



INTERNATIONAL
EXCHANGE

NAME

ESHA MEHTA

FROM

USA

TO

INDIA

DURATION

SUMMER



0123456789



Cane Travel and Hindi Lessons

Most mornings of her Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) Program in India, Esha Mehta would wake early and catch a rickshaw with her roommate to her Hindi classes. The morning she remembers most, however, happened at sunrise while on an excursion to Pushkar in Rajasthan, India.

Mehta, who is blind and an avid hiker, joined others from the American group to hike to an old temple. Dressed in traditional Indian clothes, Esha trusted her feet, as she usually does, to guide her along the rocky way and up many stairs.

“When we got to the top, it was really beautiful. My friend Nicole was tracing my hand along the horizon as the sun was rising and telling me what it looked like. Then I asked everyone to stop talking and to experience nature with their eyes closed, just listening to the birds and other sounds.”

For Esha this type of interpersonal exchange creates an opportunity to educate and learn; something that occurred frequently on her U.S. Department of State-sponsored CLS program.

The CLS program staff, after Esha’s disclosure of her disability and explanation of what type of accommodations she needs, learned how to make arrangements for her to participate fully in the program. Through connections in India with a blind retired professor and a school for blind students, the CLS staff had course materials converted and embossed in Hindi braille, offered an extra class in Hindi braille, and found a local cell phone with accessible features.

Before going to India, Esha took two years of Hindi courses at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and relied on her JAWS screen reader to access materials, though it had a few bugs when used for Hindi.

It was her Hindi professor at home who encouraged Esha to apply for the CLS program because the immersion experience would boost her language skills.

At first in India, I was really afraid to say anything because I didn’t want to be grammatically incorrect. As the program went along I got over that wall and realized that the point of learning a language was to communicate with people that speak that language. And if you can get your point across, you are doing the job of language.

Esha found her language skills useful when her host mother or people on the street would question, “What are you doing? Do you know where you are going?” if she happened to be traveling without her roommate or others in the group. It was a lot of educating on her part, “Yes, I know where I’m going; I’m confident to travel.”

Her cane travel skills did need a few adjustments in the new environment with obstacles everyone experienced, like chaotic traffic patterns that seemed unyielding and dogs, goats, pigs, squirrels, and other animals randomly crossing her path.



BADRINATH-460 K.M.

MUSSOORIE- 164 K.M.

DEHRADOON-140 K.M.

RISHIKESH - 126 K.M.

HARIDWAR- 100 K.M.

ROORKEE

DELHI - 100 K.M.

HOSPITAL - 1 K.M.

Esha's use of her cane to travel had the most impact on the children and young adults at the school for the blind where she volunteered teaching English, cane travel, technology training, independent living skills, and a little braille too. They had never been given a cane, she noticed. Instead they would wind their way around the school yard linking arms in a train of people, and rarely did they ever venture farther from the boarding school into town.

I got wonderful feedback from the students since it was the first time they had ever had the opportunity to travel independently. Having a cane in your hand is such an amazing force to getting independence versus having to rely on others to get you places.

While Esha has extended family in India, her main reason for learning Hindi is to fulfill her goal to return there and work on either the lack of psychological support for people in India, since that is her major, or opening a training center for blind children and adults to teach them new skills.

“The idea of empowering someone with a disability is a new concept in India. While there are disability organizations in India that support blindness skills, the resources financially and the stigma with it makes it harder for anyone with a disability to get services.”

Esha hopes to see this change through what defined her exchange experience – the chance to learn and educate. And now, she has more confidence in her language skills to engage and contribute in this way.

