

# We shared the language of laughter

By Annika S. Hipple | DECEMBER 31, 2004



'Hello, madam, rickshaw? Where are you going? Hello, madam! Hello? Hello!' The rickshaw wallahs swarmed around disembarking passengers at the bus depot in Delhi, India, their singsong English aimed at likely clients. As an obvious non-Indian and a young woman traveling alone, I attracted more than my fair share of attention. I shouldered my backpack and tried to get out of the crush of people. I did need a rickshaw, but I had learned not to appear too interested if I wanted to get a good price.

I had been in India for three weeks, visiting an American friend, Shannon, who was spending the year in Varanasi as a student. Blonde and blue-eyed, Shannon spoke fluent Hindi, to the constant astonishment of Indians. Shannon's Hindi skills enriched my Indian experience by gaining us entrance to people's homes and daily lives. On more than one occasion, they turned an uncomfortable situation into an enjoyable one.

I remember one incident in Jaipur, the capital of the northwestern state of Rajasthan. Walking along a downtown street, we passed three young men sitting on a stoop. Our appearance prompted an immediate barrage of lewd English. Wanting to avoid trouble, I generally ignored this sort of thing and just kept walking. Most times, Shannon did, too.

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This time, however, something inside her snapped. Uncapping her half-empty water bottle, Shannon strode over to the young men. Their faces lighted up - until she began berating them in Hindi and pouring the remaining water in her bottle over their heads. Three jaws dropped as the young men cowered on the stoop, hands up to block the water. I noticed several other men laughing as they passed by.

Water gone, Shannon threw the empty bottle at the young men's feet, turned on her heel, then grabbed my arm and hurried me around the corner. Safely out of view, we both burst into laughter.

"What did you say to them?" I asked.

"I told them they were getting overheated and needed cooling down."

That set us off again. Whether the young men had learned a lesson or not was questionable, but Shannon had certainly given them - and us - an experience not easily forgotten.

Now in Delhi on my own for a night, I had decided to try out the Hindi I had picked up. After escaping the frenetic crush at the bus depot, I surveyed the bicycle rickshaws lined up along the curb.

"You need rickshaw, madam?" asked one barefoot rickshaw wallah.

I nodded.

"Where you going?"

"Connaught Place *chaliye*." (I'm going to Connaught Place.)

"Ah, Hindi!" The rickshaw wallah beamed. He named a price in rupees.

I didn't know enough numbers to understand the amount he had quoted, but I thought I heard the word *bis*, or 20.

"*Behut jaddaa hai*." That's too much, I told him.

"How much?" he asked me in Hindi.

I didn't know any of the numbers in the teens, so I told him *das*, 10 rupees.

By this time, a small crowd of rickshaw wallahs had gathered, amazed at the sight of a Western woman bargaining in Hindi. I was proud of myself.

Then I ran out of Hindi.

One of the rickshaw wallahs asked me something. I caught the word Hindi and knew he was asking me how I had learned the language, but I had no idea how to answer. I didn't even know how to explain that I only spoke a little Hindi. All I could think of was one word, *choté*, which I had read in an Indian novel. It had been used to distinguish the younger of two twins, Choté Sahib, from his older brother, Burra Sahib. I knew *burra* meant great or large, so I figured *choté* meant small or little.

The rickshaw wallahs were all waiting for an answer.

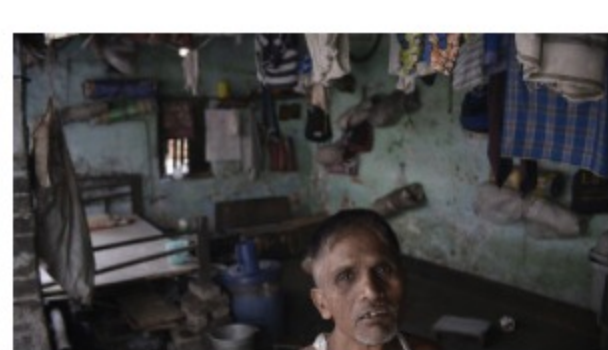
I shook my head. "Choté Hindi," I said.

All at once, the crowd of rickshaw wallahs erupted into laughter. They laughed until they were bent almost double. I turned bright red but managed to hang onto a sheepish grin.

Once their hilarity subsided, the rickshaw wallahs dispersed. My credibility blown, I completed a fare negotiation in English and climbed into the rickshaw.

As the rickshaw wallah pedaled me through the chaotic streets of New Delhi, I decided my Hindi bargaining attempt had been a success. I might not have managed to carry on an entire conversation in Hindi, but it seemed that a more meaningful cultural exchange had taken place. I suspect the rickshaw wallahs continued laughing all day at the *videshi* girl who spoke only small Hindi. The few moments of shared laughter on that New Delhi street were worth the small price of embarrassment. ■

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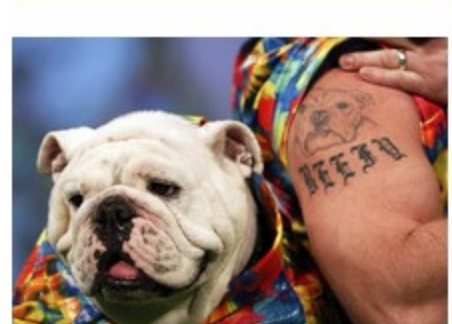


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