

January 17, 2012

Have you heard about Pongol? Held in mid-January, it is Tamil India's version of America's Thanksgiving, with festival events symbolizing the prosperity and abundance of a fruitful harvest. In villages and cities, ancient Hindu rituals are played out in temples large and small; families come together often returning home from other parts of this large nation; children play games and compete for prizes; and the farm animals — especially cows and bulls — are dramatically honored for their contribution to health and prosperity.

With an invitation from Ms. Tamarasi, a professor of Tamil Language and Literature at LDC (Lady Doak College), I spent several hours celebrating Pongol in a small, rural village about 10 kilometers outside Madurai. After the typical Indian road experience (avoiding three near-collisions; witnessing aggressive by-passing; dodging painted cows; listening to a constant cacophony of horns; and weaving in between pedestrians, motor bikes, auto rickshaws, buses as well as a surprising number of privately owned cars), we arrived ... shaken, not stirred! We drove into a dusty village square lined with Tamarind trees and overflowing with children excited to see us and happy to be on holiday. The weather was perfect: blue skies, low 80s and relatively low humidity. Our first visit was to the modest bright blue temple adorned with small statues and images of numerous Hindu deities and mythic figures; we left shoes just outside the courtyard and observed some of the women draw water from the well and clean the rice to be used for Pongol festivities. Clearly this was a sacred space but not one of silence, reverence and awe, at least not for Pongol; children, too, followed us into the temple trying out their English, asking for their photo to be taken, and finding fun and creative ways to communicate with these visiting foreigners.

After meeting Tamarasi's extended, large family, lunch was served in the lead family's home on "main street." Chairs were offered to older guests, and we balanced a metallic plate on our laps complete with dollops of spicy dhal (lentils), several chutneys and relishes, and masala (a blend of spices mixed with potatoes). And a young girl with a huge pot came by frequently to fill out plates with white rice, the mainstay of a South Indian diet. "Honored guests" also were given a choice between cans of regular and diet coke. Later that afternoon I watched villagers of all ages take a stick of chopped sugar cane and gnaw and masticate it until it yielded its naturally sweet juices. I was told that one family essentially owned most of the land, including a quarry, near the village and that an informal system of paternal authority shaped the social hierarchy of the village. One host shooed away an elderly woman who clearly was begging for food or money and apologized on behalf of the community. It was interesting to watch about 50 men (older teens to grandfathers) work their way around the two village streets, smearing yellow paste on each other, stopping by many homes for what seemed to be an informal puja ... perhaps a rather raucous blessing on each household.

The outdoor sound system was blaring loudly in Tamil as instructions were given to the village children about a series of competitive games with separate rounds for boys and girls, young and old. Various familiar forms of races with legs tied together, balloons between two partners, teams running to and from buckets to fill a bottle with water cupped in their hands, and so forth ... all taking place in a dusty village courtyard lined with extended families enjoying themselves. Undoubtedly the most unusual event was this small village's version of Jallikattu involving painted bulls sometimes bedecked with flowery wreaths. Although it sounds similar to the Spanish running of the bulls, in Jallikattu, the bull is not killed and the young male "matadors" do not use any weapons. Moreover, the bulls are free to run off in any direction after an initial taunting and confrontation. Our hosts were anxious to see that we were behind barricades out of harm's way which was a bit ironic since many children were lined-up

along the main road. Most bulls simply took off down the road, but one especially large, elder stayed his ground and after failing to gouge his tormentors, re-directed his anger toward an earthen bank butting his head, and flinging mounds of soil 10 to 12 feet into the air before slowly ambling down the road, quite dignified and proud unlike his younger predecessors. I had to wonder who and how do they round up these bulls once the festivities are done. And, I did not mention the articles I had read in *The Hindu* earlier in the week which featured one story about India's PETA demanding that Jallikattu be banned altogether and another about a group calling out for restrictions and requiring "training" for all young men engaged in this "sport" given the annual toll of injuries and even a few deaths.

To me, though, the events of the day revealed a quietly proud Tamil culture — bring together Tamil diaspora, the educated English-speaking elite with monolingual Tamil laborers, the young and the elderly simply celebrating and enjoying the events of the day.

**Afterward:** later that week I met with several Tamil Gandhi scholars who emphasized to me that what I had experienced was unusual and indicative of only one large family's domination of a very small village. As they talked about the rapid fragmentation of village life across India — the economic disruption from jobs with industries in cities, the insular turning-away from one's immediate neighbors, and the growing reliance on television, cell phones, and (at least among some segments of Indian society) the Internet — I could not help but think of many small communities across the USA, including many parts of Virginia, which have lost textile and coal jobs. Moreover, I've noticed that most days I've been here there have been reports of farmers committing suicide ... with speculation focused on their high levels of indebtedness. Is it an overgeneralization to claim that as economic and social engines of modernity march forward into the developing world that a host of social and psychological ills follow in their wake?

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