



Cultural differences

I came to India 3 years ago with the hope of learning about India, the Indian psyche and how Indian people just are... it intrigued me the difference between the country I came from (UK) and how people live in India despite all the problems they face and how we in the west still have anxiety, stress and unhappiness despite all the potential for material comforts. After spending some months travelling around the country on a mini-spiritual quest and spending a couple of weeks in a westernised ashram, I gradually became aware of an understanding of seeing how the world works in a different light. I began thinking that humility figured a lot in the way people behave here and from a spiritual point of view, that we are all one with each other and the universe and so I began to try and change my outlook a little to find a better way of just... being.

I came to Sambhali Trust by chance as I was staying in Jodhpur for 3 weeks over Christmas and wanted to do some voluntary work and I soon discovered that I really enjoyed what was going on here and felt somehow I could really help in a variety of ways from the creative to report writing and returned in July with the exciting job of managing the sewing centres and the Sambhali India shop. After some time, I soon kicked into 'work mode' and tried to transpose everything I'd learnt in Britain into an NGO in India using my method of working, together with my expectations of what could be achieved. I found it a difficult process, because on the one hand I wanted to help as much as possible with any given task, situation, discussion and of course do it in the way I only knew how and having some years of experience in working in hospitals and large organisations, I felt that I had a pretty good idea of how things work.

However, as much as I felt that I loved being in India and therefore I would automatically understand the way people thought, I began to see that there are cultural differences that really do make a difference in relating to others and in my own expectations. I've listed below a few points through my experience of living here for a year now and hopefully they may be useful for others to read to get an appreciation of how things differ and a way of dealing with them:

1. Logic

We have been trained to see things in our own logical way, through structured thinking which has been learnt through school and college, especially with regard to time. For example, we tend to think today is Monday and if we say "see you on Saturday" – in our heads we know exactly what this means, but to some people here, especially those with no schooling, it is worked out as a number of days. People can talk round and round in circles about things, without cutting to the chase or focussing on a solution. So I learnt the essence is to be patient, but keep clear in my head of what I am focussed on and gently ease through the conversation until an answer is achieved.

2. Living in the present

Engrained in the Indian psyche is living for the present; forgetting about the past and not worrying about the future. However, how this shows itself practically is that nothing is really planned more than a day in advance. You can try and plan for a week ahead, but you will need to keep reminding people if it's this far ahead. Generally it is better to say something 2 or 3 days beforehand and then remind them again the day before. Also, if a meeting is planned for a certain time, don't expect it to happen on time; other things always happen! Visitors may arrive and vice-versa; you may turn up at an office without a previous appointment and ask to be seen there and then, waiting in turn with everyone else and here, people will wait for extraordinary lengths of time without getting impatient or frustrated. Again, relating more to the Sambhali girls who haven't had a formal education, if they need to make

chappatis or do the washing, they will do this even if it makes them late for a meeting at a certain time. They see no need for urgency, but time and time-management is a learnt skill that can be acquired through practice and for the Sambhali girls you can see them gradually improving.

Again, because of this, I found it is better to go with the flow and accept that the western structure I had been used to doesn't always happen and often the best way of getting something done is to visit the person (eg government official), rather than just rely on a letter or email, because these may often be lost or ignored. But living in the present means no worry, anxiety or tension!

3. Meeting people

There is a certain formality always in greeting people; apart from Namaste, aap kaise ho? (how are you?), there is always a calmness and sincerity that needs to be appreciated first to allow your hosts time to get to know you and vice versa. More often than not, there is always chai or cold drink offered and in someone's else's house, "the guest is always treated like God" and so they cannot do enough for you, even though they may have little themselves. Shoes are taken off at the front door (or before you enter a temple). It is always good to accept hospitality that's offered to you as in accepting they feel they have given.

Indian people are very warm and welcoming people and will always be hospitable and take an interest in you. It is best to speak slowly, softly and placate any wild or enthusiastic gestures, but you will soon see that they are laughing or joking and find a lot of humour in how people react or behave.

4. Please, thank you, sorry

Generally, in traditional Indian society, none of these words are said in general conversation. You may think it rude that the rickshaw man doesn't say thank you when you have paid your fare, but it is not the custom to do so. Also when someone asks you to do something, you might expect to hear..."would you mind helping with ... and ...?", "could you just do ... and ...", "do you think you could help with ...?" but this phrasing isn't part of the Hindi language, and so you are most likely to hear "I request you to..." which is the politest way that it can be said in the Hindi language, but you are able to understand from the tone of voice how it is meant, whether it is an order or a subtle suggestion.

Also because "thank you" isn't so much the norm it is sometimes difficult feeling appreciated; whereas in the west we tend to use, "sorry", "thank you" at the slightest thing, in India this doesn't happen as Indian people themselves feel it is their duty to just get on and do the task they've been given to do (as written down in the Bhagavad Gita, one of the ancient Sanskrit texts). They don't expect thanks or praise although with friends and relatives, this is often done through a touchy/feely way of saying thank you as opposed to the words themselves.

5. Meetings

Ways have been established of working in the west so that now each individual at work has regular supervision by a manager, we are listened to and our views are discussed as to the best outcome in any situation. We have regular meetings and make sure that we have meetings with other colleagues before an important meeting, so as to keep them informed and they know what to expect. Human Resources and the development of staff in the workplace has evolved a great deal, but here in India it is more straight forward. This can be very frustrating if you think that you are used to a different way of working and I have come to realise that a certain acceptance needs to take place, that this is the way things are organised here and although it is possible to suggest new ways of working, then these will take time to develop. This is not to say that communication is not welcome; on the contrary, it is essential and valued, but it is more informal and ad hoc and often takes place 'as and when' as opposed to at an appointed time.

6. Respect

Always... and to everyone...!

Even if you think you have the brightest of ideas and lots of experience in the situation you are working in, it's as well to remember that your ideas might work in your own country, but not necessarily in a small NGO in India. Although structure, processes and management skills can be viewed as being different to ones we're used to it is only by really understanding the problems and difficulties that an NGO faces on a day to day basis that you can really appreciate how your ideas may fit in. Even with the best will in the world, you need to remember to be sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of everyone involved without them thinking that you are taking over or that you know what's best! Here in India, things happen at a slower pace and even though it can look on the surface as a frenzied busy city, it's not so important to people living here to get things done by say 5pm on Friday, even though *you* may feel a certain lack of achievement if you yourself haven't done it by then. This is not to say that your way isn't right and your ideas aren't good, it's just better to go with the flow and through experience, it's better for the happiness of the people concerned to live in the present, enjoy the moment and take great care how you behave, because in the end, what is worth more? ... to have your own fixed values on how things should be or the happiness and well-being of others? It's a fine balance to maintain, but to be in India is to learn how Indian people live and all the striving for more in the west (i.e. time=money) one wonders where does that really lead?

7. Criticism

Think "help" not criticism. Be careful not to criticise what you see around you too early on. Even if you think you have some great ideas that would improve a certain situation, I've found that you need to make sure you get a real appreciation and understanding of the people involved and how things work first. Only then is it possible to offer some suggestions and solutions to different ways of working and any problems that may arise. Offers of help are always appreciated, where an NGO is relying very much on the goodwill of its volunteers.

8. Personal space/privacy

Most Indian families live together as large extended families and are used to living together without having a lot of privacy or personal space. They are used to always being with other people and Indian families can often find it surprising the idea of a person wanting to spend some time on their own. This can also relate to meetings, where they can manage to deal with a lot of different people at once as they come and go, whereas we tend to schedule appointments.
... and a few spiritual thoughts!

9. Intention

Think of why you're doing something – is it because you want to, or for the reward or for your ego?

10. Power of thought

As you think, so you will become... thoughts>actions>deeds. A peaceful atmosphere can be conveyed through your thoughts only...!

11. Patience

Should everything fit into my time-table? In a tricky situation, put yourselves in the other person's shoes and ask yourself how do they feel/think about the way you're behaving or reacting in a situation. Indian people can be a lot more sensitive and it helps to turn the situation around a little to appreciate how you come across to others.

I have to finish by saying that these are only my personal observations and suggestions and are debatable, but nevertheless are helping me to live on an even keel in India, appreciating the belief systems that I came to India to find out and integrating with people that I feel most at home with, without hanging on to too many of my western expectations!

Enjoy your stay in India!

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