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Country: Germany
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Final Impression, August 2020

7 months in India

My first weeks in India

I still remember the day I arrived in Jodhpur. The air was hot and stuffy. It was very loud and the traffic was crazy. I came to India with few expectations as I honestly didn't know that much about the country. But already when I arrived at Durag Niwas I felt enchanted. I was welcomed directly with a flower chain and tika, the point that is painted on your forehead to be blessed. Everyone was very nice and Monica, who works at the front desk, showed me everything right away. The same day I went for a walk with Govind, the founder of Sambhali, and with Monica I bought my first kurtas. This is the traditional clothing that we have to wear at work. I was warmly welcomed and enjoyed my stay in Jodhpur from the start.

My first few days were very exciting. I did a lot with the other volunteers who took me in directly, and especially with Ayush, Govind's son. We got along very well from the start and he explained a lot to me about Indian culture. At the beginning I did admin work in the morning which includes finding new sponsors and volunteers as well as social media work. I also supported Kavita in the Graduate Center and was able to accompany Vimlesh at the "No Bad Touch" workshops which was very interesting. In the afternoons, I was at the Sheerni Boarding Home where I taught English. We also had workshops and music days and once a week we went to the park so that we could also spend time with the girls outside. I got along very well with them and quickly realized that I made the right choice with Sambhali Trust.

My work at Sambhali Trust

My time at Sheerni Boarding Home:

The girls from the Sheerni Boarding Home and also the Sambhali Graduates became better and better friends for me. They helped me learn Hindi and were always there for me. Even after moving to the Jodhpur Empowerment Center (JEC) where I taught for five months from November on, I spent many free weekends on Saturdays with

the Graduates and on Sundays with the Sheerni girls. I realized more and more how I made sisters for life for whom I am so incredibly grateful.

We experienced a lot and I became more and more a part of their lives and the girls also part of mine. I often went to the Sheerni Boarding Home after work to have dinner there. We danced and laughed a lot together and I really enjoyed the time which is why I soon couldn't imagine life without Sambhali and India. They soon started telling me about their families and other things that concerned them. In moments like these, I realized what a strong connection I had built up with those girls and young women.

My work in the Jodhpur Empowerment Center:

At the beginning of November, I changed my job because the JEC needed support. It was a difficult step but in retrospect one of the best things that could have happened to me in India. From the beginning, the JEC Center was like a second home for me. I got along very well with the teachers, women and children from day one on and sometimes went to the Center on Saturdays to do handicrafts or learn traditional Indian dances. The work in the center has completely immersed me in Indian culture. I learned a lot of Hindi from my teachers which ultimately allowed me to have conversations with the women and children in my center. We also celebrated many festivals together and I was taught a lot about the Indian way of life. The women and children also learned a lot about Germany. Sometimes, we talked about German culture for an hour or more and many were very interested. We also cooked together twice and I learned how to make Chapati, the traditional Indian bread that you eat as a side dish with every meal.



As the weeks passed by, my relationship with everyone got closer and I became part of a wonderful family. Many of the students involved me in discussions about their families and asked for advice. I started to get to know every woman and child properly and was therefore able to work with them individually. For me, the time JEC was not a job in the sense that I had to overcome myself every day to go there. It was pure fun and I was just incredibly happy. We also danced a lot together and I even had my own dance and song with the kids.

I was always overwhelmed by how much influence you can have in other people's lives just by spending time with them and laughing together. It was often the little moments when I noticed that my center and I had grown into a family. The women often told me how much they would miss me if they just could not see me after class. One time, a younger student came to me and just hugged me and thanked me for the time I spent with him. The teachers from my center and I became a real team and good friends. During my time at Sambhali, India and all the people I have met became very important to me and I instantly knew how difficult it will be to say goodbye.

My life at Durag Niwas Guesthouse

But the time was not only incredible at “work”. There was always something going on in the Guest House as well. When I wasn't eating Momos with Ayush and Roxanne (volunteer coordinator), I was sitting on the roof with Roxanne or as well with other volunteers and we exchanged a lot about our different home countries. Or we just joked around and laughed. The longer you live in Durag Niwas, the more you learn about India and its people. We participated in various poojas (religious rituals in India) or learned how to tie a sari (one of the traditional garments) from Mukta, Govind's wife. The time we all spend together became more and more beautiful and the more you had the feeling of becoming part of the family. I was invited to family birthdays or consulted if there were problems or sometimes we were only enjoying a party in Jodhpur in the evenings which made me enjoy Indian music more and more.

Not only the Guest House enchanted me but also Jodhpur itself. At some point, you know most of the shops in the area and were always warmly welcomed. I could always be on my own in Jodhpur and still was not alone because I knew many shops and could just come over for a chai.

When my parents came to visit in January 2020, funnily at the same time as Roxanne's parents, I was very excited to be able to show them my new home. At first, it was a very strange feeling, as India is very different from Germany and I was afraid that they might not understand some things. Roxanne's and my parents got on very well right from the start so we did a lot together. My parents got to know the Graduates, the girls from the Sheerni Boarding Home and my JEC Center and were enchanted. They took photos and danced with the girls and women and my dad got on very well with the boys from my center. It was a wonderful time and the week after

my parents flew to Germany, my children often asked me where “their parents” were. My parents fell in love with India as well and they definitely want to come back.

My time in India and what I took from it

I found people for life in India. Just in the last month when we went to Setrawa (outside base of the NGO in the Thar Desert, 100km West from Jodhpur) with Sambhali and the whole family due to Corona and the lockdown in India, I realized how important those people are for me. When we lived together in a confined space, I noticed how much I have got used to the Indian way of life and how difficult it will be to settle down in Germany again. I became part of a large pagal (Hindi for crazy) family. I am very grateful that I was able to get to know life in the desert so well which is again very different from life in Jodhpur and where I learned how grateful we Europeans can be for our luxury at home.

For me, India is not what you often see in the Western media. For me, India means home, happiness and security. A culture in which one is welcomed like a child of the family and always supported. Indian culture has a completely different understanding of hospitality which we Europeans don't know. It's difficult for me to answer what exactly was the best experience in India. But I guess I'll always answer the same thing: for me, the most beautiful experience was the feeling of infinite happiness. In those moments, there was no room for any worries or troubles. I felt this way suddenly and in many different places. Whether it was in my center when everyone was incredibly happy when I only ran up the stairs in the mornings or when I had to go earlier and all the children stood on the balcony just to say goodbye again. Whether it was at Sheerni Boarding Home when I stayed for dinner and we all danced together. Or With Ayush and Roxi when we once again did our private dance party on the roof or when I just sat in the restaurant and enjoyed good Indian food.

I learned a lot in India. India is loud, colorful, hot, extreme in many things, full of delicious food and great people. Of course, India is not always great and you have to be resilient. But it opens the door to a completely different world and perspective on life. I am much more grateful for the little things in life than ever before. India has taught me that we Europeans are not as much advanced in many things as we always think. It's just different. I learned a lot about cultural acceptance and looked at things with a different eye. Nevertheless, I realized that although we are so different culturally, we are all the same in many ways. In the end, we all talk about the same things, play the same games and are equally crazy. This is why you can build such a close connection to people and culture even though your home is thousands of kilometers away. I also learned to share. No matter how much you have, you share it with everyone. Indians always share, even if they don't have enough themselves. This culture and the people here are full of love and helpfulness, on a level that I didn't know from Germany.

India has stolen my heart and will always remain my home. Many thanks to Sambhali Trust, the Guesthouse and of course the whole family who gave me the most wonderful seven months you can imagine. You all will stay in my heart forever.

