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Study Abroad Program: India



Me in front of the Taj Mahal in Agra, India.

It was a crisp morning in New Delhi. Early March is easily considered winter in India, but it was a nice 75 degrees that day, which, at the time, I considered to be somewhat warm. Little did I know that 118 degrees was in store for the coming months. This easily explains why people were staring at my short-sleeved kurta, a traditional Indian blouse, as I made my way to school.

I wound my way through the busy streets by auto rickshaw. The path to school was so confusing that I needed friends to help me for at least a month. From open, busy highways to alleyways filled with people, it was almost impossible to get a grasp on where I was. Although my path occasionally changed to get there, at least one thing stayed the same.

“Hello, teacher!”

“How are you, teacher?”

“Good morning, *didi*.”

The excited voices of the students and the pep in their steps are burned into my memory forever. Every time I walked into the slum I felt welcomed, and not in an artificial way, but rather in a deep

way that felt like family and close friends I had known all my life. The slums of New Delhi are unforgiving, grueling places to live. Houses are made out of cardboard or other cheap materials, and lack basic utilities such as electricity and water. They are overcrowded, underserved communities where many children grow up and never leave. Even in these hard circumstances, the children and their parents alike cared for one another, and they even cared for a foreigner like me.

I made my way up the stairs to have *chai* with the other teachers. We started our morning by talking about our plan for the day and what we would teach the kids.

From then on, for about four hours, there was absolute chaos.

As every child walked in, they felt it necessary to have the following conversation with me:

“*aap kaise hain, didi?*” (How are you, sister?)

“I am fine thank you, how are you?”

“I am fine, *didi*.”

A slum in Pune, Maharashtra, India





From teaching English vocabulary to story time to lunch, it was a packed day; however, everyone's favorite time was "free time." The kids got to play games, color and do other things they generally did not get to do at home.

On this particular day, I had no idea what was in store for me. One of the little girls, Tanisha, started to motion for me to sit down.

"Baithiye, didi." (Sit, sister.)

I listened and took a seat in front of her. She started to run her fingers through my hair. I was a little shocked and confused, and I wondered what was going to happen to my hair. I was also concerned it would start a chain reaction of everyone wanting to touch my hair, which I was quite sensitive to when I first arrived. After a while, I noticed Tanisha was picking through

my hair and looking intently at my scalp. What I thought was going to be a stylish up-do was actually a lice check!

"Khatam hogia, didi!" (I am finished, sister!)

My lice check was complete, and I was a clean woman!

As I said goodbye to the kids and went about my normal day, I reflected on my encounter with Tanisha. Out of the goodness of her heart, she served me in something that was an everyday occurrence to her community. She even gave up her free time to do so. It did not matter that I was a 22-year-old American woman and that she was a 5-year-old Indian girl.

The commonality between the two of us? We both had long hair. The result of that

commonality? An understanding of each other's needs and a willingness to meet them, regardless of cultural differences and language barriers.

As I left India, I realized that I was leaving a piece of my heart there, too. As cliché as that sounds, my experiences stretched me and grew

me to be the person I am today. Not only did I leave a piece of my heart there, but I gained a new piece to bring back with me. Tanisha helped me realize the importance of empathy and meeting people where they are. She helped me to see that we all have similar, basic feelings and needs that we can serve one another in, regardless of the barriers society erects for us.



Leaving a lantern in my place - my sendoff from India.