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Published by Anonymous on Feb. 02, 2000

MY TURN

Surviving in India

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I love India. It's a place filled with magic and wonderment. I came here in 1995 to study dance at Kalakshetra School and will soon graduate. At first I was shocked, even disgusted at what I saw. But I soon found the rich spirituality and culture unrivaled anywhere in the world. I only wished that someone could have told me, prepared me for the external realities I would face. It would have been easier. I think that many foreigners that come get shocked with the bad things and leave before experiencing the best of India. It just takes time and common sense, as in adjusting to any new country. What follows is a realistic view of everyday life and what to watch out for. I hope it helps you prepare if you come here to live.

Being used to American conveniences, I had quite a time adjusting to the absence of a washing machine. You have to wash everything by hand. Believe me, you think carefully before using anything that might have to be washed later. The alternative to this is giving the wash to the dhoby. In this, you must understand that you may get your clothes back, but they might not be the same ever again. The sight of buttons, in

particular, seems to awaken in our dhoby wallas an excitement that results in broken buttons. The younger generation is not encouraged to wear the traditional dress of their homeland. It is getting so common to see jeans, T-shirts, etc.

After a few experiences, you quickly learn how to judge people. For example: You are able to tell if the auto walla is drunk or just tired. Similarly, you develop a strong intuition towards what to eat and drink. Always ask for the best price on anything you buy. If you don't, feeling that it's not nice to argue with strangers, they will take you for an idiot, a dunce and weak of will--in short, easy prey.

Boys are not too troublesome. I've never had anyone pinch me, but then I'm taller than most. Usually they just pass by singing or whistling. Sometimes they swerve in front of you, trying to make eye contact. If you are a woman, don't travel alone at night. During the day there is safety in numbers. If someone is troubling you on the bus and you shout, the conductor will eject the offender.

Mail gets lost, wet, opened, stolen and delayed. A rule of thumb is to always write letters in waterproof ink. During some really wet weather, I saw a picture of work at the post office to rescue mail. There were hundreds of letters spread out to dry on the floor. If an address was not legible, the letter was trashed.

Noise is something else that you don't ever get used to. You just learn how to bear it. During Deepavali the noise of the

firecrackers shook the dishes off the shelf! If there is a festival at a local temple, loud speakers are installed from which blare devotional music to work up the religious spirit of people (even five blocks away). Up close you can't scream over the noise. Most resort to hand signals.

On the more serious side, you've never been sick until you are sick in India. Common colds are violent, fierce and frequent. I've never had such a high fever or felt so terrible as I have here. You get accustomed to, but never really used to, seeing people beat their wives, kids and animals. Violence is common. Our kitchen, which faces the street, is filled with the sounds of the morning hurry-up slaps applied by the neighbor ladies as they rush reluctant children through breakfast and off to school.

Personally, I came to India to absorb a cultural tradition much richer than America's. But the youth of India are busy soaking up the Western values and consciousness delivered by satellite dish, unaware, it seems, of this richness around them. It's sad for me to watch as the culture here slips away faster and faster into the darkness of dead memories. Even with all of this, I still love India, and wouldn't have missed this life-changing experience for the world.