

Mid-January, 2012

Lady Doak College

Getting to Madurai is not easy. This time, though, I was able to make it in record time from DC to Frankfort, on to Chennai and — after a quick, restless night in the Mars Hotel (*why Mars?*) — a one-hour flight to Madurai Airport where I was warmly greeted by my friend Valliammal with the college car and driver. First though we had to drive through the city of Madurai; there are no by-pass roads in this part of India. Actually, there are no "roads"— at least in the way that we understand roads as defined by clear markings; paved; free from pedestrians, urban cows, and various other living creatures; and subject to rules and regulations. Between the sheer congestion brought on by every conceivable kind of vehicle — including entire families precariously perched on one small motor scooter, cycle rickshaws, late-model Hondas, and huge carbon-belching, badly dented, buses — the skillful college driver patiently wove his way through the chaos, more or less keeping to the left of the road.

The city of Madurai *is* ancient, and city planners of antiquity undoubtedly didn't have the foresight to anticipate the growth of the 18th century let alone the 21st century. Of the 70 million Tamil people a little more than one million live in this temple city, and they seem to be well aware of their distinct ethnic and cultural pedigree (*Dravidian*, not Aryan); and — for those in need of classical European validation — there are ancient Greek references to Madurai as a center of South Indian culture and commerce. One will find the remnants of a Nyak palace and a Raj-era estate (now the Gandhi Museum) and above all the incredible Gopuram: tall Hindu towers at the Sri Meenakshi Temple elaborately decorated in extraordinary detail with the colorful pantheon of Indian deities and semi-deities. But, to be honest, what initially stands out about Madurai — after the madness of the congested roads — is the incredible hubbub of people and commerce. Every road is lined with small stands of tiny shops encroaching on sidewalks and streets, teeming with tropical fruits, clothing, newspapers, sweets, "medicals" (pharmacies); spices, jewelry, chai (tea) and cakes along with internet cafes, driving schools (ha!), and cell phone dealers. In keeping with the sheer diversity of traffic, the multiplicity of shops reflects: i.) ancient India, ii.) 20th century India and iii.) rapidly arriving, future India. Look and smell the stream bed that is essentially an open sewer; stop at the world class Sangam Hotel for a drink and check out their first class swimming pool and *haute cuisine* restaurant; go for a helter-skelter ride in an auto-rickshaw and hang on for dear life; visit the iconic Gandhi Museum with its low-tech approach to telling the story of the Mahatma's life with an emphasis on India's Freedom Movement and Independence; and don't forget to stop for delicious caramel-like coffee at the "hotel" (means *restaurant* in Tamil India) advertising free Wi-Fi. And, about three miles from the iconic Hindu Temple — a major pilgrimage destination for Hindus from across India and just down the street from Lady Doak College — is a huge construction project, about four to five stories high. The bilingual signs are clear: this is Madurai's first indoor mall complete with a multiplex cinema, a Subway, and a host of other European and American retail stores. Welcome to the late 20th century, Madurai.

However, what I actually want to describe is my hostess: this oasis of calm, quiet cleanliness: Lady Doak College (autonomous!). This campus has to some degree sealed itself off from the surrounding typical South Indian streets, shops, and homes and become a "gated community" with only two

entrance/exits staffed by friendly uniformed security guards at all times (well, at least they've been friendly to me). At this women's college, a few men are allowed on campus, unless they are janitors, guards, CIS staff, cooks, and sweepers ... along with a few foreign male faculty. Mostly, though, I see men who constantly sweep the pathways and roads that run through this campus full of Tamarinds and palms and other tropical trees and lush vegetation. The campus includes a growing number of "closed" air-conditioned audio-visual rooms (four or five), but most classes and meetings take place in classrooms that are open to outside elements ... a cooling breeze, one hopes. Carpeting is unheard of for practical reasons given humidity and insects, and most floors are concrete, some are linoleum. Faculty offices are shared workspaces; for example, the five or six history faculty at LDC share one largish room and one computer with desks adjacent to each other. Private meetings must be difficult to arrange.

Still, this campus is a green gem. By way of marked contrast with the surrounding city, the meticulous care of their grounds, the creation of an outdoor labyrinth, the centrality of the Katie Wilcox chapel, the lotus fountain in the central courtyard of the main academic building, the herb garden, and the outstanding "Golden Jubilee Auditorium," this is an "autonomous" (mainly independent) college community that exudes pride. You can see this, too, in the way that student comport themselves. Although I'm told that there is a mix of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim women, what is most striking is their similarity: more than 80 percent, I'd say, are wearing colorful churidars: loose cotton pants with a half-dress tunic and usually a scarf. These young women are thin, relatively tall and seemingly have perfect posture holding their heads high. Unlike my first visit here six years ago, many boldly look me in the eye: curious and almost always friendly. Although their classes are held in English, their command of conversational English (with an American accent) is all over the map while most of the faculty here are able to carry on a conversation. If you have the time and interest check out the well-developed and maintained website for Lady Doak (<http://www.ladydoak.org/>) and click on their "photo gallery" at the top of the page or take a "virtual tour!" I'll talk about their curriculum on some other occasion ...

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