



Dear MSF volunteer,

My name is Hemant Pangtey. I joined MSF in Apr 04 as a Medical Doctor in the field after doing my PPD (Primary departure training) in Brussels.

**Being an INDIAN** - In this age of globalisation 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 subsystems 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. They were 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 bland continental foods. One of the common problems, 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 with MSF was in China, where I was working in an HIV/AIDS project in Xiangfan town. The first mission can be difficult in the beginning when we have to adapt to the 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 a very pleasant experience in China.

**Second Mission, Armenia-** I came to Armenia not knowing much about the country but was surprised to learn that most Armenians knew about India. Indian movies are shown on local channels twice a week. I had to start a PHC (primary health care) project in a remote part of Armenia and to live in a small village. The weather is arctic in winters; -30 degrees Celsius. But to my big surprise there were 14 Indian families working for a goldmine company to share all things Indian with. The second project I worked in was also in Armenia but in another town. That project focused on sexually transmitted infections and people who were living with HIV or 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 sometimes 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 I never considered them to be harmful or discriminatory. A sense of humor usually solves most misunderstandings.

**Working with MSF** - Working with MSF, respecting the MSF charter and believing in what the organisation stands for helped me stay with MSF. For me MSF is a career, very much worth the effort I have made to work in such an international, multicultural and associative way of life. One gains a lot of vast personal and professional knowledge and experience. This is what I have felt and understood in the 5 years that I've been 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. Working in different cultures, ways of life, working with colleagues with varied backgrounds is quite challenging. Dealing with challenging authorities or with a very bureaucratic system can be frustrating but with patience, experience, respect and appreciation of the local culture one can find ways to handle this properly. Ultimately, it is worth the effort and rewarding. If we are too idealistic and rigid, we will find ourselves in trouble. You gather experience over the years whilst working with MSF. For me, this experience is personal, individual and cannot be generalised. Until now I have worked both in projects with stable contexts as well as a country like Zimbabwe which has given me the right kind of exposure and opportunities. I can say with confidence now that I can do it and encourage the future volunteers to share the same experience by working with MSF. I am not describing the work I've done in detail, because it might sound too much like a standard job description. Working with MSF is anything but standard. It's the diversity and team spirit that makes this work so valuable and enjoyable, and that's what I've tried sharing with you.

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