

March 1, 2012; Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Twenty South Indian Cross-cultural Questions

(Yes, this is a for-credit quiz; with believable answers following; please no cheating.)

- 1.) What are the loud explosions and bangs that seem to take place on an irregular (but frequent) basis?
- 2.) Why are there "no ragging" signs placed all around campuses and school grounds? And, what do they mean?
- 3.) Where are my fork and knife and how am I supposed to eat my meal or cut my meat?
- 4.) My shower will not work and there is a huge bucket in the bathroom: does this mean what I think it means?
- 5.) More often than not toilets don't flush ... what now?
- 6.) My Indian friend just shook her head "no," but she seems to be in full agreement with me. What's going on?
- 7.) My Tamil friend claims that he knows and speaks English and yet we can barely communicate with each other. What is happening?
- 8.) Several Indian people at Sri Meenakshi Temple are speaking in slow, stilted, heavily accented English to each other. Why don't they just switch over to Tamil or Hindi?
- 9.) I walk into a classroom and everyone stands up. What's happening here?
- 10.) Why are there so many prosperous gold jewelry stores around every corner? Who is buying this jewelry and for what purpose?
- 11.) There are very few sidewalks and those that do exist are badly broken or occupied by street stalls. Where do pedestrians walk?
- 12.) Related question: there are very few public toilets and very few hotels (restaurants) that allow someone to use their facilities as a non-paying visitor. So, what do you do if you are dying to go?
- 13.) There are no ramps or other facilities for physically challenged citizens, what do they do?
- 14.) Where do boys and girls, young men and women, go if they want to head out on a date in Madurai?
- 15.) There are so many "Veg" and "Non-Veg" English language signs on local "hotels:" I don't get it: what does all this mean?
- 16.) Why am I seeing many Communist hammer and sickle flags and painted logos? I thought that Communism was long dead?

17.) Why is the power going off at least six or seven times a day? And, why does it click back on after only a few minutes?

18.) So-called "love marriages" are celebrated in Bollywood's (and Chennai's) most popular movies, so "arranged marriages" are a rapidly dying custom in India, right?

19.) Why does India have such a high suicide rate? Why do I often read about a suicide in *The Hindu*?

20.) Bonus Question: identify at least five or six amazing things about India or South India in particular.

- 1.) India has so many festivals and setting off loud fireworks is part of the fun and celebration. Many festivals are associated with Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity, and some families also throw their own celebrations including, of course, the ubiquitous engagement and marriage parties as well as celebratory wakes for the recently deceased. Let the fireworks explode so that everyone knows ...
- 2.) "*No Ragging*" is borrowed from British English, and, essentially, it means no teasing or bullying. Several years ago national legislation was passed to raise consciousness in schools and colleges and signs were mandated.
- 3.) If you sit down for a South Indian meal you will not be given a fork and knife — unless it is a "hotel" that caters to tourists and foreigners. Tamils and many other South Indians are quite adept at eating with their right hand, and if there is any meat it is likely to be a small portion included in a sauce or gravy. "Hotels" are actually what we Americans call "restaurants;" and to add to the confusion some hotels actually do provide lodging but most do not! By the way, most upscale hotels provide at least two public sinks with a shared towel provided to wash one's hands before and after the meal.
- 4.) Yes, it does. Again, although a few upscale hotels provide working showers, the norm here is bucket-bathing. So, have a clean washcloth available, don't slip on the sopping wet bathroom floor, and pray that towels have been provided (no guarantee).
- 5.) Assuming that western-style toilets are provided (more and more this is the norm in middle-class homes and hotels), the water flow is often inadequate for a "full-flush;" so, one quickly learns when to supplement the weak trickle of a flush with a full bucket of dirty bathing water. By the way, don't assume that toilet paper will be provided ... keep a roll handy!
- 6.) Ah yes, the Indian head bobble. It is most endearing but even after a few weeks still confusing. It is a shake left to right, with a slight circular motion, often done with an engaging and friendly smile. Still, to our western eyes, it appears as a mixed message: **Yes** with the eyes and mouth; **No** with the head movement!

- 7.) Many Tamil people speak and read English as their second language (*not* Hindi), and there is plenty of bilingual signage — all part of British colonial "heritage." However, there are significant class and caste differences with individuals' command of English. Toss in a heavy Tamil (or American) accent and rapid conversational speech or prepared academic content and there is ample room for either miscommunication or a near absence of comprehension.
- 8.) Speaking of Tamil, although 70 million people speak the language here in SE India, it is only one of about 17 major tongues all across India. When tens of thousands of Indian tourist and pilgrims come to Madurai to visit and/or worship at the extraordinary Sri Meenakshi Temple arrive from outside Tamil Nadu, they resort to a shared language. Usually it is not Hindi, rather it is English with an Indian accent (literally and metaphorically).
- 9.) Although some "old school" ways appear to be fading, students in a classroom still stand when the professor or teacher enters a classroom. Unlike a courtroom there is no bailiff to call students to attention, rather it is a known custom and sign of respect. Any chance that we might re-institute this in America ... ?
- 10.) Although gold prices are soaring around the world, it is such a mark of high status and prestige for Indian women to wear gold (for special occasions) so these jewelry stores proliferate. Gold jewelry for a wedding and as part of the dowry is standard, and some of the necklaces are huge and undoubtedly very heavy. When I asked to see much more modestly priced silver pieces, the selection was very small, and the store clerks were obviously disappointed in this "rich" visiting American's peculiar taste in jewelry.
- 11.) In the streets of course, which are already jam packed with every conceivable type of vehicle including ox-drawn carts; late model luxury passenger vehicles; huge, carbon dioxide belching buses; slow pedaling bikes and zip-by motorbikes; and a considerable number of dogs, goats and cows. It is dangerous, and pedestrians are regularly injured, sometimes killed, but the insanity continues.
- 12.) Well, let me state it this way: there is a lingering smell of human and animal excrement and urine in many public places.
- 13.) It is probably good to remind ourselves that "handicapped" equipped buildings and sidewalks are a fairly recent, legally mandated requirement in the USA and most European nations. I have not seen a single person in a wheel chair or a visually impaired individual during the past eight weeks; both ramps and street crossing signals for the blind are absent. Indeed, it appeared to me that most elderly people (other than the dalits and very poor) remain off the streets and away from public settings.

- 14.) A date? Did you say "date?" Get real ... this is "rural" Tamil Nadu. There may be western-style dating in Bangalore, Delhi, or Mumbai but for the vast majority of young people across India, dating is, if not forbidden, still very unusual. Nevertheless, the papers are touting the rise of coffee and coffee houses (including Starbucks) — not so much for the growing popularity of the alternative to tea — but rather because these are new places with a/c that offer young people (18 and older) a chance for social mingling beyond the eyes and ears of "mature, adult" supervision.
- 15.) Veg is for vegetarian hotels (restaurants) which tend to predominate here in South India, but there are plenty of "Non-Veg" establishments readily available especially those catering to tourists and foreigners. Just don't expect beef or pork. In the very unlikely event that hamburgers or sausages are on the menu, they are either made of chicken or a "veg" soy compote.
- 16.) Ha! And you thought Communism and Maoism were dead. Well, both are alive and well especially among some backward and scheduled caste and some tribal peoples across rural India. The parties (along with the Naxalites) provide an angry, sometimes violent, political expression for the continued economic and social oppression of lower caste people who remain suspicious of Hindus (given the legacy of caste) but who are also unwilling to align themselves with either the Indian Congress Party or with any of the hundreds of other regional political parties.
- 17.) Like many developing nations, there are power shortages as well as scheduled electric power outages all across India. In some locations the power is scheduled to be off for as long as six hours at a time. In Tamil Nadu now there is a fierce political debate about the government's plans to proceed with building a nuclear power plants. (Note: India is heavily dependent on her own subsidized coal reserves located in the NE, but it is a major pollutant.)
- On the other hand, a growing number of middle and upper class establishments and homes have purchased their own batteries and generators. LDC has invested in her own electric generator; and so after a few minutes (rather than hours) the lights, window a/c units, computer drives, and science lab equipment all click back on. Saved by electric-powered modern technology once again ...
- 18.) Wrong: although there is no question that dating, romance and marriage customs and traditions are in rapid flux all across India, the norm for Indian Hinds, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and Jain families remains the arranged marriage. Of course, child marriage has been legally banned for many years; and, by way of anecdote, one discovers that "arranged marriage" today is often a collaborative decision-making process with significant input — and even a right to decline — from those young people about to be engaged. Nevertheless, in most families the parents take the lead and late adolescents and largely obedient 20-year-olds follow.
- 19.) It is sad but true, and Indian sociologists and psychologists cite a variety of reasons for the nations' high suicide rate including: rural poverty and farmers' bankruptcies, communal violence and

oppression (based on religious identity) , continued caste-based discrimination, and depression related to gender inequity (wife abuse).

20.) **i.)** As with most democratic states there are serious internal challenges, but India remains the world's largest democratic nation, with one billion people, and many citizens are honestly engaged in building and developing their country; **ii.)** the Tamil people are so very friendly, and they treat guests with genuine warmth and courtesy; **iii.)** although the landscape is rarely free of human habitation, there is great beauty in the Ghat Mountains, the ancient Hindu temples, the backwaters and lakes of Kerala as well as with the cultivated landscapes of banana and coconut trees, sugarcane groves, and rice paddies; **iv.)** girls and women are educated all across India; and increasingly women are playing leadership roles in government, politics, business catching-up to their existing strong status in the Arts, Journalism and Education; **v.)** the spices added to gravies, curries, and chutneys are complex culinary delights including turmeric, tamarind, cardamom, coriander, cilantro, ginger, saffron, mint, cumin, and diverse peppers as well as "secret recipe" masala spice mixes; and **vi.)** India's economy is obviously booming, the middle class continues to grow rapidly, and the questions and concerns focused on clean and affordable energy, a sustainable environment, reducing govt. corruption, balancing private entrepreneurship with the public good – are challenges that stem from a rapidly growing economy.