

Feb. 1, 2012; Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Celebrating, Eating, and Rules of the Road

Last Thursday was Republic Day: India's day to celebrate 63 years of independence. At Lady Doak College classes were cancelled and several hundreds of students were required to participate in a two-and-half-hour long Tamil variety show of dancing and singing and — in the case of their all-women Corps of Cadets — "jazzy" marching and a battle re-enactment. ("Jazzy" was the term used by the student emcee speaking in both Tamil and English.) With colorful saris, loose cotton pants, and flowing scarves large groups of students representing different residence halls gracefully performed line dances and various folk movements that had more to do with India's diverse cultural traditions and a celebration of modest femininity than with the pelvic gyrations of contemporary dance in the West! Tea (with milk and sugar) and biscuits were hand-delivered to "honored guests" in the audience, a speech was given by an esteemed octogenarian (introduced as one of Madurai's Freedom Fighters), and I had the pleasure of watching two VWIL students, Shekira and Tyla, join one of the performances.

Yesterday, I participated in an early morning celebration of the anniversary of the Mahatma's assassination: referred to as "Martyr's Day" in English. The event took place at the Gandhigram, a rural university about 40 kilometers north of Madurai, dedicated to the educational and social mission associated with the Mahatma ("great soul"). By 6:30 a.m. about 50 students and 15 faculty and staff had showed up, including about 20 young women in matching white saris (members of a Gandhian *Shanti Sen* team) and bearing baskets of freshly cut flowers. The 15-minute march crossed train tracks leading to a 15-foot statue of a symbolic flame at which individuals were invited to pick up a handful of flowers, give a brief, silent meditation, and lay their flowers at the base of the flame. Short, simple, and dignified and done in time for a full South Indian breakfast; that's good!

On other occasions, when there have been loud street processions with blaring Hindi music, perhaps a band of marching people or fireworks being set off, I've asked my Tamil friends about what is happening. Their laughing response is that there is some festival or another *every day* in India. Often, I believe, extended family festivals take to the streets, or there is a joint family wedding celebration, or the blaring sound systems are spewing forth political rhetoric from one candidate or another.

Eating in South India is another tangible, daily cross-cultural experience and — although an increasing number of restaurants are now providing forks and knives — most Tamil people eat with their right hand. For us Westerners this has the feel of returning to childhood ... experiencing the tactile qualities of one's diet — the taste of one's own "curried" fingers. Although one often sees hotel signs announcing either "Veg" or "non-Veg" (or both), a vegetarian diet prevails in Tamil Nadu for cultural, religious and practical economic reasons. Apparently, most Tamil people have been "vegan" and supportive of an ecologically-sensitive, sustainable diet centuries before it came into vogue in the West. "Hotel," by the way, actually means either a free-standing restaurant or a hotel with a dining room (still uncertain about why this English language usage came to be). Eating fresh, tropical fruits is familiar and enjoyable ... including bananas, mangos, and pineapples at this time of year. Chutneys and spice-laden sauces abound; my own favorites include blends of coconut and mint. Curry leaves are evident in most dishes

and I've learned to pick out the tastes of other classic Indian spices including cardamom, saffron, turmeric, coriander, and tamarind. Masalas are blends of ground spices and — so long as they don't include red or pickled chilies (given my aversion to truly hot spices) — they offer a wonderful range of new tastes. Rice is the mainstay food but, in addition to long grain, white, and fried, one finds *idlis* (fermented soft rice cakes, the size of a small pancake) and wonderful *dosas* - large savory crepes (my personal favorite).

Dahl is second only to rice and most often (here in Tamil-land) it is called "sambar" and it includes lentils, small "black-eyed" peas or beans, mixed up with onions and spices. Other very familiar vegetables are usually mixed into masalas and sambas including potatoes, cauliflowers, onions, and carrots. Many of the breads are culinary treats. Naan (esp. with garlic) and chapatti have become well known to many Americans. Puri is a deep fried dough puffed up like a crispy balloon. Flaky, unleavened parathas are often filled-up with paneer (soft, unfermented cheese) or sambar mixes; and uttapaams are thick rice pancakes laced with finely chopped onions, coconut flakes, and coriander. Desserts are sweet, very sweet: payasam takes me back to my British childhood with regular servings of rice pudding, but it is even sweeter and includes the taste of almonds and cardamom. Sweeter again are gulab jamuns: deep fried balls of dough in a rose-flavored syrup, and ladoos: sweet balls made of gram flour. Yes, ice cream — western style — is growing more popular but don't look for the following on most South-Indian menus: beef, pork, cakes and pies, lettuce-based salads, or noodle-based dishes.

Forgive me, but I am obsessed by the experience of traveling on South India's roads; and I think by now I've gleaned the actual "Rules of the Road."

For vehicles:

- Keep beeping one's horn constantly whenever in traffic to signal your presence (not to offend).
- When approaching a main road, proceed into the main thoroughfare without stopping and only look for on-coming traffic after you're actually on the main road.
- One inch is more than sufficient space when passing any vehicle.
- Pass at any time (on either side of a vehicle) unless a head-on collision truly is imminent.
- Be particularly respectful of cows on the road ... after all they are sacred and quite a bit larger than most pedestrians.
- Keep to the left (another legacy of the British) unless there is a clear space ahead of at least 20 feet on the right and then, by all means, drive on the right side of the road.

For pedestrians:

- Whenever possible, walk in the road itself and, in the unlikely event there are sidewalks, studiously avoid them since they are full of holes, sometimes covered with debris (and worse), and serve as platforms for small shops and an occasional Hindu street temple.
- Know that when you cross any road that you may be hit and die; pray for reincarnation as a cow.
- Alternately, pretend that you are a fearless and immortal college student and aggressively work your way across any busy boulevard. You are likely to make it to the opposite side. (My own strategy.)

- Be good natured as you jostle through thick crowds of men, women, children, a few goats and stray dogs, and understand that at any time a motorbike or auto-rickshaw may rapidly skim by your backside.
- If you are a foreigner, be prepared for some people to openly stare at you as they undoubtedly wonder: why isn't this white guy taking a taxi or at least a three-wheel auto-rickshaw like he's supposed to do? Does he have any idea on how to "navigate" an Indian city street?

(Attitudes) For Urban Cows:

- Be safe; be serene; let the loud aggressive flow of traffic work its way around me.
- I will lie down in the middle of a busy boulevard and all will be well.
- Hey, I'm sacred; and McDonalds is not going to make it over here. *Go Veg*

RLO