



**Hemant PANGTEY**

I joined MSF in Apr 04 as a Medical Doctor in the field after doing my PPD (Primary departure training) in Brussels. I am among the few Indian expatriate volunteers who joined MSF when there were very few Indian with MSF. I feel proud of having the opportunity to represent India in MSF movement.

**Being an INDIAN**

In this age of Globalization and instant connectivity, being an Indian is no different than being from any other country. Thanks to pirated, ever-popular Bollywood movies, India and Indians have reached most part of the world. We are more Indian abroad than in India as people in India try to size up the individual from the caste and other subsystem one comes in from. I come from a remote village in the border part of Uttaranchal State.

In my previous and current mission many of the expatriates I worked with were Westerners, well informed about India, Indian culture, the caste system, the complexities, idiosyncrasies and food habits of Indians. The Indian food is ever popular with expats, especially the curries. As an Indian I carried spices from back home so as not to miss the Indian flavor and spice up the blend continental foods. One of the common problem, as I see, that Indians may face is about food, especially when one is vegetarian. In my long-term mission in Armenia I trained the cook in some popular Indian dishes.

**First Mission-** My first mission was with MSF in CHINA in Xiangfan town for HIV/AIDS. The first mission can be difficult in the beginning when we have to adapt to MSF way of living and working, which is community living and team work. Even though I have worked abroad for 7 years, I had to adapt and change to increase my understanding and tolerance as an individual. On the whole I had very good relations and very pleasant experience in China.

**Second Mission, Armenia-** I came to Armenia not knowing much about the country but was surprised to know that most Armenians knew about India. Indian movies are shown on local channels twice a week. I had to start PHC project in a remote part of Armenia and to live in the village, the weather is arctic in winters, -30 Celsius, surprisingly there were 14 Indian families working for a goldmine company to share all things Indian.

The second project I worked also was in Armenia but in another town. The project is for STI/HIV/AIDS.

**To understand different cultures**

Coming from different cultures, background and working overseas as a team, one has to discover by oneself, understand, appreciate and live according to the very different cultures we work and live in. This sometime creates difficulties both for national and expat counter parts. To adapt, change and to be context specific [MSF adaptation practice] is more of a common sense and observation rather than reading guidelines available in any MSF projects. There are some stereotypes about Indians but not harmful or discriminatory and can be taken in lighter vein.

**Working with MSF as it goes...**

Working with MSF, respecting MSF charter and believing in what the organization stands for helped me stay with MSF. For me MSF is also a career and very worth the effort I had made, to work in such an international, multicultural and associative way of life. One gains wealth of vast personal and professional knowledge and experience. This is what I have felt and understood in 5 years of my working with MSF. It is my personal experience but one can feel the pulse when one is in the organisation. For professional work, one has to be competent in what one is supposed to do otherwise the staff, both national and International, will not take you seriously. To work in different cultures, ways of life, working with colleagues with varied backgrounds is quiet challenging. Like dealing with challenging authorities or with a very bureaucratic system can be frustrating but with patience, experience, respecting and appreciating the local culture one can find the ways out, it is worth the effort and rewarding. If we are too idealistic and rigid, we will find ourself in trouble and not the other way. One will gather the experience over the years working with MSF. For me, this experience is personal, individualized and may not be generalized. Till now I have worked in projects with stable context as well as a context like Zimbabwe which has given me the right kind of exposure and opportunities. I can say with confidence now that I can to do it and encourage the future volunteers to share the same experience by working with MSF. I am not detailing about the work I have done so far, because it may sound like my job description but I tried to share the diversity and team nature of our work.

**HEMANT PANGTEY**, Medical Coordinator: Mission in China, October 2009