

Tibetan Studies in India Program

Program Environment Fact Sheet

This fact sheet describes the living conditions, physical environment, and practical realities of our January program in Sarnath, India. Our goal is to provide you with accurate information so you can make an informed decision about whether this program is right for you. If you have questions or would like to discuss how any of these conditions might affect your participation, please contact the program director.

Air Quality

The program operates during January, which is the peak season for poor air quality in North India. Multiple factors contribute to this: agricultural burning, vehicle emissions, industrial pollution, and temperature inversions that trap particulates close to the ground.

In Varanasi and Sarnath, the Air Quality Index (AQI) regularly reaches levels classified as "unhealthy" or "very unhealthy" by World Health Organization standards. Delhi, where the program begins and ends, often experiences even more severe conditions, sometimes reaching "hazardous" levels.

Participants are exposed to these conditions daily, both outdoors during program activities and indoors in buildings, as they lack air filtration systems. This exposure is continuous throughout the three-week program. These conditions can be particularly challenging for individuals with respiratory conditions such as asthma or COPD.

Temperature and Housing

Participants are housed at the Anathapindada Guest House at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies. Winter temperatures in this region are mild by New England standards during the day (typically 10–20°C / 50–68°F) but drop considerably at night, often falling below 10°C (50°F) and occasionally approaching freezing.

Buildings in this region are designed to manage the intense summer heat. They are constructed with thick walls, high ceilings, and ventilation features that keep interiors cool during hot months. The same design means these buildings are cold during winter. There is no central heating. Indoor temperatures at night can be quite cold, and participants should expect to sleep in unheated rooms.

All participants must bring sleeping bags rated for cold weather. This is not optional—blankets alone are insufficient for comfortable sleep in January.

Physical Environment

Housing is located on the second and third floors of the guest house. There is no elevator. Accessing your room requires climbing two or three flights of stairs, and daily program activities mean making this trip multiple times each day.

Outside the Institute, the physical environment presents additional challenges. Varanasi is an ancient city where the built environment developed organically over centuries. Sidewalks are rare. Streets and lanes feature uneven surfaces, steps, open drainage channels, and obstacles. Pedestrians, vehicles, animals, and vendors share narrow passages. Program activities involve extensive walking—often for one or more hours at a stretch—on this varied terrain.

Cycle rickshaws and auto-rickshaws are available for transportation between locations, and we use them regularly. However, walking remains unavoidable. Airports and train stations require walking through large facilities. Buddhist pilgrimage sites—stupas, temples, ruins—involve walking on uneven ground and are not accessible by vehicle. Moreover, the country's many holy places, whether Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Jain, require that one remove one's shoes before entry and walk barefoot inside. Even with motorized transport between destinations, participants should expect to walk regularly throughout the program.

Program Pace

The days are often long and demanding. There is an optional meditation session before breakfast, classes throughout the morning, and often an outing in the afternoon. The program is rich with educational and cultural experiences, but it is also very full. Participants should expect a sustained level of engagement and activity throughout the three weeks, with limited unstructured time.

Crowds and Sensory Environment

Varanasi is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and one of the most densely populated cities in India. It is also one of the holiest cities in Hinduism, drawing millions of pilgrims annually. The combination of residential density, commercial activity, religious pilgrimage, and tourism creates an environment that is intensely crowded.

Program activities regularly take participants into spaces where close physical proximity to large numbers of people is unavoidable: the ghats along the Ganges, narrow lanes of the old city, temple complexes, and markets. Noise levels can be intense—temple bells, traffic, vendors, music, and the general density of human activity create a constant soundscape.

The program also engages directly with Hindu traditions around death and dying. Varanasi is a major pilgrimage site for end-of-life rituals, and the cremation ghats are an important part of the city's religious and cultural landscape. Participants will likely encounter funeral processions, and if one wanders along the riverfront, cremations.

Food Environment

Meals are prepared by cooking staff at the Anathapindada Guest House in a kitchen dedicated to our program. This arrangement allows for some flexibility in accommodating dietary needs, and we work with our kitchen staff to address restrictions where feasible.

However, there are practical limits:

Capacity constraints: The kitchen staff prepare meals for the entire group of 15–20 people. Accommodating one or two dietary modifications is generally manageable. Accommodating multiple distinct restrictions simultaneously becomes increasingly difficult and may not be possible.

Regional cuisine: North Indian cooking relies heavily on dairy products (ghee, paneer, yogurt) and typically includes chili peppers even in dishes described as mild. Tibetan dishes such as thukpa, thenthuk, and momo—staples of our menu, given our location at a Tibetan institution—contain wheat.

Allergen protocols: Our kitchen staff are experienced and accommodating, but they have not been trained in clinical allergen management protocols such as those used in hospital or institutional food service settings in the United States. Cross-contamination prevention is limited.

Excursions: When the program visits Varanasi for excursions, meals are taken at local restaurants where ingredient control is limited and cross-contamination is common. Street food is ubiquitous, but ingredients are rarely labeled and vendors cannot reliably identify allergens.

The following ingredients are pervasive in the foods we encounter:

Ingredient	Presence in Local Cuisine
Dairy	Ghee, paneer, yogurt, and milk are foundational. Present in most dishes, including many that do not obviously contain them.
Chili peppers	Ubiquitous in North Indian cooking. Even dishes described as "not spicy" typically contain some chili. Part of the nightshade family.
Wheat/Gluten	Staple of both North Indian cuisine (roti, naan, paratha) and Tibetan cuisine (thukpa, thenthuk, momo). Served at virtually every meal.
Legumes/Nuts	Peanuts and tree nuts common in sweets, snacks, and some savory dishes. Lentils and other legumes are dietary staples.

Medical Facilities

Sarnath is a small town with limited medical infrastructure. Basic medical care is available locally, but facilities capable of treating serious conditions—including anaphylaxis and severe respiratory distress—are located in Varanasi, approximately 40 minutes away under normal traffic conditions. Traffic in Varanasi can be unpredictable, and this travel time may be longer during peak hours or festival periods.

Participants with conditions that could require emergency medical intervention should factor this distance into their planning.

Psychological and Psychiatric Services

The Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies does not offer psychological or psychiatric services, and access to English-speaking mental health professionals in Sarnath and Varanasi is extremely limited.

The program is intensive. Days are full, unstructured time is limited, and opportunities for solitude are rare. Participants are living in close quarters with the group throughout the three weeks. The sensory environment—crowds, noise, unfamiliar food, disrupted sleep patterns, and encounters with poverty and death—can be emotionally challenging even for students without preexisting mental health concerns.

Health Disclosure and Accommodations

We are committed to making this program accessible to students and to working with individuals to identify reasonable accommodations when possible. All applicants are asked to disclose any health conditions, disabilities, or dietary restrictions that may be relevant to their participation.

Disclosure initiates a confidential, individualized conversation about your needs and what accommodations may be feasible given the program environment. Some conditions may be readily accommodated; others may require creative problem-solving; in some cases, we may conclude together that the risks or limitations cannot be adequately addressed.

Our goal is to ensure that students who participate can do so safely and can fully engage with the program's academic and experiential components.

Questions?

If you have questions about whether this program is right for you, we encourage you to contact the program director to discuss your specific situation before applying. We are happy to talk through the realities of the program environment and help you think through what participation would look like.