

Language and life lessons, India style

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Jessie Cleveland, a junior political science and international studies major, spent the summer on a critical language scholarship to study the Urdu language in India.

The United States Department of State and the Council of American Overseas Research Centers developed the critical language scholarship. For Cleveland, it funded a summer of study in Lucknow, India.

Urdu is the national language of Pakistan and is one of the official languages of India. It is the Persian-based sibling of Sanskrit-based Hindi. However, when spoke, the two languages are so similar they seem to mirror the relationship between American and British English.

“I cannot begin to describe how much India exposes me to new and different ideas,” said Cleveland. “It satiates my appetite for adventure, travel and knowledge. It elevates my spirits. India is where I want to be.”



SUMMER

By Jessie Cleveland

India and I have a “love-hate relationship.”

At the worst of times, India sends me persistent stomachaches, extreme heat (120 degrees Fahrenheit) and countless species of biting bugs — I respond with Tums, strong pesticides and the occasional “I Miss America Day.” Those days feature Hollywood films, McDonalds and blue jeans.

At the best of times, India sends me knowledge, culture and endless sources of fascination, to which I respond with love and affection for a truly incredible nation.

My idiosyncratic odyssey with India began officially during spring 2006 when I made my first trip but recommenced this past summer when I found myself back in India on a Critical Language Scholarship to study Urdu. Developed by the United States Department of State and the Council of American Overseas Research Centers, the CLS funded my summer of study in Lucknow, India.

As the national language of Pakistan and one of the official languages of India, Urdu is the Persian-based sibling of Sanskrit based Hindi, but when spoken, the two languages are so similar that they seem to mirror the relationship between American and British English.

India was an assault on my senses. My unaccustomed ears were bombarded by persistent car honks, and my Norwegian palate initially lacked an appreciation of Indian curries and strong spices. My fingers had forgotten the feel of ubiquitous street grit and my body adjusted to the heat through constant perspiration. Cows roaming streets eating trash, public urination, extreme poverty and cockroaches became common sights.

But despite all these things, I remain genuinely infatuated with India. The smooth staccato flow of Indic languages now ranks among my favorite sounds, and I have come to crave a good cup of chai. The feel of a fine silk sari remains unparalleled. The beauty of Indian architecture; the nation’s natural wonders, like the Ganges and the Himalayas; and its many shrines and temples are incomparable. Moreover, the kindness and hospitality of so many of India’s citizens is unbelievable.

Famed American author Ernest Hemingway once said that if a person were to visit Paris as a young person, the city would remain with him for all his life. While this may be true, I’d argue that India has a greater ability to challenge perceptions and ideas and to linger on in a visitor’s mind long after his return home. While India exhausts me in every way conceivable, I cannot begin to describe how much India exposes me to new and different ideas; satiates my appetite for adventure, travel, and knowledge; and elevates my spirits. And all things considered, India is where I want to be.

– *Jessie Cleveland, is a junior at UNL, a Political Science and International Studies double major.*