

Cultural & Ethical Guidelines for Volunteers and Trainees at SISP

Cultural surroundings

SISP is a private and independent organization located in Kerala, a southern state of India, in the town of Kovalam. Kovalam used to be a small fishing village, but the development has brought mass tourism and heavy tourist industry to the beautiful beach front in the recent years. Still social problems such as alcoholism, family violence, child labor, and extreme poverty are wide spread throughout the area.

Most men in the concerned area – or at least most of the men connected with SISP – are occupied in the fishing industry. They mostly do coolie work, meaning that they are hired from day to day to work on somebody else's boats. Many men are not able to find work more than 15 days a month and, depending on season and on luck, one day's work can earn them 25 to 100 rupees. Furthermore a surprisingly large portion of these men, will spent their free time drinking alcohol, leaving very little money to supply the households.

The main religions in the area are Hindu, Christianity, and Islam. While approximately half the population is Hindu, Christians and Moslems share the other half more or less equally. They mostly live in separate areas although the townships, where some of the very poorest live, generally seem to be more mixed. Currently the different religions have a respectful and peaceful relationship, but there have been some serious tension between Christians and Muslims with some eruptions of violence about ten years ago.

Cautions & Courtesies

We do not wish to impose strict rules on the people who generously offer their assistance to our projects, but we have found it necessary to strongly recommend some limitations the public behavior of our volunteers and trainees. Please respect these in order to make it possible for us and future volunteers and trainees to help the children and the poor of this area.

It is still very much expected and required that you keep family and intimate relationships within your religion and caste. SISP have actually had some very serious problems with the local population in the past, because the center has functioned as a frame for some inter caste and inter religious love relationships. Rumors about how SISP was trying to match Indian people with foreigners, destroy local traditions, and assist young people in running away have been so persistent that local villagers have even threatened with having protest marches to have the SISP center closed down for good.

In the recent time we have succeeded in regaining much of the trust and confidence in the area. But it would only take a small spark to ignite another flash of skepticism and rumors, which could seriously harm SISP and the people we are trying to help.

During the years we have many volunteers and trainees doing their best to help out at SISP. But in time they all return home to their own countries and their homes. For the staff, children, and beneficiaries this means that they regularly have to say goodbye to, what have often become, good friends. We ask you just to be aware of the inequality in such relationships. The people native to this area are quite aware that the volunteer or intern return to the wealthy West and some sort of social security, while they have no choice but to stay and deal with poverty and other social threats for the rest of their lives. Please consider this thoroughly before you engage in long term or exclusive friendships with any locals, especially those attached to SISP.

Photos from at trip to India are almost a necessity, and many Indian people also find it acceptable. However you can never know for certain how the person(s) you're about to photograph feel about it. Some do in fact find it offensive, so make sure to ask permission before eternalizing anyone's image on facebook or in your own photo album.

The children

Keep in mind at all times that the children who come to attend the SISP school are among the most underprivileged in Kerala. This means that many of them have had to endure malnutrition, hard labor, discrimination, hunger, deaths of loved ones, violence both at home and at school, and failure upon failure in the public school system. We cannot say how many of our children have been subjected to it, but sex-tourists that come here specifically for children is not an unknown phenomenon, and it is more or less openly discussed that some fishermen will bring young boys with them for sexual purposes when they go fishing for several days.

For these reason we are very strict when it comes to our staff's, volunteers', and trainees' behavior around the children. Any aggressive, violent, or sexual gestures are completely unacceptable, and we do hope that you in all situations will remember the more than difficult conditions and traumatizing experiences that our children have to deal with.

The opposite sex

In Kerala it is not common for young people of opposite sex to meet freely on informal occasions, though this will not prevent the elder boys at our school from inviting any new and interesting foreign volunteer to meet with them after school hours. Apparently the gossip is extra sensitive to the interactions between foreigners and locals, and you must be aware that something as simple as walking privately down the street with a boy can cause harmful rumors about intimate relationships. Because of our previous negative experiences of this kind, we ask you to please refrain from fraternizing too much with any particular student or member of our staff outside the SISP center. It may be convenient for you to know, that hanging out with people connected SISP is not as likely to spark rumors when they form a group as it would be if you met them individually.

If you are male and are going to accompany our female social workers on their visits to the surrounding villages and townships, you should also be prepared to maintain a respectable distance of about 20 to 40 meters between you. Be also aware that when going on busses, men and women sit separately on assigned seats.

In India you are considered to be single if you are not legally married. So if you come here with a boy- or girlfriend, you can expect to have to try to explain the nature of your relationship over and over again to disbelieving and often disapproving locals.

Some experienced travelers have even found it simplest just to pretend to be married. But this strategy can also be a little risky, as it may open the door for a new cascade of questions about your wedding. We advice you to just tell the truth and try to add some explanation about how women's financial independence, the social welfare, and the more liberal approach to religions in many western countries, have also changed the meaning of marriage and intimate relationships. But married or not, it is important to know that any "public display of affection" (such as kissing and holding each other) is very offensive in Indian cultures.

"Party time"

As already mentioned, alcoholism is very extensive and a major contributor to many of the social problems of the area. It may seem like something of a paradox then, that public drinking and drunkenness is considered a serious cultural and legal offense. Even if you just buy a couple of beers from one of the "Beer Shops", you are expected to bring a bag or a box to conceal the goods while carrying them to your accommodation. The Kerala government has also recently passed a law that actually forbids smoking in public places. The respect for and enforcement of this law is very different from place to place, so you must do your best to see what the locals do and just ask around.

Some of our oldest students have already begun to show signs of repeating the negative examples from their fathers of getting drunk on every possible occasion. It is likely that you will be invited to join these festivities, and in such cases, please show a better example, than many of the boys have seen at home. You can decline the invitations politely, or you can accept and use the situation to try to talk with them about responsible behavior with alcohol. In any case we would appreciate if you would inform the management when such invitations occur and we are of course always willing to advice you on the situation.

In your own time it is hard for us to tell you what to do. But now when you know what can cause negative attention, please consider how you would feel if you observed a staff member from the school of your own child behaving in what you would consider to be a really offensive way.

Left or Right

In India you eat with your fingers, or, to be more specific, with your *right* hand. The left one is for something else that you do not wish to have associated with your food. The technique is to roll the food into small ball (roughly the size of a ping-pong ball), scoop it up with your three middle fingers, and use the back of your thumb to push it into your mouth. It really makes sense once you get the hang of it, but remember to make sure that you curry has cooled off a bit before you eat and don't just rush ahead and grab a handful that could melt a rock.

Another important notice in this context is that it is considered very impolite to hand something to someone with the left hand or just to touch them with it. Try to picture your left hand covered with used toilet paper and you'll probably get a pretty good idea of what and what not to do with it.

Dress code

You don't have to go out and acquire a full Indian wardrobe before you start working at SISP, but we do ask of our staff that both males and females make sure to have their shoulders and legs covered during their work time. Deep cleavages and very tight or transparent clothing is also something that would be rather inappropriate at SISP.

Beggars & Compassion

First of all you must know that the concepts of pride and dignity in Indian cultures (especially here in the South) do not allow anyone to go begging unless they are absolutely desperate. But then again there are quite a few people here who are "absolutely desperate". Some may feel bothered when they experience that the beggars will target them because of the expectations of wealth that are associated with foreign tourists. But whenever you should be approached by people asking for help, please consider their desperation and think about what you would do in their situation - no matter if you actually agree to give something or not. And even though it seems as if they only approach foreigners, it is actually quite common for even very poor Indians to donate what little they can for beggars once in a while.

We do, on the other hand, have a policy, that our staff, which includes our volunteers and trainees, is not allowed to make private donations in their work time. Especially if you would follow our social workers in the field and see the extremities of poverty under which our beneficiaries suffer, you are likely to feel a need to "give a little extra". You will see how, what may seem to you as a very little contribution, can make an enormous difference in the lives of these people in deep despair. They may even ask you specifically for a small help in the most heartbreaking ways.

The main reason we ask you not to give such private donations is that we are dedicated to maintaining a policy of non-discrimination. The rumors, which start and spread so easily, are likely to also carry the message of one beneficiary getting "special treatment" to other beneficiaries who, with good reason, cannot understand why *they* weren't the lucky ones to get chosen by the "wealthy" foreign donator. We also do not wish for it to become a tradition that our foreign volunteers and trainees are expected to give private donations all day long on top of the work that they are already performing.

So even though you can feel very tempted to relieve yourself of some emotional distress, that can be caused by witnessing such suffering, by giving a little extra help privately, we must ask you to consider the negative impact it can have on our work in general. If you feel that you really need to do something for one particular family, group, or individual, we encourage you to wait until the end of your stay here and do it in your private time.

Modesty & Hospitality

In many western countries it is commonly considered to be polite behavior for a guest to show modesty and to be aware of the needs of the host. When visiting the home of someone in your own country who is in obvious material need, it may feel natural for you to politely decline any food or beverages that they may offer, thinking that they shouldn't have expenses on your behalf.

In India hospitality is very highly valued and a foreign guest is considered to be something special. When you enter an Indian household, be aware that they will probably do their best to serve you some tea, snacks, or sometimes even full meals, without even asking you first. And it is also likely that they won't be having anything themselves.

If you try to show your modesty and understanding of their poverty by declining their offer, you can accidentally end up preventing them from showing their dignity in maintaining what they consider to be correct social behavior. We advise you to gratefully accept what you are offered (or brought), and if you really wish to decline, you can always explain that you have unfortunately just ate or that you are struggling with some stomach problems.

The SISP Center – Rules & Practical Information

When you are within the SISP center you shouldn't have to worry so much about cultural misunderstandings and rumors. Students and staff are getting pretty accustomed to tourists and volunteers and their crazy customs. Still it is good to keep in mind the advices and guidelines that you have already read in the above.

The center facilitates a school, three workshops, and the social workers' office. Opening hours are from 9 am to 6 pm. The main break is between 1 am & 2 pm in which lunch is served. The general rule is that the students have to form a line for the serving starting with the youngest and ending with staff and volunteers. All staff, volunteers, and trainees are entitled to a meal on the days when they are working at SISP. The staff and the volunteers also get additional smaller breaks of ten minutes each at 11 am and 4 pm. If you are a smoker, you're welcome to use these breaks to wander discreetly outside the center premises for a cigarette, but smoking is *not* allowed within the center.

Especially for trainees it is important to know that the standards of and balance between training time, study, and relaxation is quite different in India. The working day for trainees will usually be from 9 am to 6 pm from Monday to Friday. If you need more time for school work, you can always try to make arrangements with the management and you should under all circumstances discuss your situation with

your SISP contact regularly.

When you're working with SISP we expect you to respect a code of confidentiality. This means not mentioning any information that could be used to identify any particular individual or group associated with SISP. This type of information includes names and any personal physical or mental characteristics. We value the confidentiality very high, so if you have any doubt, it is important that you address the management for consultation.

The Contract

We consider the mission of SISP and the work we do here to be too valuable to be jeopardized by rumors or stories of some volunteer's (unintended or not) cultural insensitive behavior. In any working environment where children are concerned, it is also customary to take extra measures to ensure that all personnel respect the more fragile nature of these.

This is why, when you come to work at the SISP center in Kovalam, you will be asked to submit an official document that certifies you to work with children as well as to sign a contract that summarizes the values and codes of conduct expressed in this document. Besides from the primary purpose of ensuring respect for these values, this is for the sake of the volunteer or trainee as well as for the management and staff at SISP. In case any foreign volunteer or trainee should behave in any way that could cause problems for our work, we need to be able to terminate the work agreement in an orderly and reasonable manner. In the same way it is only fair that all volunteers and trainees have a clear understanding of what we consider to be unacceptable conduct when working at SISP.

We hope that the previous has given you an understanding of why we ask you to submit to these ground rules and values and sign this contract that can be used for measurement in cases of violation.

Paul Van Gelder
Man. Dir. – Pres.

Kumari G. Unnithan
P.O. – Secr.

Kovalam, 2011