

Mid- to late-February 2012; Madurai, Tamil Nadu

### JD's Story and Higher Ed in India

I met JD on top of a mountain at a Carmelite sisters' convent. He was living in what amounted to a tiny two-room gate house, working as a teacher in a nearby school designated for tribal children, and serving as a kind of mentor/advisor for extra-curricular activities focused on the arts: singing, folk dancing and acting. He had 10 tribal boys in tow, and at first appearance I thought that they ranged in age from 10 to 12 but actually most of these small boys were early adolescents about 12 to 14 years old. And, by *tribal*, please don't think feather head-caps or a primitive-style wardrobe; to me, these fellows looked a lot like other Tamil boys ... perhaps smaller in stature wearing worn-down western style jeans, pants and T-shirts; half were wearing tattered thongs; the others were barefoot. After introductions, JD offered to have the boys put on a performance just for me including songs they had recently learned, some traditional folk dances, and a heavily accented English language skit that told the story of a local philanthropist. The boys performed in earnest, singing loudly, dancing without exhibiting any sense of shyness or embarrassment. Still, as on other occasions, I had the impression that these boys had seldom seen a foreigner; and, come to think of it, on that entire three-day trip by bus, train, taxi, and private vehicle I never encountered any other Caucasian or obvious foreigner. As these boys gave an *impromptu* performance in the driveway of the convent, JD quickly and quietly confided in me the story of his life and how he ended up, essentially, "living" a form of social work with Tamil children.

As he moved into adolescence, JD's voice failed to change, and he retained a distinctly high pitched voice (JD also had other stereotypically feminine traits). Between his voice and perceived femininity he was not only teased unmercifully by his peers and ostracized by adults in the village community but also rejected by his own family; he told me that he was poisoned twice by fellow villagers. He was taken away by government child welfare officials and placed in an orphanage in the nearby city of Madurai — where he grew up, went to school, learned to love the arts, and somehow (it seemed to me) overcame despair, anger, bitterness to become a teacher and kind of "social worker" for tribal boys and girls. Oddly enough, we discovered that we had a mutual friend, a former principal (president) of Lady Doak College [LDC], who JD credited with being one of the mature and compassionate adults who gave him hope for the future. It was clear that these tribal boys had a lot of respect for JD and that he had taught them well. When I offered him rupees to purchase music and play scripts that he desperately desires, he turned me down, which made me all the more determined to remain in touch and send him some materials from the States by mail.

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A few days ago I was asked to give a brief talk on bio-ethics at a Saturday workshop for botany and microbiology majors at LDC. (Fortunately, I had one slightly relevant talk on the ethical issues revolving around fresh water consumption and conversation loaded on my laptop.) First, what is surprising is that there were close to 120 majors attending along with about eight full-time faculty (and this is a relatively small women's college); second, this was a required Saturday workshop — held from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.; and third, given the nature of their curriculum — without liberal arts distribution requirements and few

electives — these students have very little exposure to the social, political or ethical issues, concerns, and ways-of-reasoning. Their program for the day included three PowerPoint-assisted presentations: two on bio-safety and proper lab regulations and procedures and another very broad overview lecture on ethical issues in modern biotechnologies.

What was especially interesting — discouraging actually — was my conversation with several biology faculty over the next several days when I discovered how few of these young women will actually go on to use their scientific education in a career. Faculty, young and old, had estimates that ranged from 10 percent to 30 percent of these microbiology and botany majors would hold jobs somewhat related to their undergraduate studies. Why so small a percentage? Usually the first reason given was that most of these young women come from traditional Tamil families and that they would soon be compliant brides in an arranged marriage; and by the time they are 30 many are likely to be "stay-at-home moms" with one or two children. (I might emphasize that arranged marriages over here certainly does not mean child-marriage nor forced marriage between unwilling partners and that many of the young people with whom I have spoken seem to readily accept the practice and the idea that their elders have a much better sense of a fitting life-partner than they.)

Another reason given focused on the dearth of scientifically oriented positions in the Madurai region—the sole exception of hospital lab technician slots. As an alternative, a student could consider biology-related positions in Bangalore or the monstrous Chennai (now the fourth largest city in India) — after all, both cities are about a half-day train ride away and both have several large pharmaceutical as well as a few emerging bio-tech companies. Again though, cultural traditions and parameters intervene: how could a young, single woman leave her family and live independently in a strange city? With whom would she live? And, dare she risk putting off her arranged marriage until her late 20s ... or, gasp, early 30s? One Biology professor told me that she thought some of these students switched over to info tech and found some career success at the expense of giving up their training in biological sciences.

I might add that India seems to be infatuated with institutes, universities, and colleges. One can be driving along in a relatively rural area and suddenly come upon a huge "Technical and Scientific Institute for Higher Training: {insert name}": usually glistening white, three to four stories in height, emerging out of a rice paddy or adjacent to a grove of banana or coconut trees. At night some of these institutions of higher learning proudly announce their presence with brightly lit neon signs. Friends inform me that there are many government start-up grants for such colleges and that aid programs are structured in such a way that most monies go directly to the institution, rather than through individual students. Also, there is a marked public distinction over here between *aided* and *self-funded* programs and students. Imagine, if you will, that all American college students receiving government aid could only enroll in academic programs designated for "aided" students and that there are somewhat separate programs and faculty distinguished not only by their disciplinary affiliation but also by their assignment: teaching needy students (many from lower caste and class) in the morning and self-funded students (usually middle class and caste or higher) in the afternoon. I've noticed that most, if not all, of the post-graduate programs in the sciences and commerce (at LDC) are designated as "self-funded."

Indeed, most of the sparkling new "institutes of higher learning" emphasize technology, science and commerce, and I see very little evidence of a liberal arts emphasis over here. For example, although LDC includes departments of history and the social sciences, the arts and humanities (with the exception of literature) are hardly present in the credit-bearing curriculum. On the other hand, there is an interfaith center, the non-credit performing arts are alive and well, physical education has been expanded recently, community service (through India 's NSS) is a core UG (undergraduate) requirement, and the college has added required "value enrichment" seminars and workshops as a type of co-curricular enhancement .

Last week as we were passing-by yet another Science, Commerce, and Technical Institute-in-a-rice-paddy, I mentioned to my hosts how I impressed I was with the growing number of such colleges. Their cynical analysis, well, blew me away: essentially, government grants are readily available for the development of such autonomous (private) colleges and institutes; most are for-profit institutions geared for "self-funded" students; and there is reason to believe that at least some of them are saturated with corruption at the top — even if their actual faculty and students remain innocent. From my friends ' perspective, too many of these colleges have low academic standards and do a much better job of marketing than actual teaching. Whew ... while being very surprised, I fully appreciated my Gandhian hosts ' honesty, good humor, and safe driving!