

THE POWER OF A SMILE
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Imagine a world in which you could not communicate your thoughts. Picture yourself opening your mouth, having so much to say, yet stopping short as you realize that there were no means that would allow you to do so. This was the world in which we lived while in India. As we journeyed through a land that made me feel socially confined, I felt like an outsider looking in. Needless to say, while in this utterly unfamiliar territory, we looked, dressed, and lived differently than the natives of India. But the most glaring difference to me was the language barrier. Although this trip gave us the opportunity to immerse ourselves into the exciting, alien Indian culture, one of the obstacles keeping us from true immersion was the language constraint.

I'll be honest with you; I was very upset and frustrated throughout our first few days on the trip. After opening my mouth and quickly shutting it what felt like millions of times, I came to terms with the fact that this was a very unusual occurrence for me. Never before in my life had I experienced such difficulty in communicating. With Arabic, Spanish, and English under my belt, I have been able to converse and communicate throughout all of my travels. Up until this point in my life, translating my thoughts into words had been simple. Coming into this trip, I knew that I could not speak or decipher any of the hundreds of Indian languages we were about to encounter, yet I

never really understood the gravity of this fact and how much of an impact it would have on my trip experience. With each sight I saw, person I met, and meal I ate, I found myself having more and more to say. Our whole group of girls and chaperones was chomping at the bit with exciting things to share. Unfortunately, our only means of communication was through our wonderful, all-knowing guide, Mahesh. Mahesh is fluent in many of the different tribal and national languages of India, and always knew exactly what to say. He understood the messages we were trying to get across, and conveyed them to our new Indian friends with ease. Although it was a very efficient system, I did find it disappointing that I couldn't communicate directly! But, as HB girls and teachers do best, we adapted to the circumstances and moved on with ease.

A day and countless activities into our journey, we learned the phrase 'Namaste', which quite frankly may have been the best thing to happen to us. Namaste most nearly means 'the light in me honors the light in you', and is a phrase that many people in India use when thanking or greeting someone. Mind you, as a group of inexperienced tourists, my classmates and I found ourselves using it as a substitute for the words and thoughts we were unable to speak. Whenever one of us was at a loss for words, as was the case most always, Namaste would be thrown around. We shamelessly overused

and misused this phrase, day in and day out. After a while, I realized I should probably stop saying it every time I was unable to communicate. For as our group of rambunctious tourists roamed the villages and streets of Golana, Nagercoil, and Bombay, we looked and sounded like those seagulls from the movie Finding Nemo... just substitute the word "mine" for "Namaste". As we traveled through the streets and passed groups of natives walking along or selling something, a chorus of Namaste's would emerge from our group which could probably be heard by everyone within a mile radius.

After so long, Namaste was becoming trite and a bit out of context; I then embraced the silence. I took this lack of ability to speak as an opportunity to observe the environment, people, smells, and colors in which I was surrounded. I made the decision to make eye contact with whoever I met. I began to use hand gestures and some body-language to convey my emotions and excitement. Most importantly, however, I became aware of SMILES! I began to note everyone's smile, realizing that they were contagious and fulfilling. After seeing the impact that my smile had on the little children and adults we met, the random people we passed on the streets, and even within my own group of classmates... I began to smile more. In India, my smile meant that: I was happy, I was satisfied, that "yes, the food was delicious", and most importantly, that I was grateful to meet everyone I did. I had finally found a way to communicate how

genuinely pleased and thankful I was for our new friends. No longer did I feel the need to use hundreds words and fancy phrases to share my feelings. As I found myself staring into a new friend's eyes and smiling, I no longer felt like an outsider, it was then that I understood the common saying "**Everyone smiles in the same language.**"

So, I urge us all to become more aware of our smiles. Learn how to communicate without using excess words. Cherish the ability to speak, but also find other ways to communicate. "**Life is like a mirror, we get the best results when we smile at it.**"

Thanks!