



WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A VOLUNTEER IN INDIA?

If you have signed up to volunteer with AMAIDI, the most important reason for doing so is likely to be of service to people who need your skills. Your time and health permit that you spend some time in India to assist organizations in the need of volunteers to achieve their aim of helping poor people - directly or indirectly - to sustain themselves in the field of health, education, housing, agriculture and the like. AMAIDI makes it possible to follow this call in various places all over India.

Except good health and a sound resistance to frustrations that come along with not being understood by members of a foreign culture, what does it take to be a volunteer in India?

- Show initiative

People working in the organization you're volunteering in, will not always be alert to give you the information you need to carry out your tasks. As a result, you will sometimes feel stuck ('where do I go from here?'), whereas nobody else than you seems to notice it. Show initiative, think of a possible strategy - no matter how simple - to get re-started, get on the train again and do or say something. Chances are that your counterpart has been waiting for you to show him/her the way as to how to help you. Communication is everything. Don't be afraid to make blunders. One advice: it does make sense to listen to your guide, as he/she does know more about your host-organization than you do.

- Aspire to be professional

Many organizations where volunteers are put to work, like to see themselves as 'professional organizations', but reality is that they're still 'on the way of becoming'. Some of them are not, but most are aware of this gap. That is why they enjoy having you ('the professional from abroad') on board. Now if you take your task serious and put all your talents at work, you will surely be treated as a professional, even though you might not (yet) see yourself as a fully fledged professional. Enjoy your 'status', it will support you.

- Connect with other volunteers

Chances are that other volunteers have been working in the same organization where you are going to volunteer. Try to find out as soon as you have arrived, what they have researched in the same area as where you're going to work in. But not only the results of previous volunteers in your host organization, also might their personal experiences be helpful to understand how your organization works. It

probably makes you blend in faster and more easily (if you know what to do and what to better avoid). It is possible to communicate with previous volunteers even before you come to India. Ask for it, if you want.

- Be interested in the people you work with

In an Indian organization work and personal relationships are closely intertwined. It's quite normal when a director asks you 'how is your family?' or 'Did you have your breakfast?' People you work with will be positively surprised if, after answering, you return the question to the sender. It's more than a way to say 'hello', but then again it is not meant to start an in-depth discussion about the 'dosai' that you have eaten that morning. Count on it that your Indian colleagues are genuinely interested when you 'casually' tell that your mother celebrated her 25th marriage anniversary the other day.

- Be polite (at all times)

Although cordial, Indians like to keep the (working) relationship respectful. One way to honor this aspect of your work relation is to always be polite. The director of the organization you're working in, expects it, your colleagues will love it. At times this politeness (addressing you as 'Sir' or 'Madam') will feel artificial and pompous. But your colleagues will feel comfortable in your presence because of it. You will experience your hardest moment in this, when people will not wait their turn (and squeeze themselves between you and the copying machine you were just about to use). Even then: stay polite. Smile. It makes a difference.

- Be flexible

It happens: an appointment, set weeks ago, is suddenly cancelled, causing your research to be delayed for at least a week or two. Or the person you were going to meet in the organization's office has taken leave and no one has informed you. You've come for nothing and - just today - you've come all the way by bicycle! Stay calm, even if the reasons given to you (if at all ...) do not make sense to you. It will happen. And happen again. Be prepared.

- Be open minded

You will sometimes be confronted with - as you perceive them - rather strange opinions. Be open minded. At second glance and from a local perspective, these opinions do often make sense. Failing to see this is simply overcome by staying in India longer. Gradually you'll be more at peace with all that 'strangeness'.

- Mind your hygiene (but don't be *too* fuzzy about it)

90% of all the volunteers and interns that come to India get sick: an upset stomach, diarrhea, vomiting or mild dehydration, all of which is easily treatable (if you take your body serious enough, that is. And please do!). Nearly all got sick *in spite of* all the obvious preventive measures: washing hands before and after food, toilet, work etc; drinking only mineral water from closed and branded bottles; treating wounds - even the smallest ones - well; etc. Be hygienic but also prepared to get/apply the right treatment once disease hits you. India has many a good doctor, plenty of medical shops with loads of medicines, band aids, nicely packed clean one-time-use syringes etc. Try not to worry too much before things happen.

- Learn the language

If you have the opportunity, try to learn some basic words of the local language of the place you're working. Buy a book (just a few Rupees) on the market 'Learn (...) in 30 days', it will probably take much more but that is not relevant. And dare to speak with locals, from day 1 onwards, they will appreciate it so much and forgive you all the unavoidable mistakes that you'll be making. Language opens doors. Most likely English will be the medium of communication throughout your journey: don't get too frustrated when your English and theirs don't match immediately. Realize that the Indians have to get used to your kind of English in the same way as you have to get used to theirs. Give it a good laugh, now and then.

- Don't be afraid of (all) insects

The insects - of any kind and size - are without doubt India's largest population. The major players in the field are mosquitoes, ants and cockroaches. They appear whenever you don't expect them and will affect you in every possible way. ~~Keep your head cool and apply whatever local stuff (often the best prevention) you can get your hands on.~~ Check with the owner of the accommodation where you're staying for tips and tricks. And don't squash them on the walls!

In spite and thanks to all the above: enjoy your stay and work!

