

Feb. 7, 2012; Madurai, Tamil Nadu

### **Student Life and ... Sewage**

Gandhi wrote at some length about what he considered to be the deplorable state of sanitation, especially public toilets and open sewage, throughout India. And, he had no qualms about picking up a broom and some rags and cleaning out the bathrooms in his ashrams, while insisting that all other residents (no matter their caste or faith) take turns and share the responsibility to clean toilets and work for proper sanitation. Moreover, Gandhi spent considerable time not only writing and meditating in prison but also cleaning; his vivid and detailed descriptions of the vile, putrid conditions of public and prison toilets are matched by few. That was well over 60 years ago, and I'm sorry to report that at least in some city and rural areas not much progress has taken place (although, as yet, I can't speak to the state of prison bathrooms). Madurai's infrastructure for clean water and sewage drainage (largely taken for granted by us unless rates are raised a few cents) is either strained to the limit or it never was fully installed in the first place ... probably both.

On the 15-minute auto rickshaw drive from LDC (Lady Doak College) to downtown Madurai I pass by a grossly polluted small river bed, a tributary to the once might Vaigai River that runs through the heart of the city. The smell comes first: sulfuric, laden with olfactory "shades" of excrement. The muddy banks of the river are much larger than the small stream itself, and they are lined with what appears to be a year's worth of garbage: papers, plastic bags and bottles, organic materials including inedible foods, and animal excrement. Goats, cows and, yes, huge gray-black pigs are all denizens of this river neighborhood. Rather than an ecologically sound "riparian" buffer, the banks are lined with shanties and huts and what appear to be a few workshops. A few days ago not only did I notice children playing up along the banks but behind them was a line of clothing drying in the putrid breeze. Surely, those clothes were not washed in that stream? In general — from a prosperous Western perspective — there is a badly deteriorating public infrastructure (pothole-ridden roads, litter- strewn vistas, dangling electrical wiring); and although there are frequent power outages, somehow people get along and things work out.

Having written this, I recently skimmed through *Forbes'* slide show of America's most poverty-ridden cities: from Toledo to Sacramento, Detroit to Buffalo; the images are a gloomy, post-industrial pastiche of collapsed infrastructure of what was once some of America's most productive cities. (Note: I lived in Detroit for nine years when my family moved to the USA in the late 50s.) *Forbes'* editors (not particularly noted for their social justice orientation) had this note to add on the USA's poorest state: *The problems of poverty and low income are as much local as national. The poverty rate is 21 percent in Mississippi. The state also has the lowest median income at \$36,850. Mississippi is among the states with the worst education systems, highest obesity levels, highest unemployment, and lowest rates of health insurance coverage. The state is an economic black hole, and it shows in the way people suffer there. And, as is true with black holes, it is nearly impossible for the residents of Mississippi to escape their difficult financial situations. There is a dearth of federal programs that target specific states and cities based on local economic need. (9.15.2011)* When I couple this with the desperate images of people struggling to survive in a hurricane- devastated Gulf coast (*via* media reports and a two-week, MBC May Term

"community service" stint in Gulfport) — well, my reports on the extreme poverty, open sewers, and highly uneven public infrastructure of Tamil Nadu are not offered in a superior, judgmental manner. Poverty, hunger, inequitable distribution of wealth, ready access to clean water and reliable energy truly are *global* issues, and (with the possible exception of a small number of Northern European nations, the Gulf oil states, and Singapore) no country is free from these challenges.

On a more uplifting note: I had a very interesting conversation with a young faculty member at Lady Doak yesterday about student life and her work as a "resident counselor." Many of the faculty here, if not all, have dual roles: as teaching faculty in their respective departments and as active program administrators, including various roles in student life. For example, the dean of students and her assistant here are also both full-time teaching faculty — in botany and Tamil language and literature, I believe. This young bio-tech professor lives in one of the dorms and oversees student behavior; she herself is a LDC alumna, and she acknowledged being only a few years older than the students — adding that this allows her to not only serve as a role model but also to be more readily accessible. Responding to my queries about problems and challenges, she made it clear that drug and alcohol abuse are rarely, if ever, an issue and since boys are not allowed on campus, rarely do they worry about any form of illicit sexual behavior. Indeed, if I see PDA (public displays of affection), it is two girls walking hand-in-hand or one with her arm around the other's shoulder; and I've seen similar displays of affection between young men at a nearby college. I feel confident that, typically, these displays have little to do with homosexuality and instead are a simple, non-sexual display of good friendship. Ironically, I've seen far more displays of PDA between young friends of the same sex than I have from married couples on the streets of India. In any event, my bio-tech/resident counselor friend informed me that there *had* been a few cases in which a student claiming to go home on the weekend had actually gone to visit a boyfriend (in violation of college rules) but that this was very uncommon.

In general, the college life led by these young women seems to be a mix of the ethos and rules we associate with high school aged girls and college life up through the early 1960s: carefully regulated with chaperones, house mothers, strict rules prohibiting access to boys and alcohol, mandated evening study hours, and lots of required extracurricular activities. On the latter point, it appears that about every other Saturday students are required to remain on campus for some co-curricular event or another. For example, this coming Saturday is "Sports Day," and, although it will feature their NCC (National Cadet Corps) and students enrolled in Physical Education, many others will participate; and all are required to attend these in-house competitions ... a bit like a combination of track and field day and creative dancing and marching in formation with some fun intramural team sports thrown in. And, the students here are prepared to sing and dance *en masse* (apparently Bollywood *is* based on national character); they also expect visiting foreign groups to be prepared to perform music and dance routines representative from *their* culture. (Note: MBC students, Shekira Ramdass and Tyla Stormes did a great job performing Michal Jackson's *Thriller* and the LDC students loved their act!) Thank god/allah/buddah that I was not asked to perform: about the best I could do is sing *Hen Wlad fy N 'dhau* (the Welsh National Anthem) with gusto! There would have been dead silence in the Golden Jubilee Auditorium with, perhaps, a few polite handclaps ...

Returning to the matter of student behavior and college rules, constant cell phone usage *has* become a problem, and the college has recently implemented rules restricting when and where students may use their cell phones. To a lesser degree keeping noise down in the dorms is an occasional issue; and, apparently, "ragging" is an occasional concern. I was puzzled to see *Ragging Prohibited* signs posted on trees around campus and was told that legislation had been passed requiring such signs in schools and colleges across the nation. *Ragging* is the British expression connoting combined teasing and bullying; and from what I've learned the signage seems to parallel anti-bullying efforts in the USA. When asked about ragging at LDC, I was told that occasionally upper-class girls will "pick on" younger, shyer, more timid girls who don't seem to fit in. I will speculate that perhaps the college's marked distinction between *aided* and *self-financed* students, along with the continuing legacy of caste differentiation, also contribute to ragging. All in all, though, student life at this Tamil women's college seems humane, cordial, academically focused, and bonded together with strong "school/community spirit."