

Reflections on India

Kuyilappalayam, Puducherry, 25 February 2017

Introduction: I have just completed VegiVentures 3 week tour of Kerala & Tamil Nadu with an eclectic group of 14 women and 3 men. Two of the women were born in India. We began in Ernakulam, the business part of Kochi, a west coast port. Across the wide estuary known as Vembanad Lake, passed massive oil tankers, cruise ships, tiny fishing canoes and diving porpoises, the peninsula of Fort Cochin offers romance, tourist attractions and the 'Kerala Kathakali Centre' an excellent arts theatre with daily classical Indian dance, music, yoga and morning ragas. Historically, as a major spice-port, Cochin was squabbled over in turn by the Portugese, the Dutch and finally the British. Occasionally restored but mostly crumbling remnants of these colonial masters remain along the shores.

From Kochi we went south on a basic Sleeper Class train to Alleppy and boarded boats for a relaxing two-night backwaters cruise, pampered with delicious Kerala cooking. Then by minibus through rubber plantations to Kumily, a jungle-surrounded hill-station in the Western Ghats, where we trekked in the Periyar Tiger Reserve, without seeing tigers. An armed guard accompanied us, just in case.



Keralan 'leaf' lunch

Here are a few reflections, scribbled when I found time:

3 February: From Kerala's Western Ghats, we have moved further into the heart of India and are



tank & gopuram, Madurai

now at Madurai, the principal inland centre of Tamil culture. The temple is a vast exuberant celebration of the Hindu Goddess Meenakshi and all things feminine. Some of the group are beginning to act a bit stunned and bewildered! I'm bewildered by our local temple guide called Castro, a tall, slim 20 something. His English is good, but he fails to mention Meenakshi even once during his tour and totally misses the whole female/fertility worship aspect. Families descend here to arrange marriages, pray for conception, make offerings for easy and healthy birth, give thanks after a successful birth... It plays a big part in the social life of Tamils, attracting, I notice, some muslim visitors as well as hindus. Interestingly Castro has his own agenda, preferring to lecture us on how ancient Hindu mythology recounts modern 'truths' that are now accepted by science. I share that view, but on its own it's way too narrow for Madurai.

Tonight, our Indian guide recommended a Son-et-Lumière show at the Mahal (Madurai's gigantic, magnificent Mogul palace). Turned out to be a rather boring, one-hour jingoistic history of the kings of Madurai. But the night-time minibus ride back to our hotel makes up for it. First we witness a physical fight (I think there was some dispute over a motorbike). Interestingly this involves a lot of pulling, pushing and fast open handed slapping. No heavy punches are thrown. There appears to be a code to prevent serious injury. We drive on through busy dimly-lit streets of small dusky shops, markets and pavement-sellers offering everything from generators to mobile phones, and from car parts to saris, plus masses of produce especially bananas in a variety of colours and sizes... The atmosphere is purposeful chaos: in the jammed honking traffic we crawl past a good-looking fit young man in a smart grey shirt and lungi (loin cloth). He's straining at the pedals of a tricycle and trailer, laden with 4 large sacks, probably rice. For a moment he stops straining and communicates over the crowd by a kind of semaphore with a man in a doorway on a mobile phone...

Part one of the tour ends and we travel south to Cheranmahadevi near Tirunelveli. Here we begin the NGO stage.

7 February: I love many cultures, but it's India that grips my attention like no other country. Every day opens new windows on Indian life. On our second afternoon at NGO SCAD (Social Change and Development) near Tirunelveli in southern Tamil Nadu we visit Pudukkudi, nicknamed the Saree Village. Pudukkudi is like a rectangular island of clean, concrete-surfaced streets full of small single-story, light blue houses with pitched roofs, and dark rooms. Most were built in the 19th century or before. This 'island' is surrounded on 3 sides by beautiful rice-paddies and on the 4th side a large banyan tree shades a deep ditch full of rubbish... We duck our heads under a carved teak lintel and enter one of the dimly-lit family homes. Kindly, they have cleared space for us in their one main room about 12 x 15 feet. Here the family eat, sleep on rolled out mats, entertain and weave. Filling one third of the room is a wooden loom, set-up with colourful threads for making saris. A man in his 50's, stripped to the waist, wearing a green lungi (loin cloth) and green scarf, works the loom with his hands and feet. The saree pattern is fed from above his head via concertina'd punch-cards, like those from a barrel-organ. It takes 2 days to set up the loom and 2 – 4 days to weave a saree, which may sell for only 800 rupees (£10). Competition from factory-made sarees (even worn by women in THIS village!) makes business difficult. The weaver wears green in solidarity with the pilgrims who, at this time of year, walk barefoot (often over 200km) to the coastal Murugan temple of Tiruchendur. There they bathe their blisters in the sea and celebrate the conquest of Lord Muruga (the six-headed Hindu God of War) over a devil, after a bloody battle...



onion seller, Pudukkudi

I once asked a lady from Pudukkudi, a teacher, "Do people from this village work in the surrounding rice fields?" Oh no, she replied, we wouldn't do that! – I gathered that in the Saree Village people weave or have other professions in the city, but would not stoop to farming. A few doors down we are invited into a house with larger main room, much higher ceiling and stronger lights. Today this functions as the cooperative 'shop.' A range of sarees appears and VegiVentures' guests gather around to talk women's wear. Behind the activity are two solid metal beds, one covered with a thin mattress made from used cardboard boxes. I climb on. Sitting cross legged here is remarkably comfortable and far enough from the hubbub to quietly observe the surroundings. Through a back door the pots and cooking utensils are neatly stacked in a small kitchen. (Most families cook beautiful, simple food 2 or 3 times per day: grains, vegetables, curd, dhal and may be a small amount of meat or fish). The main room has been tidied for us. A dusty laptop sits on a pile of magazines in one corner, evidence of children who, aided by SCAD, have fled the nest to university. In another corner there's a small cathode ray TV topped with a black and chrome clock that might have been won at a fair in the 1950's, a sort of cross between baroque and art-deco. But it's two wall hangings that catch my eye. Near the centre of the room hangs an old plastic calendar displaying a large photo of a male film-star. With his stubble, sunglasses and the angle of the photo, he could be mistaken for a young Anthony Quinn. It is in fact Kamal Haasan, one of the greats of Indian cinema. Actor, writer, producer, director and more recently political activist, Haasan is a giant of Tollywood (Telegu movies, based in Hyderabad) and Kollywood (Tamil films based in the Kodambakkam district of Chennai). For a long list of his many awards, wives and girl friends just google him... The second, a scroll of Lakshmi, hangs by the front door. She is the Hindu Goddess of abundance and wealth. I admire the colourful no-holds-barred kitsch: Lakshmi, royally dressed, sits in a pink lotus flower. She holds lotuses (symbols of prosperity) in two of her 4 hands. Above her two highly adorned elephants shower her with pots of

precious things. Gold pours from her other two hands into a brimming bowl in front of her. This is one of two images of the Goddess in this room. I count 7 sarees sold to the group. Her power seems to be working!

One morning we visit a college where the slim young women (no sign of obesity here), all dressed in matching saris, are training to be junior school teachers. A student asks us one of India's favourite questions: 'What is your level of education.' It turns out that we have 2 PhD's in the group and the majority have a post-grad qualification, with careers varying from pharmacy to clinical psychology and software engineering to catering. One lady is an occupational therapist and intends to return to SCAD as a volunteer.

We complete our journey by chilling for 2 days on the 2km beach at lovely Varkala on Kerala's coast. - It's a good half-way-house to end the tour, enjoy a fresh coconut, the warm sea and cafe life on top of the cliffs.

12 February. Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) Airport International Terminal is on the brashly confident ultra-modern side of Trivandrum State. Miles of wide, fast dual-carriage ways connect sprawling compounds of brand new 10 to 20 story apartment blocks, Maruti-Suzuki car show-rooms and furiously active building sites. Interspersing all this is an occasional conserved lake surrounded by tropical jungle and coconut palms. It appears that the pressure is on to fill in these lakes and develop... Having accompanied the group to the terminal for their flights back to Europe, I head for the Domestic Terminal. It's early morning and pleasantly warm, like a hot day in England in July. The journey takes about 15 mins in the mini-bus and almost immediately we are into narrow streets lined with small one-story shops, food stalls, tooting rickshaws and two-wheelers. This is the India I know, and I now find the organised chaos reassuring. As, on our right, we pass the end of the airport's main runway, I look left. There I behold a sleepy village and wonderful view of the Arabian Sea with small fishing boats drawn up on the palm-fringed beach.

I Fly to Chennai and make my way to Kuyilappalayam, a village on the outskirts of the old French colonial port of Pondicherry (now Puducherry), and about 6km from Auroville, New Age dream city of the future. I'm treating myself to a rest and some Ayurvedic therapy at Ayurananda Centre. My single room is basic but functional, very clean and has its own simple wet-room. I happily share the room with two friends, a gecko and a brown wall-climbing tree frog I've named Brian. They help to lap up the mosquitos that appear at night. Mercifully my teak bed has a very effective mosquito net. In the middle of my first night I go to the loo. On lifting the seat, under it I find a rather flat light green toad sitting on the rim of the toilet. I decide to pee in my bucket and leave the toad to her own devices. In the morning she has disappeared, probably down the loo where I imagine she came from in the first place! A week later she has not reappeared, but I did find Brian on the loo rim one night and will attach a photo of him.



14 February: Exploring, I exit our compound and stroll down the lane away from Kuyilappalayam. Right opposite us is La Ferme Cheese. Apparently it's pronounced La Farm and is an Auroville project making organic cheese from cows who wander under coconut palms. This is the only place on my trip where I've seen cows fenced in. Normally they are tethered or meander anywhere they wish and specialise in crossing busy roads very slowly. Indian drivers are so used to this that they do not slow down. They simply sound their horn and swerve around the cow. I continue down the lane past coconut and banana plantations and come to an open field edged by a wood. The scene that greets me has probably not changed much in 2000 years. Across the field walk several slim, sari-clad women carrying large bundles on their heads: piles of sticks, freshly cut grass, logs... The lane leads to their village, where many of the houses are mud huts with palm-thatched roofs.

It's late afternoon and folk are sitting outside their low doorways, making and mending things, preparing food, chatting and are clearly surprised to see me walk by. Some of them respond well to my Namaste with Vaṇakkam, Tamil for hello. This village leads right up to the main Puducherry/Chennai road.

In a nutshell: Auroville is a bit like Findhorn, but much bigger with around 2500 residents, some of them born here. Many have European and world-wide origins. About 1000 of them come from various parts of India. It's the dream of Sri Aurobindo and his close student Mirra Alfassa (known as The Mother). Together they founded Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry in 1926 (not to be confused with Auroville). Sri Aurobindo, originally from Bengal, educated in Victorian England, became an early leader of the Indian independence movement. He was also a poet, philosopher, visionary and taught his own brand of 'integral yoga.' He died in 1950. His spiritual successor The Mother, from France, was an artist, pianist, leader and teacher. She created the blue-print for Auroville: "A universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace..." Auroville was founded in 1968. The Mother died in 1973, aged 95. Today, Auroville is a busy creative place but the original dream still has a long way to go.

20 February: Initially, one of the puzzling things about Auroville is how to find it. Sure, at the centre of the galactic-spiral layout, there's the posh Visitors Centre with information, shops, eateries... and 1km away the 'Soul of Auroville' the Matrimandir (temple of the mother) that looks like a golden golf ball, surrounded by wide green lawns... Coach loads of tourists, especially Indians, come to view it. Where Auroville gets enough water for the lawns in these dry times, I do not know. The monsoons have failed 2 years running.

When I last came to Auroville in February 1980, the land was flat, open parched red earth, with occasional palm-nut plantations, and 3 or 4 pioneer communities dotted around the 9 square kilometres. Since then lots of development has occurred: residential, small industrial, retail, schools, guest houses, concert halls... Surrounding and between all this, 3 million trees have been planted and have grown into thick woods that obscure the geography. There are few signs, so finding your way takes time and patience. I've hired a bicycle and luckily for me Auroville has cycle paths, something I have not seen elsewhere in India.

In search of more land, some Aurovillian businesses and institutions (like La Ferme) have spread as far as Kuilappalayam. Also near me are Auroville Eye Clinic, Auroville Paper Works and Aqua Dyn Auroville, manufacturers of water purifiers. Tanto Auroville, a swish (by local standards) Italian restaurant in the centre of Kuilappalayam, even serves an organic spelt vegan pizza topped with tofu!



24 February: In the evening I am invited to a temple. It's Sivaratri, a major Hindu celebration of the God Siva. Principally we are there to see Refi, the 13 year old daughter of some friends, perform bharatanatyam dances. - It takes dedicated training, and Refi started when she was 6. Imagine the scene, a crumbling Siva temple with a massive gopuram (tower of god-statues), near the beach just south of Puducherry. We (a minibus full of Indian and western family and friends) follow the crowds in, stepping through trees, over fallen masonry and past the (now almost dry) temple 'tank,' an ancient ritual bathing reservoir. The wide open grounds are dusty and dark save for the flood-lit stage, small ghee lamps and the occasional tall flames flaring up from offerings at altars. The atmosphere is mysterious yet vibrant. The classic flute, tabla and voice music has been specially composed for the occasion and is blasted through giant speakers... I attach a photo of Refi.

I end these thoughts with another photo: me enjoying a game with kindergarten children at Rajapandi Nagar School, near the east coast port of Tuticorin. This is also known as the Salt-Pan School, and is part of a SCAD project. The children's parents and grandparents are local salt-pan workers. SCAD has been supporting this village for over 25 years, gradually improving workers' rights, pay and conditions. Just after our encounter with the children, we met the village women's group, who were having a nutrition session and cooking class to help improve their families' diets.

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