

I Say Lady's Finger, You say Okra, Together We Say "Let's just shut up and eat!"

"Trowbridge Road Walk Time!" I was still ten feet from the crossing. "Wow!", I thought maybe a sensor 'saw' me approaching and stopped traffic to let me cross. But as I reached the crossing, the friendly, inviting white figure of a person walking changed into a red flashing hand. "Huh?", I stopped cold in my tracks. The hand stopped flashing but stayed red (and decidedly unfriendly). I looked around to blindly do whatever my fellow pedestrians would do. Found none. (Driving license? Perhaps I needed a 'walking license' to use the side-walks!) The cars slowed down as they neared me at the crossing as if they were expecting me to madly jump in front of them in my bid to cross the road. (What rubbish? I was prepared to wait till sunset for the signal to change! I did not realize that they were offering to let me cross.) Couple of minutes passed and The Hand was still red. I saw a button and a sign on a pole. "To Cross, Press Button". Press button? Is that all? Oh! Perhaps all lights will turn red, traffic will come to a screeching standstill and I will cross the road like a Sultan! But what if I accidentally start a pile-up? What if all the drivers start cursing? Who knows? Perhaps I could get booked for violating some traffic-rule? May even go to jail? May be lynched by the public? Nah, too risky... I shall wait. Just then, "Trowbridge Road Walk Time!" Ah! Sweet, sweet rescue! And I crossed hurriedly before The Hand returned.

This was one of the many confounding encounters with the highly automated American way of life.

Hello MSU, my name is Param. I come from the small town, Cuttack, (the first capital of Orissa, one of the poorest states in India). In Cuttack, traffic lights have been introduced only recently, and only in the busiest of squares. There are no road signs. You know (or rather guess) what place you are in by reading the address on the board in front of the shops. Here the honking of horns is conspicuous by its absence. There if you don't honk, you are likely to run over some jaywalker. There are some wide roads, mostly narrow winding lanes and no side-walks. There is an implicit understanding where pedestrians are supposed to walk. You will find cows, bulls and dogs roaming on the roads with gay abandon. No traffic rules apply to them and you just have to weave your way around them, staying clear of the horns of the bull and praying that the dog you are about to

walk by is not rabid. You can park almost anywhere; no fines, no tickets and absolutely no chance of your vehicle being towed away. And crossing the road? You better be fast!

There, monthly rent for a 3-bedroom-2-bathroom apartment with a separate room for kitchen, a garage, a terrace and a lawn is about Rs. 6000 (less than \$150, cheap even by Indian standards!) Any normal bicycle repair wouldn't cross Rs. 20 (less than 50 cents). The washer-man does your laundry (plus ironing) for less than 25 cents for a set of shirt and regular trousers. (MS-Word does not even recognize 'washerman' and underlined it in red, so I hyphenated it). For \$100, one can eat out on most days and still spare enough for the month's groceries. So, understandably, there's a knot in my stomach each time I check out the price of an item. (I actually gasped as I read the price printed on one of the *used* textbooks in the Spartan Bookstore.)

There, the temperatures in summer are normally around 40-45°C (about 110°F). Heat strokes and sun strokes are routine. The temperature here in the month of Aug would be that of early winter back home. In the words of Eric, one of my American friends, come winter and I'm in for 'the treat of my life!'

There, no public transport bus is air-conditioned. People get packed in like sardines, initially jostling for space but finally tire out and stand on their toes in their designated 5-square-inch space (some actually fall asleep standing!), standing still for most part of the bumpy ride. To get off, you have to make your way through the crush of people at least 10 minutes before your stop comes and make enough noise and commotion to catch the bus conductor's attention. My first bus ride here was something like this: Got on at Spartan Village, was taken by surprise by the driver's "how're you doing today?", smiled and mumbled something incoherent in reply, swiped my bus pass the wrong way and the driver politely showed me how to do it, stood throughout the ride even though most seats were empty, got down near Trowbridge Plaza instead of the CATA Transit Centre and had to walk to the Engineering Building. Getting off the bus is a story in itself. I had a faint idea that I was supposed to pull the yellow cord near the window, but did not see a bell hanging anywhere. What if the cord was linked to the breaks instead of an electronic bell? I could have simply asked someone, but what fool doesn't

know how to get off the bus!!! So I got down at Trowbridge Plaza when the bus stopped for some passengers. I've also got onto the wrong buses and have got off at the wrong stops and once, had to walk from Meijers to Walmart and back (!).

So! I am finally here at MSU! After 75 hours of travel (40 odd inside India itself), canceled flights, lost luggage pursuit, the trip to US is a sleep deprived, jet-lagged haze, a blur with many disjointed memories suddenly springing forth in vivid detail. No amount of American television and Hollywood movies (perhaps the most visible, but misleading window into the 'American world') could have prepared me for this new life. I have hardly been here for a fortnight and perhaps, am still to come to terms with the magnitude of the change, the mind-boggling array of choices and opportunities, and above all, the American way of life – one that is so diverse and yet so similar to the life back home. Some of the changes were expected; petrol is called gas, toilet became restroom, biscuits became cookies, foot-paths become sidewalk.... And some surprises: 'Curd' became yogurt, lady's finger became okra, people keep their used stuff near trash-bins for others to take away and use, seeing a lady on roller skates pushing a pram with her baby in it (!), seeing a guy clad only in shorts (while I had my hands in my pockets to keep them warm) and zipping across the sidewalk on a skateboard, with his right arm tattooed from shoulder to finger tips and hair spiked up, being able to drink water directly from the tap without risking hospitalization.

Every helpful piece of automation was a problem at first. Using the ATM, using the debit-card, self-check-out after shopping, doing laundry... everything that was a routine act in India became a novel experience. But more difficult to understand was the utter friendliness of the people, being greeted so cheerfully, welcomed and helped by total strangers. (The first time a person at the sales counter at Goodrich said, "Have a good one." After I made my purchase, I gave her a goofy polite smile, and got out wondering what 'one' was and on top of that, how was I supposed to have a 'good one'.) These frequent expressions of such social courtesies and niceties were new at first.

But soon the 'new' became familiar, the 'daunting' became helpful..... and strangers became friends. I

remember walking into MSU Printing Services for a part-time job – just walked in with a friend, fully expecting something on these lines- “What? Job? NO! What do you expect? You just waddle in and we hire you?” Guess what? I got the job! And made my first American friends. Thanks Dennis.

The biggest initial challenge was not to form immediate opinions and judgments about anything, and to stay open-minded. Getting a job, receiving precise directions (the MSU campus map was a lifesaver, but not if you are cartographically challenged like me!), opening a bank account, finding the individual buildings and then the rooms within the building, shopping, information about bus routes, recovering my lost luggage – I received help from total strangers at in unexpected, serendipitous ways.

It’s only been a few days, and homesickness is still to peak. This ‘honeymoon’ period will end. Classes will start in a week. I am plagued with questions and doubts about what to expect, like most new students. Like everybody will be juggling a lot of things. There will be struggle, failure, and disappointment.... The problems and roadblocks could be endless, but so are the possibilities. No matter what troubles come my way, or how tough the going gets, I am sure I’ll always find help and inspiration. At this moment, when I am poised on this jumping board of life, waiting to take the plunge, when I am anxious yet determined, unsure yet confident, I am reminded of these lines from a hymn we sung in school:

‘There’s a fight to be fought and a race to run,

There are dangers to meet by the way.

But the Lord is my Light and the Lord is my Life

And the Lord is my strength and stay.’

One thing is for sure. On the Roads and Streets of this Life here at MSU, it will always be “WALK TIME!!!”