



On January 7<sup>th</sup> we visited a village where the team observed silk saris being woven by hand. Then it was off to an organic farm where a Rotarian-owned Engineering College is growing bananas, coconuts, and Sapote (a brown-fleshed, sweet fruit) using 100% organic methods. The farmers have been able to increase yields without adding pesticides and chemical fertilizers. The advantage of this is that it reduces India's carbon footprint. About 3% of India's agricultural production is currently organic. Half of this is exported to Europe for which uses this for their Kyoto treaty carbon offsets.



Later we observed two folk dances performed by male dancers. The ear-drum pounding rhythms finally got to Julie. She got up and began a vigorous, hip-shaking dance to the wonderment of her team mates and the assembled crowd. When it was over she had a wide grin on her face!



In the dark of the evening, I was finally welcomed back to India in a familiar and unmistakably Indian way. Mosquitoes that had been feasting on our two redheads seemed to have tired of the novelty. After sampling the white and black blood among our team members they joined ranks and feasted on the familiar – me!

I awoke on January 8<sup>th</sup> to find over 60 mosquito bites on my face, neck, arms and chest. Who knows how many more are on my back. To make matters worse, team member Team Dobbins pointed out to me that these mosquitoes were of the Anopheles variety because of their unmistakable stance (I was surprised he remembered his training!!). The female of the species is the one that carries Malaria. The variety we have encountered thus far has been the Culex – painful, but harmless. I can just hope that it was a mosquito bachelor party and the females stayed home.

We visited a 3 room Kindergarten school that is completely funded by the Rotary clubs of Dindigul. The students are taught primarily in Tamil so while we observed the teachers and students and got the general idea we couldn't really interact with them.



We then proceeded to a private school for teachers. The Principal outlined the basic curriculum and teaching methods. The student teachers asked our teachers questions and we asked them a few too. We then saw a few dances – some classical and some inspired by Saturday Night Fever, Michael Jackson and MTV! As India becomes more global its classical ways are losing currency and being replaced by a more universal culture. I suspect India will be poorer for that. I am personally getting tired of the same old “dog and pony shows” put on for our benefit. It would be much more fun if our teachers could meet small groups of teachers but private interests appear to use our presence to impress the audience and the local press. I plan to tell the GSE Chair that this needs to be changed.





We left for Theni (late again!) and arrived around 5.30 pm. Once again, we were met by friendly Rotarians who advised us that the meeting would start at 6.30. I told them we needed to rest and freshen up. I also asked for the schedule for the next couple of days. Just as I feared it was packed with events over the next two days. I told them I was sorry but we were promised a full day of rest. We said we would be happy to participate in their events after we had rested. They accommodated us and we did.

The good news is that we each had a private hotel room. The bad news is that it was on a very busy, noisy street with the barest of essentials. No matter we were happy for the privacy. We joined them at a lively Rotary meeting where they engaged the team in several questions regarding our observations about their educational system. It was a “family night” so they had their children with them and asked us to pose with their children.

On January 9<sup>th</sup> we departed for Thekaddy and the Perriyar National Park. Along the way we crossed the Border into the state of Kerala. This is the state with the highest literacy rate in India. It was also one of the first states in India to elect the Communist Party in the mid-sixties - partly because of the Communist party was willing to address the issue of landless indentured servants. The border of Tamil Nadu and Kerala is famous for its waterfalls, power plants and spices. Soon after we reached Kerala, we stopped at Thekkady so the team could look at the spice shops and art stores.

We departed our hotel at 6.00 am on January 10 for Periyar National Park and Tiger Preserve. The Periyar River originated in the Western Hills of India and used to drain into the Arabian Sea. The British built a dam on it and diverted it so that it irrigates Tamil Nadu and empties into the Indian Ocean and a constant source of friction much as the Colorado is in the Western US.

We took a boat ride in the Park and were able to see blue Kingfisher birds, wild boar, Indian bison, buffalo, and a few wild elephants at the water’s edge. Then it was on to Bodi. We were welcomed at the home of the Past President of the RC of Bodi. He and his family own rice paddies, and plantations of cardamom, pepper, coconuts and assorted fruits.



For lunch we were taken to a coffee plantation where the government is testing various types of coffee beans for their hardiness and yield. At the plantation were black pepper plants (green, actually until they dry), cardamom plants, jackfruit and other species. We had a catered lunch under the large shade trees in a forest setting.



Then it was off to a silk-cotton processing plant. Like most, I have heard of silk and cotton. But what the heck is “silk-cotton”! It turns out that it is a pod that grows on the Silk-cotton tree. The pods are harvested by means of a long pole. After drying, they are cracked open and a very silky type of cotton is inside a 5 inch pod. The cotton is cleansed of the inner seeds and the white silky cotton is then used for stuffing mattresses, pillows and for making fabric.

We also stopped at a 3,000 student private School with students ranging from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Our teachers had the opportunity to teach a couple of classes and compare student reactions to their own in the US. Some teachers on the team feel that the rote learning inhibits creativity because the students were able to provide answers to factual questions but silent



when the questions were open-ended. However, the owner said that the students would have been more responsive if they felt more comfortable with new teachers. There is probably truth on both sides.

We ended the day with a family dinner at the RC of Bodi. We were joined at the meeting by many Rotarians from the RC Club of Theni where we had stopped two nights ago. They felt badly that they did not exchange their club banners when we visited. So they drove all the way here to rectify that. During the meeting we were hit with a power outage. It was not the first time during our visit to Tamil Nadu that the power went out but it was the longest. No matter. The club meeting continued using the light from cell phone screens. Dinner was served under the stars with hastily acquired gas lanterns. Rotarian and Assistant District Governor Jaganathan took us all to his house where all 6 of us we spent the night – three women in one room, two men in another and the last all by his lucky lonesome.

On the morning of Jan 11, we were taken by Asst Dist Governor Jaganathan to his temple where we joined him and his Guru in offering prayers for a successful trip. Then we were off to Madurai.



We were scheduled to reach Lakshmi School (another private school run by Rotarians) a little late but still in time to watch the school children perform a number of folk dances. These were unique in the sense they were celebrating an authentic feast (Pongal or the Harvest festival) which starts tomorrow and they were educating each other about in Tamil about the origins and meaning of the various dances. Schools are closed for the next 5 days in celebration of this holiday.

Following lunch and a discussing with teachers and students we were off to another school run by the same Rotarians. Here the program was put on by the school's Interact club. We watch and heard students sing classical songs, perform dances and thank us for being there.

This time our teachers were seated only about a foot away from the other teachers and there was a very lively exchange of ideas from students and teachers for about an hour. Then it was off to ROHTALK (Rotary Helen Keller Talking Book Library). This a functioning Matching Grant program between Rotary Districts in Greece, New York and Madurai. It is aimed at providing Visually Impaired students Text books, Reference Books and study Guides which are used for their academic requirements in Audio cassettes and CDs. It was created in 2003 with a grant from Rotary International.

The team observed books being recorded and blind students listening to a variety of books from the library. We heard that audio centers that are being created all over Tamil Nadu and about the free mailing program that allows blind students to order a wide variety of reference materials.

But by far, the most touching and impactful time was the discussion with about 15 blind students. Most of them want careers in Information Technology, Engineering, and the Arts. They asked us about jobs in the US. They wanted to know how we treated the visually-impaired in our schools. There wasn't one of us who wasn't moved by the energy and ambition of those students. They were not asking for a hand-out but a chance to compete fairly and build economically productive lives. Following that we were off to dinner and to meet our host families for the upcoming week.

Madurai is one of the oldest cities of India, with a history dating all the way back from the 4th century B.C. It was the capital of the Pandya dynasty, a center of learning, and the mother city of the Tamil literature. The Sri Meenakshi Temple is its main attraction. It was ransacked by the ravaging armies of Delhi. It has a population of almost two million – almost all of whom appear to be on the road at the same time.

In the early centuries A.D. there was voluminous sea-trade between the Roman Empire and South India. Augustus Caesar speaks of Indian envoys and boasts having been the first Roman ruler to welcome them. The trade in pearls, gemstones, live animals and other exotic produce brought not just foreign products but ideas and people as well. Hoards of Roman coins have been found in undisturbed coastal site.

From 1550-1740 Madurai was ruled by the Nayaks. The Nayaks made lasting contributions to the city's architecture such as the Raja Gopuram of the Meenakshi Temple, and the Thirumalai Nayak Palace. By 1801, the whole of Madurai district, which then was made up of Dindigul, Palani, and Kodaikkanal, was under the control of British East India Company.

The history of Madurai will not be complete without mentioning Rani (queen) Mangammal, the woman of great skill and sagacity. Though it was considered that women were not suited to succeed the throne of a kingdom, she was an able and powerful ruler in Tamil Nadu.

Sri Meenakshi temple is in the heart of Madurai. Along the massive outer walls stand four gopurams or towers, the tallest is 160ft. Over 10,000 visitors may come here on any one day. People come to bathe in the sacred water of the Tank of the Golden Lotus at the temple.



The gopurams are covered with multicoloured images of gods, goddesses, animals and mythical figures. Lighting little lamps in the temple is part of the fulfillment of the vows of the devotee.

We also visited the palace of the Nayak Dynasty. Unfortunately, only the entrance gate, main hall, and dance hall remain. We then went to the only museum for Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi - the father of the nation for heading the movement that liberated India from British rule through passive resistance. He was called Mahatma or Great Soul, and is revered by all Indians as Mahatma Gandhi. The Gandhi Museum gives an account of the Mahatma's life, as well as India's struggle for independence. It holds many of Gandhi's belongings, including his books, etc. Tomorrow January 13<sup>th</sup> we are off to a small village for the Pongal (harvest festival) celebration.



Visits:

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	DATE	
Rotary	District Conference	12/28/07	
	Micro Credit Bank	01/02/08	
	Rotary Meeting	01/02/08	
	Rotary Meeting	01/03/08	
	Rotary Meeting	01/05/08	
	Rotary Meeting	01/06/08	
	Reception for DGE	01/06/08	
	Rotary meeting and Dinner, Theni	01/08/08	
	Rotary meeting and Dinner, Bodi	01/10/08	
	Rotary meeting and Dinner, Madurai	01/11/08	
	<b>Totals</b>	<b>10</b>	
	Cultural Events	Classical and Popular songs at District Conference	12/29/07
		Song recital at Rotarian's Home, Trichy	12/31/07
Dance Performance by children of Untouchables - at school		01/01/08	
Dancing and singing at school, Karur		01/04/08	
Bharat Natyam Dance, Karur		01/05/08	
Folk Dances at Organic Farm		01/07/08	
Folk/Movie Dance@student-teacher		01/08/08	
Folk Dances at Primary school		01/08/08	
Periyar National Park		01/10/08	
Pongal Dances at Lakshmi School		01/11/08	
Classical Songs and Dance at TVM school		01/11/08	
<b>Totals</b>		<b>10</b>	
Historic Sites		Rock Fort Temple, Trichy	12/30/07
	Sriranganathan Temple, Trichy	12/31/07	
	Dam on Kaveri River built in 200 AD	12/31/07	
	Meenakshi Temple	01/12/08	
	Nayak Palace	01/12/08	
	Gandhi Museum	01/12/08	
	<b>Totals</b>	<b>6</b>	
Economic Sites	Village Wood Carving, Perambalur	01/03/08	
	Rice processing Factory, Peramalur	01/04/08	
	Textile Manufacturing and shipping	01/05/08	
	Textile Wholesale business, Karur	01/05/08	
	Organic Farm, Dindigul	01/07/08	
	Hand-loom silk sari manufacturing, Dindigul	01/08/08	
	Silk Cotton Processing Plant, Bodi	01/10/08	
	Coffee, pepper and cardamom plantation, Bodi	01/10/08	
	<b>Totals</b>	<b>8</b>	



Vocational	Sironanda Balalaya School (2 sites) - New Education concept	01/01/08
	Middle School in Worryiar (slum school rehabilitated)	01/01/08
	Infant Jesus primary school - primary	01/02/08
	St. Philomena school – poor middle	01/02/08
	Monfort School – modern high school	01/02/08
	College of Arts and Science for Women, Perambalur	01/03/08
	LNVN Private Primary school	01/04/08
	Regional District Education Office	01/04/08
	Meenakshi College	01/05/08
	Raja Metric School, Puliur	01/05/08
	PSNA Engineering College, Dindigul	01/07/08
	Lakshmi Schoo, Madurai	01/11/07
	TVM School, Madurai	01/11/07
	Meenakshi Matric School	01/12/08
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