

# **“SEVA” FOR THE INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER’S SOUL**

*A GUIDE TO SERVING IN INDIA*

THE PRODUCT OF AN INDICORPS FELLOWSHIP

\*\*\*2003-2004\*\*\*

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August, 2004

## *Acknowledgements*

This handbook is the produce of many hands and many minds. To all who have contributed their time, research, thoughts and advice, I owe a heartfelt thank you. To all who have opened their homes, their kitchens, their medicine cabinets and their arms in an attempt to sustain my well-being as I researched, I am fantastically indebted.

A special thanks to Miriam, Andre, Tobias and Roshini for sharing their perspectives and experiences as international volunteers.

To Neelima Khetan and Deepti Ameta of Seva Mandir, Udaipur, who accommodated me on short notice and gave me full access to their volunteer program, their volunteers, and their personal experiences with international volunteers.

Much of this material stemmed from a NGO workshop that was held in Ahmedabad on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004. The contributions of attending and participating organizations proved central to the substance of this handbook. I express my sincere gratitude to Animal Help Foundation, Center for Environment Education, Delhi Public Schools, Environmental Sanitation Institute, Manav Sadhna, Motibai Devraj Kanyashala Trust, IVolunteer, Pratham, SEWA, Setu Developmental Intervention Centre, Samvedana, and Visamo Kids. I hope that this handbook has done some justice to their participation.

A special thanks to GIVE Foundation who introduced me to the Indian voluntary sector, and supported my first explorations into issues involved in volunteerism. The five months that I spent with them have proved vital to my understanding of volunteer issues in India.

To my Indicorps family: your contributions, support, and care extend far beyond the boundaries of a thank you. To Prarthna for assuming the unenviable task of reading countless drafts of countless documents, and to Roopal and Ami, without whose mung nu pani I may never have made it this far.

To my Manav Sadhna family, whose collective and endless wisdom, gentleness, generosity, and peace have maintained my reason and sense of person for the past four months. Thank you for showing me the true meaning of seva, and allowing me to participate in your magic.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others*

-M.K. Gandhi

Being a volunteer in India can be one of the most difficult and rewarding experiences of your life. Whether you're coming for 6 weeks, 6 months, or an entire year, you are almost certain to find things that frustrate, amaze, challenge, and change you. You may find yourself questioning, and constantly reevaluating, your definitions of "social work" "volunteerism" and "service". Especially for the social servant, India is truly a land that can delight you to the core, break you down, and then rebuild you, stronger and wiser than before. It is a place where change happens slowly, often painfully so, but is also a place where revolutions can start with a simple act of defiance.

The social service sector in India has tremendous potential to be a powerful conduit of social welfare. The number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in this country is growing at an astonishing rate. A 2001 study conducted by the New Delhi based Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) in conjunction with Johns Hopkins University, found an estimated 1.2 million nonprofit organizations operating in India.<sup>1</sup> With the large number and wide variety of NGOs, and a host of social development issues ready to be tackled, India can be a volunteer's paradise. Whether you are interested in women's empowerment, income generation, slum child education, services for the handicapped, rural sanitation or watershed development, you will find a wealth of opportunities to offer your time and skills. However, cultural peculiarities, differences, and misperceptions often make India an extremely demanding land to volunteer in. You may find that things are not always as they seem, and the same situation can appear remarkably different, based on your perspective and attitude.

Though the number of voluntary organizations in India has grown substantially, the popular perception of "volunteerism" as a veritable force for social change is lacking in this country. As such, unlike other parts of the world where volunteering is practically written into the social discourse, India suffers from a sluggish and, in some parts of the country, practically nonexistent volunteer movement. Although India remains welcoming to *international* volunteers, the general perception of volunteerism cuts across geographic boundaries. As an international volunteer, you should be prepared to face this popular perception of your time in India, and to rise above it. With the support and guidance of a good host NGO, the potential for you to effect change is substantial.

One remarkable aspect of a volunteer culture is that the positive relationship between a volunteer and his/her host organization can catalyze tremendous positive change, in both the organization and the volunteer. However, India can be a place where international volunteers and host organizations can find it quite difficult to relate to one another, for reasons other than language. This book is intended to assist the international volunteer in preparing for his/her period of service with a host organization in India. Based on discussions and experience with over thirty international volunteers and over fifty organizations, extensive research on the voluntary sector in India, and examination of various volunteer programs and resources, this handbook is

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<sup>1</sup> The full report of this study can be accessed at [http://www.pria.org/cgi-bin/press/pressrelease1.htm?pr\\_id=8](http://www.pria.org/cgi-bin/press/pressrelease1.htm?pr_id=8).

designed as a tool to prepare the international volunteer for some of the challenges of serving in India. What we hope to provide here is some philosophical insight into and practical information for maximizing your volunteer experience in India.

## **PRE-DEPARTURE**

### **The Personal QUESTions:**

Before you leave for India and start your journey of voluntary service, it is highly worth taking a few moments to ask yourself some questions:

1. Why have I decided to come to India as a volunteer?
2. Why is this appropriate for me at this stage of my life?
3. What am I hoping to gain by serving in India?
4. What does being a volunteer mean to me?
5. What am I expecting from my upcoming experience?
6. What are my perceptions of India and how have they been formed?

Each year, international volunteers of all ages and backgrounds come to India for service, each with his/her own motivations, intentions, and goals. Some come looking for a cultural experience, some come hoping to build their resume through time spent in a developing country, some come looking to perform hardcore service, and still others come for spiritual/religious reasons. Most often, it is some combination of the above that prevails. Whatever your reasons for choosing India and choosing voluntary service, it is important that you consider carefully your reasons for coming, and coming as a volunteer. It will affect the location/NGO that you choose, the relationship that you have with your host organization, and your overall experience. Even if you only have some general, broad idea of “why India, why now”, it will assist you as you plan for your experience abroad.

### **Assess Your Expectations:**

With answers to (or thoughts about) the above questions in mind, it is important to assess your expectations before you arrive in India. For the tourist, India represents the exotic land of snake-charmers, dazzling fabrics, spices, palaces, and religious celebrations. For the individual coming for social work, this third world country can be the land of inequality, poverty, destitution, charity, and tremendous potential. It is no secret that, whatever your purpose for visiting India may be, you will certainly have a picture of what to expect when you arrive in the country. For the social worker, the following expectations are important to consider before you leave for your volunteer experience:

- What kind of experience do I anticipate having? Life-altering?
- Am I expecting to make changes and to contribute positively to the social service sector?
- What kind of support am I expecting to have while in India?
- Do I expect/anticipate any difficulties or challenges?

The exercise of evaluating your expectations is important when you realize that India does not often allow you keep them (see the section on “Changing Expectations” below). If you come with grand expectations, you may find yourself disappointed and frustrated. International volunteers overwhelmingly agree that an open mind, a sense of humor, and zero expectations are the most important things to pack when doing social work in India. A positive attitude and the ability to view problems as challenges to be overcome will serve you well during your stay in India. Tobias, a volunteer from Germany provides this recommendation: “Don't come with too high expectation[s], don't expect to change the world in a few months. Don't come with a superior "Mother Theresa" attitude thinking ‘I want to help th[ese] poor people’. Be open-minded, curious and flexible, learn as much you can, get involved into the issues, try to bring in your own ideas”<sup>2</sup>. Miriam, another volunteer from Germany, offers this as her biggest recommendation to other international volunteers: “get rid of the pictures in your mind”<sup>3</sup>. They will almost certainly change once you arrive in India.

### **Finding an Organization that Suits You:**

You’ve asked yourself the personal questions, assessed your expectations, and are ready for the next step: finding an organization to volunteer with. The relationship with your host organization is often the key to having a productive and enjoyable experience in India. As mentioned earlier, there are over one million non-governmental organizations working in a variety of causes all over the country. The large numbers exist, in part, because of the ease with which NGO registration can be obtained, and the lack of enforced regulations for the voluntary sector. Though many organizations are registered, the PRIA survey found that, in Delhi alone, 30% of nonprofits are not legally incorporated.<sup>4</sup> As such, it has become difficult to identify the honest NGOs from the suspicious ones. There are efforts afoot to establish rules and regulations for the voluntary sector (see [www.credibilityalliance.org](http://www.credibilityalliance.org)), but no uniform system of evaluating NGOs is currently practiced.

With that said, do not be afraid of getting stuck with a suspicious NGO. If you do a bit of homework ahead of time, you should have no trouble finding an NGO that is a) sincere in its efforts and b) a place where you will want to spend your time.

Below are some helpful tips on how to find an NGO that is right for your needs and interests. You will find that, if you search actively and intelligently for NGOs, the suspicious ones will naturally be selected out.

- Do some basic Internet research to see what has been written about the organization.
- If you have contacts where the NGO is located, ask for some feedback.
- Contact resources such as IndianNGOs, ProPoor, Karmayogi, (in the Mumbai region) GIVE Foundation, Charities Aid Foundation, Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), AISEC, American India Foundation (AIF), Indicorps, ActionAid, CRY, etc. to see if they have any information.

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication on May 13, 2004

<sup>3</sup> Personal conversation on June 14, 2004

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.pria.org/cgi-bin/press/pressrelease1.htm?pr\\_id=8](http://www.pria.org/cgi-bin/press/pressrelease1.htm?pr_id=8).

- After establishing initial contact with the organization, ask yourself the following questions:
  - Does the organization seem interested in you volunteering with them?
  - Are they willing to answer questions that you have?
  - Are they willing to discuss their programs and activities openly?

When having even basic communication with potential NGOs, it is important to remember that organizations in India often do not have the luxury of instant communication. Therefore, pay attention to the *quality* and not the quantity of the contact. Most often, the first impression and/or feel that you get from an organization will be the right one. Trust your instincts, use your judgment, and go with the organization that feels right.

### Location:

Geographic location is another important factor to consider when you are deciding where and with which organization to volunteer. While the quality of your experience depends in a large degree on the organization that you choose to serve with, your geographic location will also figure prominently in your experience. A fantastic location can often offset a sub-par NGO relationship, and vice versa. Often, volunteers who do not feel a strong pull towards a particular organization or social cause, will make a decision based on a physical location that they are drawn to. In addition, you should think carefully about whether you wish to volunteer in an urban or a rural area. The differences between urban and rural India are remarkable, often to the point of disbelief. Living and volunteering in both areas has its own set of challenges, and a unique set of rewards. If you are unfamiliar with the different geographic locations of India, it is well worth your time to do some basic research and see what appeals to you. Below is some general information to help you start the process.

### *Urban*

Urban areas can be divided into two categories: 1) Large cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkatta, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, etc. and 2) Smaller cities such as Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Lucknow, Pune, Aurangabad, etc. In larger cities, you will find most, if not all, of the amenities that are available in the West. Movie theatres with a variety contemporary films, modern, shopping centers, restaurants, fancy mobile phones, sports clubs, entertainment facilities, nightlife, and high-speed Internet cafés are just a few of the items that you will find. These cities have a large variety of international food and products, through Western items are often much more costly than local goods. In the large cities, Western clothing is popular for both men and women, and gender relations are significantly more relaxed than in rural India (see the section on “Gender Relations” below).

In contemporary urban India, there is an appreciation that borders on a fascination with Western (mainly American) culture. As such, the functional language in many of these large cities is English. Many conferences and business dealings are conducted in English, and it is not uncommon to hear two youngsters joking around in perfectly Anglicized English. In addition to language, Western products and goods are often viewed as a sign of status in the middle and upper classes. Therefore, do not be surprised to see a crowded McDonald’s, GAP T-shirts, and

images of the latest American pop stars around you. Much like big cities around the world, the pace of life can be fast and furious at times.

A unique aspect of big Indian cities is the juxtaposition of crippling poverty and destitution with this exclusive lifestyle. The largest slum in Asia is located in Mumbai, not far from areas of wealth and luxury. As such, you will find a terrifically high number of NGOs in the big cities, many working for these marginalized populations. Areas around Kolkatta and New Delhi are famous for their slum dwellings, their homeless communities, and their ailing individuals. The sheer abjectness can be overwhelming at times. If you are working amongst these communities, you should be prepared for some often shocking and heart-wrenching sights.

As can be imagined, big cities offer tremendous opportunities for social development. Some of the more common NGO fields in large cities are: slum education, vocational training, special needs education, handicapped services, and more specialized health care services such as leprosy and polio relief. You should consult with your host organization in these big cities to determine how much field work you will be doing. If you will be moving among the marginalized communities, the standards of dress, behavior, gender relations, physical and expressive freedom will most certainly be unlike those in the rest of the city. Initially, these different standards and extreme juxtapositions may seem disjointed, but remember that you have the freedom to define your lifestyle and to choose how and where you wish to spend your free time (see the section on “Community Immersion” below).

As happens with most big cities around the world, you should pay attention to your safety and personal well-being in Indian cities. Especially for women, large cities can be troublesome if you are not familiar with the scene or the culture. If you choose to volunteer in a big city, make sure that you get well acquainted with the different areas, local means of travel, emergency systems, and general hours kept. Ask your host organization or your local community for advice on staying safe in your particular locale.

#### *Smaller Cities:*

Smaller cities such as Ahmedabad, Jaipur, and Pune have many of the same amenities and products as bigger cities, but tend to be more conservative than their larger counterparts. Usually, while Western style clothing can be seen in certain areas, most of the populace still wears the traditional Indian dress. In addition, while Western products are becoming the norm in large cities, they are still a novelty in the small cities. As such, if you bring technological devices (computers, cameras, etc), a supply of Western food products, and the like, expect to attract some attention.

While English is rapidly disseminating through the small cities, the majority of the populace will still speak the regional language and, in many cases (except in the South), they will also speak or understand some Hindi. If you plan on being in a smaller city, it is recommended to engage in some form of language study, either before or immediately after your arrival (see the section on “language” below).

Although smaller cities are generally safer than larger ones, you should be aware that, as a foreigner, you may attract more (sometimes unwanted) attention in the smaller cities. To minimize the amount of attention that you invite, we suggest that you adopt the conservative, local style of dress, and pay close attention to what the accepted standards of behavior are. “Blending in” with your community in smaller cities can ensure that the focus remains on your work and your service, and *not* on your person.

### *Rural*

Though the cities and suburbs of India are often the most noticeable, the vast majority of India still resides in villages and rural areas. Despite the proliferation of NGOs in the rural areas, much of the region remains underdeveloped. As such, opportunities to volunteer in India’s villages are plentiful. Focus areas range from basic sanitation to watershed development to sustainable agriculture, rural education, and everything in between. In the rural areas, it is not uncommon to find NGOs working in many or most of these areas, or on “total development” or “total upliftment” schemes. As a general rule, cities offer more chances for NGO specialization and concentration, while rural NGOs are often spread across several fields. While this may offer more varied opportunities for a volunteer, it also requires the volunteer to be open minded and ready to serve in different areas, if needed.

In the rural areas, you will most certainly either need a strong grasp of the local language, or have someone with you that knows the local language. While it is possible to “get by” with Hindi or another major regional language, if you wish to effect change, it is highly recommended that you make an effort to learn the local language either before or during your stay. However, with that said, many rural organizations have a head office in a semi-rural or small urban area where language will be less of an issue. If you clearly and honestly communicate your language abilities ahead of time, you and your host organization should be able to design a project that benefits everyone involved.

As mentioned earlier, there are many ways to add value to rural organizations. If you have decided to volunteer in the rural areas, you should be prepared to do tasks other than hands-on field work. Field work generally requires a strong command of the local language, and local village dialects can be difficult even for the NGO employees. In addition, rural NGOs generally do not need help with hands-on, physical work; they can recruit (and employ) plenty of local village individuals for this type of job. Often, rural NGOs lack certain systems of administration and documentation that they need outside help with. With a solid command of the English language and basic documentation skills, you could be of tremendous service to a rural NGO. If you desire fieldwork as well, there are usually ways to incorporate it. Talk to your host organization and inform them of your desire to spend some time in the field, and it can generally be accommodated.

In the rural areas, your community will be acutely aware of everything that you do. As a foreigner, you will be viewed with curiosity and awe by many, with disdain and suspicion by some, and with respect and reverence by still others. It will depend on their level of exposure to foreigners, and is something that is worth asking your host organization about. However, regardless of exposure levels, you will still be the subject of much investigation. Mostly, it is

harmless curiosity, but at times it can seem like an invasion of personal space. When volunteering in rural areas, it is highly important to observe the cultural norms and behavior. As your NGO can tell you, it can be quite difficult to build trust and respect in rural communities (though this can apply in select urban and semi-urban areas as well), since they generally have little contact with the outside. As a rule, assimilating with the local community will help you build the trust and respect that you need to do social work with and among them.

### **Establish Communication Lines**

After you decide on a particular geographic location, cause, and/or group of NGOs, you should begin establishing communication with them. It will be very important to your experience to have a high level of communication with potential NGOs, and eventually your host NGO, before you leave for India. However, as mentioned earlier, you should also remember that not everyone in India (and certainly not all non-profits!) may enjoy the same access to email and the Internet as you do. Although technology is improving and spreading quickly throughout the country, it is still considered somewhat of a luxury to have one's own computer and Internet account. Thus, do not be discouraged by what seems to be poor email correspondence with NGOs in India. Instead, look at the quality of the content that they provide. Before you leave, you should have established some of the following:

- **Housing:** If you need housing, make sure to communicate this to your NGO. Be sure to ask what your living situation will be like.
- **Money:** What expenses should you expect to pay out of your pocket? What is the NGO supposed to cover? Will you be receiving a stipend to cover living necessities?
- **Packing:** Does the nature of what you will be doing require any special gear that you should bring from your own country? (i.e. laptop computer, digital camera)
- **Your Project:** If you have been selected for a particular project or task with your host NGO, it is worth asking for some additional details. How much time can you expect to spend in the field? Will you need Indian language skills to perform your duties? (see the below section on "language")

Although how early you wish to contact organization is entirely up to you, we suggest establishing contact at least a month before you arrive. Rohini, a volunteer from America, began contacting NGOs nearly 8 months before coming to India.<sup>5</sup> The high responsiveness of her final choice, as opposed to the lack of response and, more importantly, a lack of enthusiasm showed by the first few NGOs, was a deciding factor for her. Though it is important to have lowered expectations in terms of instantaneous responses and lengthy email/phone conversations, you should not sacrifice in terms of NGO interest and/or enthusiasm. Again, trust your instincts. If you feel like you will not be comfortable at a particular NGO, then you are probably right.

### **Language Study**

Once you have chosen a particular location and/or NGO to volunteer with, you should consider what language skills will be necessary for you to implement your project. As mentioned earlier,

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<sup>5</sup> Personal conversation on June 15, 2004

ask your host organization if you will need special language skills before arriving in India. Although English usage is spreading and increasing at an astonishing rate, it is still a language of the middle-to-upper classes. One of the most popular suggestions of international volunteers is to *learn the language*. Though the depth of your language involvement will obviously depend on your particular setting (i.e. you are MUCH more likely to need language skills if located in a village or a small town), it is advisable to have basic working knowledge of the regional language before you arrive. The slightest bit of conversational fluency will assist you in everyday activities such as traveling and shopping, and can go a long way in helping you get a fair price!

If possible, pick up some study materials ahead of time and look through them. For learning Hindi, Teach Yourself Hindi is a good resource material that you can use if you anticipate needing Hindi speaking skills. All Indian languages are phonetic and, as such, are generally made easier with some knowledge of the script. Though it may be difficult at first, it is popularly considered one of the quickest ways to learn an Indian language. In addition, consider picking up some movies in the language that you will need, if they are available. For example, though you may not understand a word of Hindi, watching a Hindi film will introduce you to some of the different sounds and speaking habits that will be important to your language study.

While you are in India, make every effort to immerse yourself in the local language. You can set goals for yourself such as keeping 1-2 hours per day when you only speak your Indian language. In addition, though many people around you may speak English or may *try* to speak English with you, encourage them to converse in your local language. As with all language study, the most important thing is to not be afraid of making mistakes. People are generally forgiving and understanding when it comes to language mistakes. In addition, making attempts at conversing in the local language will certainly gain you additional respect and trust in your communities.

## **AFTER ARRIVAL**

### **“Seva”**

Many volunteers who come to India believe that they will be doing lots of hands-on, one-on-one and “feel-good” work in the tradition of Mother Theresa. However, the nature of service in India is changing as the country gets increasingly developed and increasingly familiar with technological advancements. Especially in the last few years, many social organizations have moved from a small and focused approach to a larger, broader, and research/sector oriented approach. Members of large NGOs tend to travel more, throughout India and abroad, to see the latest developments elsewhere. It is important to understand that both the localized AND the comprehensive approaches are necessary components of “seva”.

As an international volunteer with generalized skills and interests, you may find that you are most needed for tasks like documentation, Internet research, analysis, report drafting, fundraising, etc. It is important to remember that, while this may not be your ideal volunteer situation, you could be filling a tremendous need of the organization. Most NGOs have local hands that they can use and employ for everyday fieldwork (with over 1 billion individuals in

this country there are plenty of hands to use), but they often need people with good administrative, organizational, and (English) communicative skills to fulfill equally important functions in their organization (see the section on rural locations above). Even if you find yourself in an office 5 days a week, remember that this is still service and can still be tremendously satisfying and gratifying. As Neelima Khetan, executive director of Seva Mandir in Udaipur states, “there are many different ways of doing Seva”, and not all of them are glamorous.<sup>6</sup>

Volunteering in India can be particularly frustrating because of this changing nature of Seva. Andre, a volunteer from the UK, came to India and expected to be living in a village and doing hands-on work with the local populations. When he arrived at his organization, he discovered that language and unfamiliarity with the nuances of rural development posed a substantial barrier to this agenda. As a result, he spent his time in the organization’s head office, helping design an evaluation and impact assessment system for their various programs and activities. After some initial frustration, at times intense, he came to the simple realization that “I should be where I’m most useful”. Over the past nine months he has contributed substantially to the organization and the new impact assessment system, and has remained so satisfied that he has delayed his return to the UK on two separate occasions!<sup>7</sup>

### Changing Expectations

Expectations and their management is a central concept of a positive volunteer-NGO relationship. At a workshop that was held in Ahmedabad on June 7, 2004, the following question was posed to the participating NGOs: What are your expectations of a volunteer? What do you think a volunteer expects of you?

The findings are as below:

<b>NGO Expectations</b>	<b>Volunteer Expectations of NGO</b>
Volunteer will meet a need of the organization	Volunteers expect to make an impact on the organization
Volunteer will display the credentials that they put on paper	Volunteers expect personal satisfaction
Volunteers will add value to the organization	Volunteers expect that the organization will give them a certain amount of freedom AND support
Volunteers will provide fresh blood and new ideas	Volunteers expect that the organization will communicate with them.
Volunteers will be interested in the subject material of the organization	Volunteers have a picture in their mind of what their experience will be like
Volunteers will be sensitive and committed	Volunteers expect to change the world
	Volunteers have an idea of service as “glamorous”

<sup>6</sup> Personal conversation on June 15, 2004

<sup>7</sup> Personal conversation on June 15, 2004

As you can probably imagine, there is a danger when the expectations of the NGO and the expectations of the volunteer are different. NGOs have a certain idea of the kind of individual that will be coming for volunteerism, and volunteers have a certain idea of what their experience will be like. When these expectations are changed or not met, it can cause stress and tension for both parties. Sample NGO responses on how to avoid an expectation clash are as follows:

- The volunteer has to understand the organization. If they do not achieve success in their particular project, they should adapt to the circumstances.
- The organization can create projects and opportunities that meet the interests of the volunteer. These should be carefully and thoroughly defined.
- The organization also needs to be flexible and to adapt to changing circumstances.
- The organization should understand that the volunteer can still be adding value even if his/her particular project does not proceed according to the plan.
- Both parties should understand that it is a give and take relationship.
- It is okay to reject a potential volunteer if there is nothing for him/her to do. This avoids a voluntary experience being a waste of both the volunteer's and the NGO's time.

The conclusion that stemmed from this exercise is that the dangers posed by clashing expectations can be avoided, in a large degree, if both sides clearly communicate what they are expecting from the other in advance. When you are talking to potential host organizations, be straight with them about the kind of support you are expecting, the hours that you anticipate work, the amount of free time you expect to have, etc. For example, if you expect to have weekends free to travel, communicate this to your NGO.

Though it is difficult to not have *some* picture in your mind of what your experience will be like, realize that these pictures may change, sometimes significantly, after you arrive in India. Miriam expected to feel lonely in a new country, and expected to have plenty of personal time and space. Neither of these happened, and Miriam quickly found herself a member of a "little family", surrounded by people at all hours. In addition, she states that she was not even aware of certain expectations that she had until they changed. For this reason, Miriam recommends coming with as open a mind as possible.<sup>8</sup>

Andre arrived in India with a certain perception of development and how it should proceed. When he began working with his NGO on their comprehensive evaluation system, he encountered approaches that differed, sometimes quite substantially, from his own. He wondered why the NGO staff members did not proceed in a manner that made perfect sense to him. This caused some initial frustration and disturbance, and caused him to question his decision to stay and volunteer. However, Andre soon learned to view development through a different lens and from the perspective of his NGO community. Though it was a difficult lesson, he learned that his ideals of development would not work in India, and he would have to adjust to the local approaches. Once he attained this realization, his project proceeded much more smoothly, and he began to observe successes.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Personal conversation on June 14, 2004

<sup>9</sup> Personal conversation on June 15, 2004

## Maintaining Communication Lines

Conversation with both NGOs and international volunteers indicate that communication is a key factor in maintaining a healthy relationship. Being such a basic and fundamental issue, it is often taken for granted. Both the NGO and the international volunteer can be comfortable and even adept at communicating in their home environment, but struggle at communication across physical, cultural, and contextual boundaries. During our June NGO workshop, we posed the following questions to the participating NGOs: What are important items to communicate to your volunteer? What should the volunteer communicate to their organization?

The response was as follows:

<b>NGO to Volunteer Communication</b>	<b>Volunteer to NGO Communication</b>
Limitations and constraints of the organization: time, money, etc.	Focus of their stay and objectives for volunteering
Values of the organization	Honest level of their skills
Expectations that the NGO has of the volunteer	Time commitment to organization
Everyday framework: What will day-to-day life be like?	Personal issues/difficulties when they interfere with your work
Logistical details: small things are important too!	Resources that they need in terms of housing, money, food, etc.
Cultural differences: i.e. gender issues in India	
Environment/surroundings details: food, appropriate clothing, activities outside of NGO life, etc.	
The terms of the relationship after the volunteer leaves the organization: sustainability is paramount	

Further discussion and additional input from international volunteers produced the following conclusions:

- While verbal communication is extremely important, some things can be communicated non-verbally. For example, conveying the “work culture” of the organization was given high importance. The volunteer should be made to understand the kind of work environment that is desirable and how he/she fits into it. A volunteer should not feel that he/she can go shopping all day if the host NGO disapproves. By informing and demonstrating to the volunteer that time commitments are of serious value to the organization, this type of discomfort can be avoided. However, if there are different standards for the volunteer, this should also be communicated. If work timings are flexible, this should also be discussed.
- There should be some level of “befriending” the volunteer, to the extent that is culturally and contextually appropriate. Especially with international volunteers who may feel lonely, a friendly face within the NGO is appreciated. Though a relationship of dependency should be avoided, greater familiarity and friendship with the volunteer can smooth over many issues. Friendship also creates an environment that is more conducive to communication and discussion of issues. When you sense that something is troubling or disturbing the volunteer

and it is affecting his/her work, it is best to approach as a friend and as someone concerned about the volunteer's welfare.

- **Job Description:** The tasks, duties, and responsibilities of the volunteer should be communicated. What is he/she expected to do? Are there certain goals/targets that the NGO expects the volunteer to achieve? What things fall outside of this job description? Within this, it is important that the volunteer knows which tasks are of highest priority and which ones are added bonuses. Thus, if the volunteer is stretched for time, he/she can do that which is most important to the organization.
- **Community Involvement:** NGOs should encourage their volunteers to get involved in their local communities. This will often help the volunteers be more effective in their work and will also provide them with a small support system outside of the NGO. In addition, international volunteers can see and experience cultural issues like gender sensitivity by interacting with their communities.
- **Organizations should not be afraid to approach their volunteers with issues that they have.** They should feel comfortable talking to the volunteer if they do not approve of something that they are doing. It is best to talk about issues early before they become larger and more intense.

Based on this information, be attuned to what and how you should be communicating with your organization. Remember, most issues can be solved or prevented with open and honest discussions, preferably on a regular basis. Even if it is five minutes per day, it can go a long way in maintaining a healthy relationship.

### **Measuring Success**

One thing that can be frustrating about the Indian voluntary sector and about Indian culture in general is that *nothing* seems to run on time. There is a joke that India runs on Indian Standard Time (IST); anywhere from 15 minutes to 2 hours behind schedule. The pace of work and business is generally relaxed, with a relatively stress-free and calm atmosphere prevailing. In this relaxed environment, you will find people investing time in fostering and maintaining personal relationships. In India, it is not uncommon to find business deals made over a cup of afternoon tea, government offices that are closed as their employees go home for lunch, shops that do not open until 10 or 11am, political alliances that are formed or broken over leisurely dinners, and a working year with up to two months of religious and other holidays. Coming from a Western environment, the relaxed pace of life and business can be difficult to get used to at first, and a common complaint of international volunteers is "*things just move so slowly!*"

It is often difficult for international volunteers to measure progress or successes in their projects because of this relaxed pace. Though it can be challenging to stay with a project or an organization that seems to be moving slowly, it is important to remember the perspective that you are coming from. When you cease looking at your experience in terms of quantitative accomplishments, progress, and impact, and start noticing the qualitative effects that you are making, you will be less frustrated with apparently slow advancement. As you become more and more ingrained in your project, your organization, and the Indian NGO sector, you will realize that the most important successes often cannot be quantified. They exist in the one life that you have impacted, a feeling that you have generated in a community, or an attitudinal shift that you

have helped foster. When you have begun to measure successes in this manner, your experience can assume new significance. As Andre states, “It’s very hard to see the impact of what you’re doing” but there is a very different kind of satisfaction that comes in the end.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, there are certain factors that make it difficult to achieve quick and obvious success. As an international volunteer, you may need anywhere from one week to one month just to get accustomed to India, to your new surroundings, to the NGO, the local language, etc. With all of these additional issues, quantifying your impact can be especially frustrating. Deepti Ameta, volunteer coordinator at Seva Mandir, advises her international volunteers to look at their experience in terms of learning curve. She helps them stay positive when they feel like they are not “getting a lot done”, and reminds them of the tremendous amounts that they are learning.<sup>11</sup> Once again, when you place yourself in this frame of mind, you will be less bothered by a lack of quantifiable results, and can even realize a different and often more internally satisfying sense of advancement.

### **Community Immersion**

As your NGO can probably tell you, community immersion, while not a necessary requirement of volunteerism, can certainly assist you in a) having a deeper cultural experience and b) maximizing your volunteering efforts. Almost any program that involves a cultural exchange, volunteerism, or a student exchange in India recommends that you immerse yourself in your community. Some have measures to ensure this, such as home stays and organized community activities. If your living community and your working community are the same, you will need to pay particular attention to the relationship that you maintain with your neighbors and the surrounding populations, for obvious reasons. Below are some suggestions that we have gathered for maintaining good relations with your community:

- Be sensitive of the hours that are generally kept, and try to observe them. In India, it is not the norm for girls to come home late in the evenings. In certain areas, girls come home as early as 6pm! While this may seem odd or even restrictive, if you ask your community for the reasoning behind this, you will almost certainly get a satisfactory response.
- Be aware of appropriate gender relations (see below) and try to observe them
- Actively engage in conversations (even when you don’t know the language!) and participate in community activities.
- Try to mimic the clothing style of your community. Remember that, though they may not say anything, people may have a certain perception of you and your intentions based on the clothing that you choose to wear.
- Have respect for their belief systems and values. You may find things that you disagree with, which can be difficult sometimes, but remember that they may not agree with everything that you stand for either. It is worth talking to them about these issues, and exploring your similarities and differences.

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<sup>10</sup> Personal conversation June 15, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Personal conversation on June 14, 2004.

- Observe how the community perceives and approaches everyday activities. For example, if you see everyone sweeping his or her doorstep in the morning, you may want to follow suit. The simple act of sweeping your own doorstep can show them that you respect their values (in this case, cleanliness) and wish to integrate with them. This will assist you in gaining the trust and respect that are needed to effect change in a community.

## **Cultural Immersion**

Cultural immersion, while not a required component of your volunteer experience, will also assist you in gaining the trust and respect of your community. Cultural immersion involves not only integrating with your community, but also opening yourself up to new and different ways of looking at yourself and the world around you. While it can occur on the outside in terms of dress and behavior, it can also occur internally through shifts in perspective and attitude. Listed below are some of the items that figure into cultural immersion in India.

- Try not to share too much of your personal life initially, and be wary about discussing sensitive topics such as romance and money.
- Do not be too disturbed by the lack of personal space. It is often the result of honest curiosity or, more often, genuine affection.
- Learn how your community verbalizes and demonstrates respect, and practice this. In India, respecting elders is of paramount importance.
- Be aware of the local food and eating norms. For example, using your left hand to eat is considered “dirty” in many parts of India, and leaving food on your plate can be viewed as disrespectful.
- Observe what the bathing and washing norms are in your area, and practice them.
- In India, guests are often considered incarnations of God and, as such, are shown the highest level of hospitality. If you host people at your house, be sure to show them due reverence and attention.
- Books and instruments of learning are also viewed as sacred. Therefore, touching these items with your feet and sometimes even placing them on the floor is taboo as it shows disrespect.
- “Please” and “Thank You” are rarely heard in any Indian language. You will find that there are other subtle yet powerful ways of communicating these sentiments. Don’t be surprised if people look at you funny if you say “thank you” for simple things. In fact, they may even scold you; such things are generally not necessary between friends.
- Be aware that cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption can create problems, sometimes substantial, depending on your host community and NGO. In many parts of India, alcoholism is a main contributor to social evils and injustices and, as such, is viewed with extreme distaste. If you choose to engage in these activities, be sensitive to who is around you, and remember that word travels fast. Know that the consumption of alcohol, in certain communities, can damage your credibility as a social servant, and can damage the image of your NGO as an organization committed to eradicating social evils.

## **Gender Relations:**

Though the norm is slowly changing in the big cities of India, gender relations are still highly conservative and restrictive. In the smaller cities and rural areas, you will not find men and women mixing and talking freely, or moving around together much. Dating certainly doesn't happen in most places or, if it does, it is kept more or less underground. If you are coming from a culture where gender relations are more relaxed you may find some difficulties adjusting to your new situation. However, once you experience the culture for a short while, you will find that there are ways of communicating affection between genders that does not involve much physical contact or closeness. For example, a warm clasp of the hands or a smile can often communicate what is necessary.

Observing appropriate gender relations can also lessen the amount of unwanted attention that you may receive. Foreign women are often the target of sexual harassment due to misperceptions that stem from the portrayal of women in foreign movies and television shows, among others. As such, Indian men often feel comfortable socializing with foreign women as they cannot do so with Indian women. Though it can be harmless, know that it will also affect how the community views you.

If you find yourself in an uncomfortable position, do not hesitate to draw attention to it. Public embarrassment and shame can often be the quickest way to stop harassment, unwanted touching, etc. Do not be afraid to assert yourself and speak up, even if you do not know the language. The tone of your voice and your facial expressions can communicate enough information for the perpetrator and everyone around you to understand the situation.

Be aware that you may be sending out certain signals without being aware of it. Since relationships and dating still occur covertly, an entire clandestine system of communicating sexual interest has developed. For example, accepting a drink from someone of the opposite sex can serve as an agreement for additional relations. Inviting someone into your bedroom, even to view photographs or conduct tutorials can have unintended consequences. Extra touches, prolonged eye contact, and seemingly meaningless outings can all connote an interest that may not exist on your part. To avoid uncomfortable situations, it is recommended that you mimic the behavior of same sexed members of your community, and err on the side of caution.

## **And Off You Go...**

This handbook is intended to serve as a guidebook for you to maximize your volunteer experience in India. While several practical aspects of your relationship with your host organization, your expectations and their management, your choice of location and cause, and immersion in your surroundings are covered, remember that there are countless internal aspects of "seva" that are impossible to prepare for, and that are often learned during the experience itself. Volunteering in India is truly a journey by and for the soul, a path that will be full of challenges and difficulties, but one that can have rewards of a type that you may have never encountered. As Shruti Patel, a volunteer from America states:

I am learning to be a student of people and their lives. I am finding an earnest desire to understand how people tick, to understand even just a small piece of the human condition. Most importantly, I am trying to understand what makes people true, noble, content, and hopeful, despite an overwhelming amount of moral degradation around them and a life full of small, but significant struggles in their day-to-day life.

I am glad to have the occasional doubts and confusion, because each time I am inspired again and reminded of India's own servants. This process has established a firmer, clearer, better-founded, truer conviction than before. That is the most critical foundation for my work, otherwise I stand nowhere<sup>12</sup>

Happy trails, trials, and triumphs...

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<sup>12</sup> Full column of Shruti Patel's report is accessible at [www.indicorps.org](http://www.indicorps.org)

## Appendix 1

### INDIA: GENERAL INFORMATION<sup>13</sup>

**Geography:** India is a large, triangular-shaped Asian country between the Himalayas in the north and the Indian Ocean in the south. Bordered by Pakistan to the north-west, China, Nepal and Bhutan to the north, and Bangladesh and Myanmar to the east. Sri Lanka is off its southern tip. Wildlife in India has been hunted by the British and the Indian rajahs. Large-scale forest clearance for agriculture, pesticides and the increasing population have had disastrous effects on India's environment. Only about 10% is still forest cover, and only 4% is within 350 parks, sanctuaries and reserves. India's fauna lists lions, tigers, leopards, panthers, elephants and rhinoceroses, as well as deer, antelope, wild buffaloes, massive Indian bisons, shaggy sloth bears, striped hyenas, wild pigs, jackals and Indian wild dogs. Then there are the monkeys and reptiles such as the king cobras, pythons, crocodiles, large freshwater tortoises and monitor lizards as well as the diverse bird life including large hornbills, serpent eagles, fishing owls, and the elegant national bird, the peacock.

**Climate:** The climate varies greatly, from arid deserts to cool wet highlands.

Basically there is a three-season year - the hot, the wet and the cool. The heat starts on the northern plains around February. By April it becomes unbearable. Monsoons start in May with high humidity, short rainstorms and violent electrical storms. The rains begin down south about 1st June and sweep north to cover the whole country by early July. Monsoons don't really cool things, but give relief - especially to farmers. The main monsoon ends around October and India's northern cities become crisp at night in December. The south-eastern coast is affected by the short and very wet north-eastern monsoon, from mid-October to the end of December. In the far south, it never gets cool, but temperatures are comfortably warm rather than hot at this time.

**Culture:** Religion is an important part of Indian life. India is one of the few countries in which the social and religious structures define the nation's identity, and have continued to do so for at least 4000 years despite invasions, persecution, European colonialism and political upheaval. Change is inevitably taking place due to modern technology but essentially rural India remains much the same as it has for thousands of years. Indian art is basically religious in its themes so that its appreciation requires at least some background knowledge of the country's faiths. Classical Indian dance, Hindu temple architecture and sculpture, military and urban architecture of the Mughals, miniature painting, and mesmeric Indian music are the highlights. The cinema is important so that the Indian film industry, centred on Bombay, is one of the largest and most glamorous in the world. Although vegetarians are everywhere. In the north more spices and less chilli in the foods; and grains or breads are more popular than rice. In the south there is more vegetarian food; more rice is eaten, and the curries tend to be hotter. While down south you do not use eating utensils but just scoop the food with the fingers of only your right hand.

**Currency:** Indian rupee. You are not allowed to bring Indian currency into the country, or take it with you when you leave.

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<sup>13</sup> Material taken directly from Involvement Volunteers Association Inc (IVI). Please see [www.volunteering.org.au](http://www.volunteering.org.au)

**Electricity:** 230-240V, 50 HZ

**Government:** Democratic

**Health risks:** Cholera, dengue fever, dysentery, hepatitis, malaria, meningitis (trekking areas only) and typhoid. Many larger cities are highly polluted so volunteers with respiratory ailments may need to take precautionary measures with them. Consult your family doctor well before departure.

**Languages:** There's no 'Indian' language, so English is widely spoken, but with only about 3% of Indians having a good knowledge of the language. Eighteen other languages are officially recognised and over 1600 minor languages and dialects are listed.

**People:** 72% Indo-Aryan, 25% Dravidian, 3% Mongoloid

**Population:** 968 million

**Religion:** 82% Hindu, 11% Muslim, 2% Christian, 2% Sikh, 0.7% Buddhist and 0.7% Jain. Hinduism, is the largest religion in Asia and one of the world's oldest extant faiths. Buddhism was founded in northern India in about 500 BC, but was gradually reabsorbed into Hinduism. The Jain religion emerged at the same time as Buddhism. Today there are large numbers of Tibetan Buddhists living in exile in northern India. There are more than 100 million Muslims in India, making it one of the largest Muslim nations on earth. Islam is the dominant religion in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Sikhs number 18 million. The religion was originally intended to bring together the best of Hinduism and Islam. Sikhs are opposed to caste distinctions.

**Time:** GMT plus five hours 30 minutes

**Visas:** Everybody needs a visa. Terms range from 15 days to six months, single and multiple-entry versions. Only some visas are extendable. Be careful to check whether your visa is valid from the date of entry or the date of issue.

**Warning:** Due to border disputes and civil unrest in many places, volunteers are advised to contact their Diplomatic offices to be brought up to date with the latest reports and advice on where, when, how and permit requirements.

**Weights & measures:** Metric (see conversion table)

**Money & Costs:** The rupee is fully convertible. In cities you can change most major foreign currencies and brands of travellers' cheques. Save hassles, stick to US\$ or GB£, in either Thomas Cook or American Express travellers cheques. Wise to bring a couple of different brands of cheques and in different currencies as some branches of some banks may refuse to handle a brand of travellers' cheques or either US\$ or GB£. When changing money at a bank, a lot of time is needed so the secret is to change money in large amounts as infrequently as possible and preferably in big banks in big cities. You should be given an 'encashment certificate' when you

change money at a bank or an official moneychanger. Some hotels insist on sighting an encashment certificate before accepting payment in Indian rupees. Staying in India more than four months, you'll need to keep a handful of these certificates to get income tax clearance.

Credit cards are widely accepted in Indian cities and larger towns. Particularly Visa, MasterCard, American Express and Diners Club can also be used to get cash advances in rupees. The Bank of Baroda is reputed to be the best bank for such transactions. Currency notes circulate far longer than in other countries and the small notes become very tatty so you may find occasionally that a ripped or grubby note may be refused. You can change old notes for new ones at most banks or save them and use them as tips. Don't accept grubby notes from shop owners as change. If you stay in simple private hotels with room and a bathroom, a varied diet, and only occasional 1st class rail travel for long journeys, costs will be around US\$20-25 a day. Tipping is virtually unknown in India. Baksheesh, on the other hand, a term which encompasses tipping and a lot more besides, is widespread. You 'tip' in India not so much for good service but in order to get things done. Judicious baksheesh will often open closed doors, find missing letters and perform other small miracles. In tourist restaurants or hotels a 10% service charge is often added to bills. In smaller places, where tipping is optional, you need only tip a few rupees, not a percentage of the bill.

**Getting There & Getting Around:** The major international airports are Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay), though international flights also arrive in Calcutta and Chennai (Madras). The most popular overland routes between India and Nepal go through Sunauli from Delhi to Kathmandu and Birganj from Calcutta. For Bangladesh it is fairly easy to travel between Calcutta and Dhaka overland. The Indian Railways system is legendary and Indian rail travel is unlike any other sort of travel on earth. At times, uncomfortable and frustrating, but an integral part of the Indian travel experience. You need to learn the key points of Indian train etiquette as quickly as possible, otherwise you will find yourself hopelessly attempting to defend your own private space. You will be advised by your 'host' as there are a number of different classes and different trains. You will want express or mail trains, and when booking your tickets, take advantage of the tourist quota allotment which makes it easier to reserve a seat. Buses can be good or bad, but often with a choice of 'ordinary, express, semi-luxe, deluxe, deluxe air-con and even deluxe sleeper buses' on the main routes. Private buses usually faster, more expensive and more comfortable than Government buses on many routes and can make a lot of sense on longer trips. Bus travel is usually crowded, cramped, slow and uncomfortable; with a mad scramble to get on board and get a seat. Local transport includes buses, taxis, auto-rickshaws, cycle-rickshaws and tongas (horse-drawn carriages). Taxis may have meters, but don't expect them to be working. Three-wheeled auto-rickshaws are generally half the price of a taxi but remember your health from the inhalation of diesel fumes. Be sure to agree on a fare beforehand.

## Appendix 2

### INDIA: INFORMATION FOR TRAVELERS<sup>14</sup>

#### PASSPORT AND VISA

- Make sure that you have a valid passport that will not expire while you are in India. If you do not have a passport, it will take at least 4-6 weeks to secure one. Consult the U.S. Department of State for more information.
- VISA: There are several types of visas that are available for India, depending on your citizenship, intended length of stay in India, and nature of work while in the country. Consult the website of the nearest Indian Embassy for information on which type of visa will be appropriate for you. Obtaining a visa can often be time consuming, so be sure to start the process well ahead of your anticipated departure date.

#### HEALTH AND SAFETY

- Immunizations: check with the CDC ([www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)) or consult your family physician.
- **MALARIA:** Present in India, transmitted through mosquito bites. Options: Mefloquine, Lariam, Doxycycline, Malarone, Chloroquine. Check with your physician and the CDC due to possibilities of side effects, and also check the areas of India that you will be in for resistance to certain malaria medications.
- **FOOD AND WATER BORNE ILLNESS:** Lots of harmful bacteria can enter your system through food and water. To prevent infection from food and water:
  - DO not drink the tap water: remember that tap water is in ice and juices
  - If you have to drink the tap water, boil for AT LEAST 5 minutes
  - DO drink hot beverages, carbonated drinks, soda
  - MAKE SURE that bottles are sealed before you drink from them
  - DO NOT EAT: raw vegetables, fruit without the skin, uncooked meat, non-pasteurized dairy products, food that has been sitting in the sun.
  - DO EAT: Cooked food, fruits with thick skins, pasteurized dairy products
- **THINGS TO PAY ATTENTION TO:**
  - Normal body weight
  - Allergies
  - Frequency and consistency of bowel movements
  - Menstrual cycle
  - Energy level (especially during the hot season)
- **GOOD HYGEINE:**
  - Wash hands as often as possible
  - Keep fingernails and toenails trimmed and clean
  - Eat only hot food and boiled/mineral water
  - Insist on a new blade when getting a shave or a haircut
  - Avoid walking barefoot
  - Clean your undergarments daily
  - Avoid stray animals (the incidence of rabies is fairly high in parts of India)
- **EATING OUT:**

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<sup>14</sup> All information courtesy of Indicorps. Please see [www.indicorps.org](http://www.indicorps.org).

- Avoid ketchup, chutneys and fountain drinks because they are made with tap water
- Avoid eating pani puri and other water-based dishes off of the street
- Eat fruits and vegetables that are in season
- **DOCTORS/HOSPITALS/LABS/PHARMACIES**
  - Find out from your NGO the name of a doctor they trust (preferably one that they use themselves) and introduce yourself **BEFORE** any illness occurs.
  - Locate the nearest reputable hospital to your residence and workplace
  - Make sure that you understand any medications, side effects, dietary restrictions

### **LUGGAGE: PACK LIGHT!**

- It is recommended that you bring only the essentials when coming to volunteer in India. Despite popular perception, most everything is available in India these days, and at much cheaper prices! While you may want to bring a few sets of clothing to start you off, you can purchase Indian clothing after your arrival. And remember to leave space for gifts, etc. that you may want to bring home with you.
- Usually a standard-size duffel bag or small hiking pack plus a daypack suffices. However, be aware that Western-style luggage pieces often attract attention and identify you as a tourist.
- **SUGGESTIONS FOR PACKING**
  - Tampons (though sanitary napkins are readily available)
  - Any supply of medication taken readily
  - Comfortable and sturdy walking shoes
  - Nightgown/pajamas that cover your body
  - A small first aid kit
  - Insect repellent with DEET
  - Sunscreen
  - Travel flashlight
  - Supply of your favorite vitamins
  - Two-three pairs of clothes to get you started (see “clothing guidelines” below)
- **ITEMS READILY AVAILABLE IN INDIA:** Shampoo/conditioner, soap, razor blades, deodorant, camera film, batteries, books, CDs,

### **CLOTHING GUIDELINES**

- Know that in India, modesty is paramount. While increasing numbers of people are dressing in Western clothing such as jeans and tee shirts, this is found mainly in larger cities, and can often have negative connotations. Be sensitive to the clothing norms of your community, and observe how people around you dress. Know that special attention is paid to cleanliness of clothing and body.
- **WOMEN:** Long, loose-fitting clothing is most acceptable and, you will find, most suitable to the Indian climate. We recommend that you adopt the traditional long tunic and trousers combination, called *salwar kameez*. Otherwise, slacks or long skirts and loose blouses are acceptable.

- **MEN:** Most Indian men dress in Western-style clothing consisting of khaki pants and a button down shirt. In addition, you may wish to adopt the cool and comfortable *kurta pajama*. Shorts are not appropriate in India.
- Shoes and sandals are inexpensive, readily available, and worn by both women and men.

## **ELECTRICAL EQUIPMENT**

- Be aware that fancy electrical equipment will earn you the (often unwanted) curiosity of your community. Most often, community members do not mean any harm, but are simply interested in devices that they may have never seen before. Computers, cameras, CD players, palm pilots, Ipods, etc. connote wealth and affluence and, as such, may affect how your community perceives you and your time in India. It is recommended that, if you choose to bring such equipment, you keep them in a safe place when not in use, and you exercise caution when using them in your communities.
- **Computers:** While it may help you in your various projects, the possibility of theft or damage remains. The dust and heat of India can be harmful to your hardware, and transportation can be difficult. We recommend that you confer with your host organization with regards to bringing a laptop.
- **Cameras:** Digital cameras, while becoming commonplace in other parts of the world, are still objects of much excitement in India. You may be the main attraction if you bring and use a digital camera in certain parts of India. While it can be a great icebreaker, you may find yourself in a sea of people wanting you to take and display their photo.
- **Voltage Information:** The electrical current in India is 220v, AC 50 Hz. If you plan on using electrical equipment in India, you will need to bring a voltage adapter and plug converter. Electrical surges and power outages are also fairly commonplace in India.

## **TRAVEL**

While travel in India can be exciting and fun, it can also be challenging and dangerous. Exercise caution when you travel, and always be on your guard. Though you are likely to meet a host of interesting and friendly characters, you could also have some unsettling experiences. Pay attention to your surroundings, keep an eye on your belongings, and trust your instincts.

### SOME HELPFUL TRAVEL TIPS:

- **General:**
  - Do not keep all your money in one place when traveling
  - Avoid taking out money in front of other people
  - Be sure to ask more than one person for directions
  - Try to not travel like a tourist: i.e. opt for a small duffel bag instead of a backpack
  - Be wary of large crowds: the chances of theft and unwanted contact is higher
  - Avoid traveling at night, especially if you are female and/or alone
  - If you are in an uncomfortable situation or are being harassed (especially women), do not hesitate to make some noise. Public embarrassment is often a quick and effective way to stop harassment.

- Be attuned to local events (elections, rallies, protests, controversial happenings) that could affect the travel situation.
- **Trains:**
  - What are the different classes of train travel?
    - AC First Class (1A)
    - AC two tier sleeper (2A)
    - AC three tier sleeper (3A)
    - Chair Car (CC)
    - Sleeper Class (SL)
    - Unreserved / General Class (GEN)
  - Foreign Quota Tickets: Certain trains have seats that are available to international tourists under the title of foreign quota. To use this, you must go to a station with the provision of foreign quota. You must take a non-Indian passport, and payment must be made in cash with a certificate proving and exchange from US Dollars or Pound Sterling to rupees. Often times an ATM receipt will suffice. There is no additional charge for this service.
  - Many travelers, especially women traveling alone, prefer an upper berth (that is not on the side) for safety and security. Make a lot of noise and arouse your neighbors if you are bothered in anyway.
  - When traveling try to talk to the people next to you in a friendly yet cautious manner. This can help you to understand the nature of your neighbors, and they may be able to assist you if a problem arises.
  - You can try and stop a conversation by opening up your book or going to sleep if you feel uncomfortable. Notify the conductor if anyone makes you uncomfortable.
  - You can book train tickets up to 60 days in advance by going to the station, a reservation center, the internet (<http://www.indianrailways.com>) or through a travel agent. You may incur a small fee when booking online or taking the services of a travel agent. Make sure that the travel agent is authorized by Indian Railways. You can also purchase Trains at a Glance, the Indian Railways official schedule, for detailed information.
  - Always confirm the date of travel and train name before going to the station.
- **Bus:**
  - There are many types of buses in India. It is always recommended to take the advice of a trustworthy local traveler. There are three types of buses: ST buses (state run buses that travel longer distances), city buses (local buses that are for intra city travel) and private buses (privately run by bus companies). Just because a bus is privately run, it does not mean that it is necessarily safe. All precautions should be used in choosing to travel by bus.
  - On the bus sit in the ladies or men's section.
  - Keep your bags close by.
  - If you are unfamiliar with the stop make sure the conductor knows where you are getting off and ask him to tell you where to get off

- Take extra precautions when you are traveling at night by bus. Avoid this if at all possible.
- **Taxis / Auto Rickshaws:**
  - Before getting into an auto in a new city, find out the norms of the auto. Some places go by the meter, while others do not.
  - Do not get into an auto with another person already in it unless you are comfortable in the area or know the person. There are shared autos in certain areas. Investigate their reliability and patterns.
  - Never touch the meter or any other part of the vehicle.
  - If you are unsure of the fare, ask for a rate card. If you cannot read it, ask another person to confirm the fare.
  - Avoid taking rickshaws and taxi drivers that approach you. They may have already identified you as a tourist who they can overcharge.
  - When arriving near a bus stand or a taxi, walk for some distance and then take a taxi. Often times taxi drivers who want to overcharge wait immediately near touristy areas.
  - Act confident in saying the name of the place you are going. Know a major landmark near your destination before getting in. Avoid disputes, but if there is a problem, try and find a constable or police officer to help mediate. Most often auto drivers will not persistently argue if they are trying to cheat you (they will offer to compromise quickly).
  - Many taxis and rickshaws have a minimum fee regardless of distance.
  - Most often taxi drivers can read English addresses; however, they may drive you in circles if they know that you do not know the area.
  - Make sure that you take all your baggage with you.
  - Write down the license number of the taxi whenever you get in. If you leave a piece of luggage behind, you can trace it if you have the license number of the taxi.
  - Taxis often assume that you will know the way and will only ask you for directions after you get into the taxi. Do not hesitate to ask them if they know the correct route to the destination.
  - At some train stations, you can hire a prepaid auto. This service usually can be safer and more convenient in a new city as they note down the license number, give the fare amount upfront and arrange for the auto. There might be a small fee for this service (less than RS 5).

## **MONEY**

A common question for students, volunteers, and other travelers coming to India is: How much money should I bring? Obviously, the answer to that question will depend on how you structure your time while in India, and what you hope to take away from your volunteer experience. You should consult with your host organization (if you have one) ahead of time regarding items such as food, housing, transportation to/from your volunteer site(s), and a living stipend (if provided). Keep in mind that your community will notice what you choose to spend money on, and it may

add to their perception of you. Outside of the above, things that you may want or need to spend money on while in India:

- Clothing
- Phone calls home
- Books and reading material
- Medical visits
- Extra travel

It is recommended that you bring money in the form of travelers' checks and carry a credit card (VISA, American Express, and MasterCard are the most commonly accepted) for emergency situations. ATMs are also available in most large cities of India.

## **COMMUNICATION**

- **Internet Access:** Cyber Cafés are fairly easy to find in most Indian cities these days. The rates are usually decent, but the connections are often slow and unreliable. While email is a good way to keep in touch with folks at home, it may disappoint at times.
- **Telephone Calls:** Public telephone booths can be found on almost every street corner in India. ISD service is available for calls outside of India and STD service is for calls within India. However, ISD calls are relatively expensive, and the time difference often makes telephone calls difficult.
- **Mobile Phone Options:** Mobile phones are very popular in India these days. While the instrument itself is fairly costly, most of the calling plans are relatively inexpensive. You can choose from a wide variety of options to best meet your usage needs. Note that some mobile instruments from outside India will NOT work within the country.
- **Postal Service:** Despite popular perception, the postal service in India is fairly reliable. Letters to and from the United States take about 10 days, and to and from the United Kingdom is around 6 days. Letter writing is often the best way to keep in touch with friends and relatives back home, as the other means of communication can be frustrating, at times. Be aware that packages sent to India from abroad are frequently opened before they reach their destination.

## Works Consulted/ Additional Resources

Dimensions of Voluntary Sector in India, ed. Dr. Gopa Kumar. New Delhi, India: Charities Aid Foundation, 2000.

Healthy Travel: Asia and India, ed. Isabelle Young. Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2000.

*American Institute of Indian Studies*: Various resources consulted. Please see [www.indiastudies.org](http://www.indiastudies.org).

*GIVE Foundation*: Database of Indian NGO. Please see [www.givefoundation.org](http://www.givefoundation.org)

*Indian NGOs.com*: Database of India NGOs, information on voluntary sector in India. Please see [www.indianngos.com](http://www.indianngos.com)

*Indicorps*: Fellowship program connecting NRIs with voluntary organization in India. Please [www.indicorps.org](http://www.indicorps.org).

*Involvement Volunteers Association Incorporated*: Various resources consulted. Please see [www.volunteering.org.au](http://www.volunteering.org.au)

*ProPoor*: Database of South Asian NGOs. Please see [www.propoor.org](http://www.propoor.org)

*School for International Training*: Various resources consulted. Please see [www.sit.edu/studyabroad](http://www.sit.edu/studyabroad).

*Voluntary Services Organization*: Please see [www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk)