my tenuous relationship with the community. I thought, "Raquella will come back, perhaps she has gone home, or to her neighbors' to show off the video camera...may be something is holding her back...Probably she had to use the rest-room... Surely she will come back." Another part of me said, "Raquella may have stolen your camera." I went through the emotions of trust versus distrust, faith versus doubt with a poker-face, trying very hard to conceal my emotions. Half an hour or so elapsed, I kept dragging my feet, and wondered what to do. Suddenly, I saw Raquella. Smiling sheepishly, she came running toward me holding the video camera in both her hands. Relief. I cannot describe in words the relief I felt when I saw Raquella. I never asked her where she went because I did not want to embarrass her.

Raquella, still holding the video camera, accompanied me as usual to the parked car. She handed the camera over and waved good-bye. Driving out of Dhobiatalla, I looked at the beautiful sky. The monsoon clouds started fluffing into golden-pink feathers and the sun was almost ready to set. As always, I felt a great sense of peace and freedom when I looked at the vast open sky. Suddenly, this calmness was disrupted by Raquella's face, I recalled her sudden disappearance and dramatic return. I was overjoyed to get back my camera, but I couldn't make sense of what had happened.

Bewilderment and Clarity

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply for a few minutes. Raquella's tale of hunger pangs in her childhood, hardships in making a living, inadequate housing, difficulties in staying healthy, borrowing money, and marital discord started replaying. The extent of injustice! "Why did Raquella have to live under such horrible circumstances? Why did Raquella run away so swiftly immediately after she got the camera? Did she plan this ahead of time? What took her so long? Did she want to steal the camera? Why did she come back with the camera—intact? Why didn't Raquella run off with the camera, sell it, and live happily ever after? Why was she such a fool?"

The video camera cost me about US $1,000. Because of very high import duty in India, the camera would have fetched Raquella 75,000 rupees easily, enough to allow her to live modestly for about a decade. Moreover, she knew that I was visiting Calcutta temporarily and would leave soon. Had she disappeared for a few days, no one could have found her in the conglomerate that constituted Calcutta. Why didn't Raquella grab the opportunity to experience some economic comfort? Why did she rise above temptation and demonstrate valuable strengths such as honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, courage, dignity, and self-respect?

I have struggled to make sense of this experience with Raquella because it failed to fit within dominant perspectives such as deficit and pathology, micro-economics, or Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Raquella taught me that human behavior is too complex to be understood through single lenses. Raquella's poverty, oppression, and otherness could not preclude the possibility that Raquella had many inherent strengths. My formal education which taught me the dominant paradigms seemed obsolete in helping me understand "the other." A new paradigm was needed to explain Raquella's behavior.

Slowly, the strengths perspective came alive. It dawned on me that despite dire poverty, Raquella may not have had any intention of stealing, or that she chose to return the camera despite its economic potentials. Within the first scenario, it is possible that Raquella ran away immediately after I gave her the camera because she was thrilled to get an expensive item in her hand. Delirious with joy, she ran away from me temporarily, perhaps to show it off, perhaps to make believe that she owned it. Once whatever she was experiencing was over, she came back

and returned it to me. Alternatively, the second scenario suggests that Raquella may have been tempted to use the camera for economic gains, but made a conscious choice to return the camera to me. Just as I did not want to be defined as "coming from America," Raquella did not want to be defined by her poverty. Raquella was much more than a poor woman. Raquella's actions exemplified the true meaning of the co-existence of strengths and constraints in a slum.

STRENGTHS BASED PRACTICE, TEACHING, AND RESEARCH

Weick (1992, p. 24) wrote, "The act of empowering reawakens or stimulates someone's own natural power. . . . A strengths perspective assumes that when people's positive capacities are supported, they are more likely to act on their strengths." In my struggle to understand Raquella's behavior, it seemed that despite deficit orientation, despite imposing middle-class values in understanding life in a slum, I did some things right. In trying to recall my interactions with Raquella, I remember that I was very respectful of her, expressed understanding and acceptance of her situation, and openly appreciated her. I focused more on her strengths than on what she did not have. All of these features and qualities are expected of any social work interview. However, in a class-conscious Indian society, where I was introduced as a "Didi" from America, handing over the camera, a valuable possession, to Raquella may have seemed an unusually loving, trusting, and respectful action. My sense is that Raquella was not used to being treated with respect, dignity, and trust by larger Indian society, which I represented. This was a test for me. How far was I willing to go in working with strengths? Raquella, the smart woman that she was, was perhaps not fully satisfied with my talk on strengths. She wanted to test my walk on strengths. I am glad I passed her test. Experiencing good feelings in the brief relationship that I had established with Raquella, she reciprocated with goodwill.

This personal experience with Raquella validated for me Weick's (1992, p. 24) note that "when people's positive capacities are supported, they are more likely to act on their strengths." I want to add that social workers may have to pass tests posed by clients in truly supporting people's capacities. For me, the strengths philosophy is no longer an esoteric concept discussed and debated in the ivory tower of Twente Hall; it is grounded in reality. Were I to work with Raquella in empowering her to move out of poverty, I would emphasize all the positive attributes in her which had enabled her to survive for so long. I would enable her to remember her strengths. Slowly, she would be able to unshackle the chains of oppression overburdening her and realize her dream of a "better home." Similarly, in teaching social work in the class room, I would draw on students' positive experiences with learning so that they could build on their strengths and move forward.

Last, I learned an important lesson I did not and could not have discovered these strengths in Raquella through mere questions or observations—the traditional modes of data collection. Researchers exploring or examining strengths would discover more unidentified strengths in people by creating simulations than through merely interviewing and observing. Social workers could create scenarios that have the potential for ambiguity so that true and so far unidentified strengths would emerge. Additionally, the existing social work literature on strengths does not explicitly discuss truthfulness, honesty, integrity, dignity, and self-respect as strengths. I too had not consciously considered these traits as strengths because they verge on the grounds of morality—often times a very slippery ground. Nonetheless, within the context of severe economic deprivation, choosing to do the right thing exemplifies enormous honesty, integrity, courage, and dignity—towering strengths which deserve attention and celebration in the social work literature.

Sitting many thousands of miles away from Calcutta, I often think of the people I met at Dhobiatalla. I dream of a day, a day when Raquella is sitting comfortably on a rocking chair in a cozy home, far away from the slums of Calcutta, with a grandchild on her lap. Gently rocking, Raquella is telling her grandchild a story. It is a story about how she met me many years back. Pulling the edge of her saree over her head,

Raquella tells her grandchild how she asked that I let her carry the video camera. Then Raquella tells what she did when she had the camera—her joy, her bewilderment, her sense of dignity... upon returning the camera....□

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