

[India: Students' Shangri-La?](#)

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India: Students' Shangri-La?

Most of the millions of Hindus living outside India never once thought of sending their children to India to school-too far and too expensive. And what's India got to offer school-age youth that their own country doesn't? In a two-part series, we share the stories of a few families who braved tears and years of separation to have their children spend some of their schooling years in adventurous India.

By Sheree Lipton

My 15-year-old daughter, HinaRapa Lipton, a student from Hawaii, is right in the midst an unusual experience-schooling half-way around the world, in India.

I raised her with a full sense of Hindu consciousness. She was clapping to bhajans at the local Sathya Sai Baba Center here in Honolulu when she was only two, bal vikas classes since age four and puja and chanting the Gayatri mantra before school each morning. At nine, I took her on a pilgrimage to India to meet the great masters. She hiked up to remote cave temples in Andhra Pradesh, bargained for bracelets in the market at Mylapore and spent two weeks patiently sitting in the darshan line at Prasanthi Nilayam Ashram to have Sai Baba's grace. Her favorite pastime was racing in the dark down to the ashram milk line at 5am each morning to wait for the milkman, who came in a wooden cart. She would pet the bullock, buy the sweet milk from Sathya Sai Baba's cows, and run back to our room with her daily treasure. At 13, invited by Swami Shantanand, founder of the Temple of Fine Arts, she bravely went off alone to Malaysia, stayed with an Indian family, steeped herself in bhajans, bharatanatyam and tabla lessons.

Alas, the teenage years brought problems. I began worrying about what most

parents worry about for their children-lack of discipline, peer pressure, easy availability of alcohol and drugs-even in elementary school-"fast" friends with relaxed morals.

My fears peaked in the fall of 1992, on an "International Day" when my daughter wore her beautiful Indian salwar kameez to school. When one of the students taunted, "That's a pagan custom," I hit the ceiling. Immediately I thought, "What about school in India?" Yes! I decided. Armed with addresses of schools in North and South India, and some suggestions from the Director of Education at the Consulate of India in San Francisco, I set off to India with my reluctant, then 14-year-old to look for the school. In spite of her ambivalence about leaving behind her world of boogie boards (mini-surfboards) and cliques of sometimes bored, precocious peers who mostly hung out at MacDonalDs, I held stubbornly to my plan-visit three ashrams and carefully look at the reputed Indian boarding schools built by British and Americans over 100 years ago.

Aside from the stubborn resistance of my teenager, there were other obstacles and hardships on our pilgrimage. For one, I remember we clutched each other in terror through a driving rain, singing bhajans till we were hoarse, as our fearless, schizophrenic taxi driver lurched and slid at breakneck speed up and down muddy roads during a monsoon-for nine terrifying hours. We departed one ashram and took what an elderly pujari said was "a straight road to Ooty," a hundred miles away. This meant in actuality, that we careened uphill, all nerves and muscle, glued to our seats in a volatile mixture of fright and diesel fumes, praying that our vigilante driver would not collide with the huge trucks straining up and down a crumbling single lane road that wound past elephants, monkeys and an occasional bullock that sauntered across. We took a train that was stopped by a felled tree. With 400 passengers, we sat on the tracks for six hours while the night turned black and insects buzzed around us.

But there were soaring, blissful moments too. We were blessed with the darshan of three great living Masters, and personal interviews with two, both approved the plan to send my daughter to school in India. We experienced an amazing day at a new Buddhist monastery in Dehradun, where we sat amongst thousands of Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama, marvelling at unending performances of dances that dated back 12 centuries.

In South India, we went to Ooty, now known officially as Udagamandalam. The

wide dusty streets and horseback riders gave it a veneer of a Wild West cowboy town, albeit 7,349 feet above sea level. Nestled in the deep green woodlands planted with eucalyptus and conifers, we visited two interesting schools. The campus of Lovedale School looked straight out of England, complete with ivy climbing the walls. We loved the campus and ancient Smith Corona typewriters, but the administrator was doubtful my daughter would pass the 8th grade exams, only given in Hindi. We headed for Hebron, a co-ed British School, set in a wooded estate of 19 acres overlooking the beautiful Government Botanical Gardens, on the lower slopes of Dodabetta Peak. There was a nice mix of intellectual and sports-minded youngsters. While originally founded in 1889 as a Christian school, it is now non-sectarian.

We then flew to Delhi, spent a luxurious night at the Hyatt, then rented a taxi and headed for the foothills of Mussoorie, 8 hours and 260 km. north, snaking up a thin ribbon of a collapsing road the last hour. We took a room at the cliffside Siva Hotel, enjoying crisp mountain air at 7,000 feet and visiting two more boarding schools. Both were bright and busy, filled with ebullient kids.

Mussoorie is on the first range of the Himalayas. The British founded a "hill station" here more than 130 years ago, where they could escape the plains' summer heat. There are about a dozen English schools here, including Woodstock, founded in 1854. Its student body is about 1/3 North American, 1/3 Indian and 1/3 from other countries. At this co-ed campus, special emphasis is placed on intercultural activities. Students may choose Hindi to meet their foreign language requirements, as well as courses in Indian music. The school looks like an Ivy League campus, and despite its isolated setting, seemed to be quite American in character.

Up the valley across another ridge is Mussoorie International School for Girls. This is the one we chose for HinaRapa. This landscaped hillside campus of 46 acres built in the 1980's is totally Hindu in orientation. Fresh flowers and goldfish were in the lobby. We walked the long sunny corridors, with marble floors and windows inset with yellow trim, dozens of plaid-skirted, skipping girls. Everything is ultra modern with biology and chemistry laboratories, a fancy computer centre and swimming pool. I liked the commitment to discipline and tidiness and the vegetarian food. This seemed the perfect place for my daughter to school and also learn bharatanatyam and more about Hinduism.

Of course there are some minuses. My daughter will be 16 this month, and I cannot be with her on her birthday. The school has a lot of rules, discipline is tough-perhaps inflexible where there might be a more Mom-like tenderness, understanding and sensitivity. I am not comfortable with the lack of privacy afforded these girls; letters from outside are often opened and censored, parcels are rarely permitted except on birthdays. Communications with the school are slow and frustrating, phone calls nearly impossible. Chowkidhars, guards, are posted at the outside gates. No one gets in without special permission. There are restrictions on visiting, and basically we see each other only during the long winter break from late November to the beginning of March. Though I do not discount her loneliness, I know my daughter is learning to adjust in a challenging environment. I do see healthy, subtle changes and a great sense of humor emerging. This past winter, she wryly wrote that dorm mates liked her more for her double AA batteries than her companionship!

She has grown tall, slim and muscular from hiking up and down the mountains and her health is good, fostered by early morning aerobics and a very strong athletic program. HinaRapa is the fastest swimmer in the school. Though the separation is hard, I feel secure in the knowledge that she is safe, and protected from some of the troubling aspects of our American culture. She is working hard to meet the higher academic standards, meditating regularly now and learning sadhanas. She understands some of the Sanskrit prayers she recites daily. She is learning about Bharat and the Deities and the value of cultural exchange. There is no doubt that my daughter will continue to grow and blossom in India, to discover and develop her own resiliency and wonderful potential. What more could a mother hope for?

Daughter's View

By HinaRapa Lipton

"I left my home in Honolulu, on Valentines Day 1993 for my Big Adventure. My mother flew with me and we stayed in Singapore for about 3 days, then on to India. We travelled around first-I not really wanting to get to my destination. We went to ashrams and stayed with some really divine beings, who I hoped would enlighten my depressed soul! Nevertheless the decision for me to go to a boarding school in India was made.

Finally the day came. I left my mother and said a tearful goodbye. The school transported the girls in coaches to Mussoorie from Delhi. When I arrived there, I found it to be freezing cold. Luckily, Mom had given me her special handmade shawl just before leaving. I walked up the hill having a feeling of loneliness, dreadfulness. Unbelievably, I felt unloved. When I went up into the dorm, I made friends immediately and the girls were really nice.

In the first year, I experienced many things. First of all, I was tremendously homesick and I would cry every night before I would go to sleep. I stayed like that for about a month. But when the exams came, I didn't have time to be a crybaby. So after about 2 months, I stopped crying. I had to use that energy for studying, and also I used it to participate in the school's sports program which is great and I won all kinds of medals and certificates.

Every morning before classes, we sing a long Hindu prayer and during the religious festivals, we do all different pujas, and they teach us what happens during the functions and why we celebrate the various festivals. Just this year, they have started giving regular lectures about all different Deities and what they stand for and why we worship them.

Now that it is my second year, I'm pretty used to the rules. Occasionally, I get into trouble, but not very often! I am now a dorm monitor, and I'm also in charge of the house corridor to make sure it is decorated. I'm getting up every morning at 5:30 am for morning physical education class. I have done discus, javelin, basketball, even shotput!

What are the hard things? My main hardship at boarding school is being away from my family and friends; I still haven't quite got used to living in another part of the world for nine months. It takes a lot of courage to go there you know. It's the first time I went away for school. I didn't know anyone at the school, and I was in a country that I didn't know, with languages I didn't know either. How was I to live at the school? No idea. I just went there with my trunk and suitcase to live in the Himalayas and to study. It takes a lot of guts to do something like that, and I did it. Surprisingly! I still don't have that many friends, just two or three.

Looking at this from a parent's view, I feel if you really want to provide a good

background for your children (or yourself too) and learn non-US type of values and also to develop an open mind, you have to experience new things and different cultures. I've learned a lot of values that I know I couldn't learn in the US. That is in fact why my mother sent me to this school. I'm actually enjoying conversing to a shop owner in his or her language and they seem surprised."

Spring Break

HinaRapa is presently on spring holiday in South India at Swami Ganapathi Sachchidananda's ashram in Mysore. Here is an excerpt from a recent letter to her Mom:

"I'm so happy to be here. I lost my address book on the bus on the way down from school. Oh well, Swamiji has taught me not to attach myself to any things. I am meditating and have experienced wonderful leelas meditating at the stupa (shrine) that Swamiji made for all the people and souls that left the earth before their time. One day, Swamiji was watching me meditate from his window, and he told Prasadi, a young priest, that I looked very peaceful and at ease. I was sooo happy!"