

SCHOLARLY NOTES

Reflections on a Sabbatical in India

By Roderic Owen

[Editors note: Roderic L. Owen, Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Mary Baldwin College, Virginia, recently spent a portion of a sabbatical leave engaged in teaching and research focused on Gandhian Ethics and Interfaith Education at Lady Doak College, Madurai, and the Madurai Gandhi Museum. Dr. Owen arrived in India in early January 2005 and returned to the United States in mid-April, 2005. Portions of his journal sent to friends and colleagues are published here.]

The impact of the Tsunami in India

January 5, 2005

India has lost well over ten thousand of her citizens in the Dec. 26 tsunami disaster, the majority of them living in costal villages along the coast of Tamil Nadu, in the far southeast. Upon my new year's day arrival in Chennai--a massive city of six million still known by many by the colonial name of Madras-- I had expected to see ample evidence of the disaster or at least throngs of reporter crews, aid workers, and military transports, but none were to be seen. When I asked an auto-rickshaw cabbie to drive me down to the city waterfront, I did not see any evidence of damage at that point on the coast even though it was reported that about 80 souls had lost their lives in Chennai alone. Of course, Tamil Nadu is a massive state of 60 million people situated in an even larger nation-state with the world's second-largest population: three times that of the USA. Apparently one had to visit the rural coastal villages to actually see the ravages along the Indian coastline. I opted to stay off the coast and headed inland.

Still, I heard people talking about the tsunami constantly and viewed endless media coverage (available in English, Hindi, Telugu and Tamil) with a great deal focused on the response of the Indian and American governments in particular. Following the first few days of reporting on the initial shock and the seemingly ever-escalating toll of lives and property, the Indian papers ran some interesting articles that might surprise fellow Americans. For example, there was the press report filed by D. Suresh Kumar reporting from Cuddalore on how the victims of the tsunami had no interest in receiving **used** clothing and that while they appreciated

the gesture of support, the victims asked for more dignity. A government agent was cited as empathizing with the victims (many of them fishermen and their families), and he stated that “They are all psychologically affected and you cannot argue with them. So we are now requesting that people only donate new clothes or give money.”

There have been a number of reports about new orphans and some practical legal and bureaucratic advice to families considering adopting some of these children. There has been an outpouring of practical and financial support from fellow Indians from all across this nation. For example, Gujarat (on the other side of India) mobilized 1,200 tons of relief materials and sent it by a special train; the Indian Navy, too, quickly moved into top gear with medical relief crews and supplies and also continuing in the sad task of recovering bodies. Ration cards were being issued by the Tamil Nadu state government to enable affected families to buy essential items through a public distribution system including water, food, and temporary shelter.

The Indian media has given a great deal of coverage to the massive losses in nearby Sri Lanka and in Indonesia, and there was a conciliatory interview with the Sri Lankan prime minister in which she stated that her government would not make any distinctions in distribution of aid between Sri Lankan citizens generally and the Tamil rebels. Perhaps one of the most interesting reports was entitled: *India’s Decision Not to Accept Aid Now Hailed* in which it was argued that this decision, although initially criticized as false or misplaced pride, is now “being grudgingly saluted by the press and international community.” The French paper *Le Figaro* on Monday, January 3, 2005 reported that *Overall, India has managed the crises well...Better, India has used the catastrophe to affirm its status as a regional superpower. India has proved that it is not dependent on international aid....Better still, India will on January 6, in Jakarta, sit at the donors’ table in the company of the USA, Japan, and Australia.*

While the horrible extent of the tragedy continues to unfold across the islands of Indonesia and on Sri Lanka, I suspect that we have heard the worst about the damage done to India. Indians are rapidly and generously responding to the loss of life and property on their own humanitarian terms while also seeking to join wealthy donor nations in aiding those beyond their national boundaries. The broader infrastructures for communication, transportation, and energy in southeast India were largely unaffected by the tsunami, and Indians are able to care for their own ...and then some.

Comments on the Streets of India

January 13, 2005

The streets of Indian cities appear wild and chaotic to my American eyes and ears. For those of you who have traveled in developing world countries, you will not be too surprised by this description. The congestion of people and traffic can feel overwhelming at times. Traffic consists of old buses jam packed with passengers, countless motorbikes (clearly the preferred mode of transport), auto-rickshaws(three wheeler taxis), cars and taxis, bikes, ox drawn carts, stray cows along-side the road. Those cows -- along with stray dogs -- are usually eating garbage dumped between the road and what might appear to be either a sidewalk or a polluted drainage ditch. Apparently, one is not allowed to drive any vehicle in India without tooting one's horn at least once every twenty seconds. Taking a ride in one of those auto-rickshaws on a busy street in Madurai falls somewhere in between riding dodgem cars and a ride on the Loch Nest Monster ride at Busch Gardens.... The streets themselves are lined solid with small shop keepers who must eke out a living by selling baked goods or fruits, candies and "drug store" items, computer software, etc. Of course, there are also dalit, street beggars and young children tagging beside one, hand outstretched asking for money, while about every five minutes the driver of an auto-rickshaw will slow down and ask to give you a ride. It seems inconceivable to them that a tourist or a Euro/American visitor might actually want to simply walk down the street.

Caste in India: Alive and Well

Jan. 28, 2004

Each day so far I have made it a point --whenever the context seemed appropriate -- to ask my new Indian friends and acquaintances about the meaning and reality of caste in either personal or broader social terms. What follows is an informal reflection upon those conversations:

Imagine, if you will, a citizen of India coming to the USA and asking all sorts of annoying and naïve questions about the significance and social meaning of race in contemporary American life. Consider the wide variety of responses that said inquiring individual might receive from rural middle class Caucasian American youth, urban African –American intellectuals, poor Hispanic migrant workers, or –for that matter – from an aging, unapologetic

white racist. I suspect that this may characterize my own fumbling attempts to understand caste in a more personal way.

Of course, India's system for social categorization was legally abolished when she became an independent nation after WW II; and throughout the 20th century prominent Indian intellectuals and political leaders (including Nehru, Ambedkar, Tagore, as well as Mahatma Gandhi himself) have spoken out against the centuries-old, deeply rooted inequities of caste. To this day, the political and intellectual establishment gives lip service—at the very least --to the abolition and illegality of caste. I have yet to talk to an Indian who has anything good to say (to me anyway) about caste. Still, after a few weeks in India, my initial impression is that the caste system is very much a social and cultural reality across a wide spectrum of Indian society: including the burgeoning middle class (400 million according to some demographers) and it is also evident across many religious groups beyond the majority Hindu community (including Indian Christians and Muslims to some degree).

Bear with my “textbook” description : strictly speaking class (“varna”) and caste (“jati”) are different social institutions, and castes are usually characterized as fitting-in to the four basic “varnas.” Jati” means “birth,” and it is a system of social divisions according to spiritual and profane levels of purity. *Brahmins* (analogous to the head) are at the top as an educated, priestly class followed by the *Kshatriyas* (shoulders) serving as warriors and leaders; *Vishayas* (stomach) work as the producers, merchants and business folk; and finally the *Shudras* (the feet) do such menial jobs as cleaning and garbage collection and in general earn their living through physical labor. Considered outside of the body—absent even an allegorical reference to any bodily part -- are the Untouchables, now often referred to as the *Dalit*. (Gandhi's term was the *Harijan* : God's people.) Historically, the *dalit* were considered the most impure, and – to this day: January 28, 2005 -- the majority of the people born without caste subsist through scavenging, begging, cleaning latrines, digging graves and burying corpses of people and animals. It is a pitiful, heart-wrenching sight and a step beyond my other encounters with poverty in Appalachia, the Caribbean, or in the People's Republic of China a decade ago.

An Indian acquires caste status simply through birth, and even today, in all likelihood, will marry someone from within their caste. (Keep in mind that the so-called “love marriages” of western culture remain quite rare in India and that the vast majority of marriages -- no matter one's caste affiliation, educational level, or religious identity -- are family affairs with the initial,

major arrangements made by the parents of the groom and bride.) This link between purity, pollution, and caste still affects social relationships in general: setting sometimes invisible parameters on whom they may eat, socialize, marry, and live next door to. Ironically -- somewhat akin to America's affirmative action programs --official designation of "caste status" has now become a new legal and political reality as the government seeks to offer redress by providing special access and allotted positions to *dalits* and *shudras* and other low caste peoples. Indeed, according to some, caste status had become more important by the start of the 21st century; and, indeed, there has been a well-documented rise in the political voice and activities of dalits and other disenfranchised groups, many of whom have founded new socialist, communist, and communal-based political action groups and local and state parties. (However, I dare not begin to even attempt to describe the Indian political system, since India manages to make Italian politics look simple and non-controversial.)

How does one identify caste? Is it in bad taste to directly inquire? Are there any "secret" symbols or handshakes? According to my conversations there is no single determining factor; and it is now more possible than ever for Indians to work side-by-side and never know the caste of a co-worker. Moreover, I am told that well-educated, cosmopolitan Indians in such international cities as Madras, Mumbai, and Delhi pay little heed to caste. Also, the students and some faculty at Lady Doak College (largely middle class with a mix of Hindus, Christians and a few Muslims) tend to deny the importance of caste. They avoid talking about caste among themselves and feel that it is in poor form to make such an inquiry about a fellow student or a faculty member. Students here (who appear very willing accept the reality of arranged marriage) seem to think that caste is well on its way out and that it is only due to government interference (by establishing legal definitions and government "quotas") that they still must deal with caste. Older people, however, tend to be far more skepticaland perhaps less naïve. They point out that – whether consciously or not – Indians seem to gain a sense caste through a subtle mixture of social signals including accent, type and quality of clothing worn, occupation or profession, educational-level, and literacy (in one or more languages).

One individual told me that the Brahmin still exert tremendous control over social life in India while asking me to keep his comments "off the record" – apparently fearful that there may be some social repercussions. He, and one or two others, expressed real concern about the national political party: the BJP and the rise of nationalistic Hindu fundamentalism. Obviously, most

non-Hindus (about 15% of the population of India) stand adamantly opposed to the BJP, but they themselves are divided by caste, religious identity, and cultural and linguistic identity as well as the split between rural and urban India. Moreover, there are -- no doubt -- many millions of Hindus (including Brahmin) who have little sympathy for the dangerous mix of politics and religious fervor advocated by the BJP. One educated Christian Indian sincerely told me that he feared that if the BJP re-gained a solid parliamentary majority that the party may attempt to reinstate caste. (Note: as best as I can determine, that is not on the party's official agenda.) Still, many individuals have informed me that the grip of caste has been loosened over the past several decades and that it has now become possible -- in economic terms -- to find some relatively poor Brahmins as well as prosperous *Shudras* or even *Dalits*.

Indians are openly talking about the subject: rarely has more than a few days gone by without a news report on an altercation, death, or act of political compromise involving caste-based conflict. Certainly, many individuals have been very generous with their time and with sharing their thoughts about Indian society with me. Finally, every day I am struck by the sheer diversity and complexity of Indian society. It is a miracle of sorts that she is able to function as a nation-state at all given the striking regional and linguistic and religious differences in addition to the historical burden imposed by caste.

More conversations to come.....

From Palani to Maharashtra: A Pilgrimage Experience

February 11, 2005

On the way back home to Madurai after a weekend trip to Kerala, we passed by several small groups of Hindu pilgrims striding toward a holy site: Palani Hill. On the often narrow and bumpy, pot-holed country lanes and village streets, the driver frequently had to swerve over into the right lane (India's colonial legacy has her driving on the left-hand side) and vigorously beep his horn in order to avoid hitting person or beast. (Beeping one's horn in 5 to 10 second intervals, in any event, appears to be mandatory driving behavior in India.) The pilgrims themselves seemed quite casual about the possibility of being side-swiped by a van zooming by at 50 mph. Perhaps a sense of karmic fatalism is at work; or, more likely, people and animals have not yet yielded the road to the combustion engine in this part of the world. In India,

everything from three- wheeler auto-rickshaws to huge cargo lorries (the British term, of course) must share the road with the un-motored masses: including young children, unsteady elderly citizens, village and city cows, stray dogs, goat herds, and an occasional elephant . And, given the fact that there are few (if any) four lane highways and city by-pass roads or sidewalks in most of India.... well, perhaps this is how it felt to cross the USA prior to President Dwight Eisenhower and the federal interstate highway system. Except, of course, there have never been this many people on the North American continent.

For the first few miles, beginning around 6:00pm, we passed a few solo pilgrims and several small family clusters along with --what appeared to be -- two or three “youth groups” marching in exuberant spiritual solidarity. By 7:30pm as their numbers increased -- and after we had negotiated a manned road-block intended to restrict travel on our intended route (undoubtedly due to the heavy pilgrim traffic) -- I began to realize that we had seen hundreds of pilgrims. We saw hundreds upon hundreds more until we turned off a major access road at around midnight: some still striding along while many others had bedded down for the night immediately alongside the road. Please set aside any notion you may harbor of L.L. Bean backpacks, nylon tents, ground mats and polyester sleeping bags....or even a simple campfire. Rather, individuals, family clusters, village groups alike simply stopped along the road (again dangerously close to traffic), set down a thin blanket or cloth (if anything at all) , and placed their tired body on the ground. I was told that in addition to the narrow strips of public land along the roadside that many landowners supported the pilgrims by allowing them to camp out in an adjacent field or by providing a very simple but free canteen service with water, tea, and rice. I did not dare ask about public health, sanitation, and basic toiletries. I’ll put it this way: there were no porta-potties nor any public restrooms to be seen for miles and for two hours we passed at least two thousand “pilgrim-campers.”

To me this had a tribal feel to it, despite the fact that Indians clearly distinguish themselves from the scattered remnants of truly tribal or aboriginal peoples who do, indeed, inhabit some of the remaining jungle and undeveloped areas of the rural south . Those tribal peoples are not only not Christian or Muslim, neither are they Hindu (despite the dominant presence of Hindu culture in South India for over three millennia); nor do tribal peoples here speak Hindi or Tamil --and certainly not English. But to return to these good Hindus on a pilgrimage....

Some pilgrims (mainly men) were carrying the kavadi, a traditional worship “device” consisting of two wooden poles decorated with a garland of flowers (usually jasmine) and peacock feathers and balanced, swinging on one’s shoulders just below one’s head. There were several village groups carrying or pulling a portable version of their village shrine with a loudspeaker system blaring out traditional carnatic music or perhaps just the latest hit from Bollywood (well, I’m guessing) ; one could smell burning incense; some pilgrims were singing or chanting. Although all appeared to be dressed quite humbly, in response to my numerous (undoubtedly irritating) questions, I was assured that men and women, boys and girls, of all castes were participating: from Brahmin and other caste peoples to dalit. I could see for myself that both sexes and all ages were striding toward Palani; but, of course, I had no way of checking on their “caste credentials.”

As we drove by Palani Hill which abruptly juts out of a flat plateau and rises about 1,000 feet - I learned that the temple(at the top of 659 steps) is dedicated to Lord Murugan, a god who I believe is rooted not so much in Sanskritized (a newly learned adjective which I’ve been anxious to use) Hinduism as in regional Tamil culture. In short, Lord Murugan’s roots may lie in the ancient Dravidian culture of south India and pre-date the Aryan invasion from the north. As they climb to the top of Palani, pilgrims honor this deity and his many wives in small shrines that depict various temple legends en route. I am told that there is an icon to the deity at the very top in the inner sanctum and that pilgrims touching the icon pray for miracles and blessings to be bestowed upon them. The temple and annual pilgrimage have become so popular that an electric winch was installed a couple of decades ago to allow for the elderly and handicapped to complete their pilgrimage. Indeed for this festival of the full moon over 200,000 people make this particular pilgrimage...and, this is only one of several hundred such holy sites all across India.

My romanticized admiration for this ancient pilgrimage came to an abrupt halt just two days later upon reading the following headline “300 Killed in Maharashtra Temple Stampede” (reported on January 26, 2005). Several hundred miles northwest of Palani, an “auspicious” day for worship had turned into a nightmare: over three-hundred pilgrims --largely women and children -- had been killed (trampled or burned) in a deadly stampede of people trapped on a narrow path leading to Kalubai Temple. According to press reports, the trouble began when some people fell on steps and steep walkways made slippery by devotees opening and spilling

coconut milk. Also, the approach to the temple had become a narrow corridor lined with temporary thatch-covered stalls selling food, drinks, and trinkets all along the final mile of the pathway. Many reported electrical short circuiting followed by a small explosion of a gas canister which, in turn, set off a fire which spread rapidly. Moreover, there were reports that some young male pilgrims were so angry and desperate in their “trapped situation” that they attacked some of the stall vendors and purposely set those businesses on fire. The situation was further compounded by the inaccessibility of the site to rescue squads, firemen, and police caused not only by the sheer masses of panicking people but also by the largely undeveloped transportation and water systems. Indeed, as any seasoned developing-world traveler will understand: one develops a deeper recognition and abiding respect for the decidedly unglamorous infrastructure systems that we take for granted, *i.e.* clean and safe drinking water, functioning sewage system, dependable trash and garbage pick-up and disposal, paved roads, *etc. etc.* Although I have never visited the Maharashtra site, I have now seen numerous other temples (including the extraordinary Meenakshi Temple here in Madurai), and my guess is that there were few (or no) crowd control devices and public health, sanitation and fire safety features. What a very sad, terrible irony that the smaller and younger Indian pilgrims paid for their devotion with their lives in such a senseless event. A Christian Indian friend here claimed that the historic temple sites were given huge amounts of rupees, and he privately accused the Brahmin temple leadership of corruption: siphoning off donations and not taking proper care of historic Hindu sites.

Gender, Women’s Studies, Lady Doak, and Me.....

March 7, 2005

To begin with a “cleansing” confession: I am guilty of stereotyping and pre-judging the Lady Doak College community prior to my arrival here. This Protestant-Christian, Tamil college for women was established over fifty years ago and is run and staffed largely by women and for women -- with degree offerings in subjects ranging from English to Tamil, Zoology to Physics, Commerce to Sociology. I had mistakenly assumed ---perhaps given the quaint sounding name -- that there would be a rather traditional and conservative feel to this place -- or, perhaps, a British colonial “finishing school” atmosphere with relatively little understanding of,

or commitment to, women's issues and women's rights as we have come to generally understand them in the USA over the past half century. The social reality of this place is rather more complicated of course. Moreover, I am humbly reminded of how a few of my American acquaintances have responded when they learn that I work at a small, private, Presbyterian-affiliated college for women in the South that goes by the name of "Mary Baldwin."

Lady Doak College was started as a school for girls (of all faiths) early in the 20th century by Katie Wilcox, a Congregationalist Yankee missionary with a degree from Smith College and an abiding commitment to women's education in Madurai, India. Miss Wilcox's fascinating life story has some interesting parallels with that of Mary Baldwin College (MBC)¹; and they certainly shared many traits: most of all a faith-based determination to prevail in-the-face-of-extraordinary odds. Following national independence in 1947, Lady Doak College began offering college-level courses and over time has emerged as a largely self-sufficient "autonomous" college for women with both undergraduate and post-graduate programs serving just over three-thousand students. I am told that although most of the young women are from India's rapidly expanding middle class that as many as one-quarter are coming from lower castes and rural, "underprivileged" settings; the Principal and several faculty have asserted this with obvious pride. It seems quite clear to me that on many levels this college for Tamil women is a genuine success story: from its spacious, newly constructed "Golden Jubilee" auditorium (which will hold all 3,000 students) --- to its Oberlin International Center and remodeled Van Allen Guest House which together host a steady stream of visiting faculty and students from across the world (including Korea, Japan, Britain, the Philippines as well as the USA) -- to its weekly hosting of short conferences and workshops sponsored by a variety of disciplines and college programmes – this is a thriving educational community.

From one perspective there are elements of LDC culture that take one back to vintage MBC 1950's. For example, there is the Katie Wilcox Chapel-- centrally located with two chapel services each weekday (morning in English; evening in Tamil) each drawing well over 60 students most of whom have no problem whatsoever with public displays of their faith. (Interestingly, I'm told that many Hindus choose to attend the ecumenical Protestant services.) Promptly at 9:30am a Vice-Principal comes on the college-wide intercom system not only to

¹ Mary Baldwin College, founded in 1842, is a small Presbyterian-affiliated women's college in Staunton, Virginia. Ed.

give daily announcements but also to offer a decidedly Christian prayer to start the day. Then there is the daily sea of pastel-colored saris as well as numerous chudidaars (a sort of a light fabric, south Asian pant suit). I'd say that about 90% of the women of all ages on this campus (faculty, staff, and students) wear one of these forms of traditional, modest clothing. Of the remaining 10%, those women are either wearing the more modest and less colorful Muslim burqa, or they have donned a western style skirt and blouse or even pants and a t-shirt. Yes, the latter clothing category is evident, and I'm told that this is a fairly new but emerging student trend. The "u.g"(undergraduate) students here -- particularly the ones who live on campus -- lead sheltered and protected lives while on this campusand most likely at home as well. For example, social visitation by boys on campus is strictly prohibited; u.g. students are not allowed off campus unless they have explicit permission from their parents and a specific reason to leave; of course, no alcohol or tobacco is allowed; and there are a host of mandatory, group-oriented, co-curricular activities that range from volunteer community service to a folk dance club to athletics to serving as a cadet in their all-female corps. One is rarely allowed to be a loner or to dwell upon oneself in splendid isolation on this campus: a social reality which (I'm rather sure) is reflected in the broader dynamics of India. Also popular is gender segregation in various other settings including schools, movie theatres, and places of worship...although sex segregation is nowhere near as extensive nor as enforced in South India as in, say, Saudi Arabia and many other Muslim majority states.

On the other hand I had the ironic experience of being surrounded by young, healthy and educated Indian women while listening to talks and speeches on female infanticide and "gender-discrimination practices: son preference." Throughout this campus workshop -- sponsored by their expanding Women's Studies Center-- speakers made it clear that Indian culture has traditionally favored males and that there is continuing discrimination leading to the abortion of female fetuses among those who can afford pre-natal "screening" -- and to female infanticide among rural villagers (who have minimal access to modern, middle class health care). Indeed, the political and moral debate on abortion here in India is shaped not only by the "right to life" vs. "the right to choose" but also by the fact that an overwhelmingly high percentage of aborted fetuses are female. One obstetrician claimed that over 80% of aborted fetuses are female in her practice .

I witnessed a clear sense of mission and passion: one history professor frankly stated that Indian women are still “treated like trash;” she added that the ancient Vedic pantheon of goddesses had made little difference in the status of real women over the centuries. Another faculty member pointed out that despite the constitutional guarantees protecting women’s rights (established in 1947 when India became a nation) that India is “harshly discriminatory society with a majority of women domestically confined.” During the conference a gynecologist referred to “nutritional distress” among girls -- not due to anorexia nervosa or bulimia -- but rather rooted in centuries-old traditions in which men and male elders are fed first, visitors and guests second, boys third, women fourth, while girls are the last to be fed -- with any remaining scraps going to the animals or non-caste people (untouchables). She also noted that even following the “second wave” of the Women’s Movement in India (in the 1960’s and ‘70’s) that the laws regarding rape and sexual harassment are either rarely enforced outside of the world-class metropolitan cities or that millions of less educated, rural and lower caste Indian women are simply unaware of their legal rights and succumb to traditional, sexist familial and societal pressures.

Another speaker emphasized that “boy preference” in India was not just a rural problem but that also a sizable percentage of educated middle class men and women (in candid moments) admit that while a first born daughter may be acceptable, a second -born daughter is often viewed as bad fortune, and a third daughter is viewed as disastrous... ..or even “catastrophic.” Women feel pressured to keep bearing children until a son is born; and there are many desperate prayers from pregnant mothers and their mothers-in-law along these lines: “Please God let this child be male.”

Why is this so? What are the “culturally constructed arguments leading to “boy preference” in India? Girls are viewed by some as an economic burden: they cost more to dress, and they are less likely to contribute to the family economically. Also, in Hindu tradition it is only a son who may light a parent’s funeral pyre and, above all, there is the escalating price of dowries that must be paid to future husbands and their families. The dowry issue and “bride burning” (when dowries are considered inadequate) have been brought to the forefront as well publicized legal and moral issues in contemporary Indian society.

In general, rarely does a day go by when the editors of India’s English language press (“The Hindu” and the “Indian Express” in particular) don’t include at least one specific “hard”

news item focused on gender issues or the status of women in Indian society. A brief sample of titles from the past several weeks follows: “Emancipation of women my aim: Girija Vyas;” “Scheme to help women in coir units launched;” “All orphaned children, girls eligible for aid;” “Tsunami: women, the worst affected lot;” “Empower women in tsunami-hit areas;” “Eve teasing: 34 injured in clash;” “Woman doctor playing caste card (in a discrimination law suit);” “Home for destitute women planned;” “Where science falters” (on discrimination against women in the Sciences). At Lady Doak College, a senior faculty leader in the Women’s Studies Center bemoaned the fact that so many current students appear to be apathetic or less engaged about women’s issues than in the past decade and that they “tend to take their college studies for granted.” Still, it is interesting to note that this past weekend there was a campus-wide celebration of the opening of a newly expanded Women’ Studies Centre and that tomorrow: Tuesday, March 8th will be fully recognized on this campus as “International Women’s Day” with various talks and presentations.

A View of Tribal India

March 25, 2005

Were you aware that there are over fifteen million tribal peoples living in South India alone ? That is well over twice the population of Virginia. I certainly had no idea..... but it was fascinating to recently learn about one tribal group from a Christian missionary family living in a very rural part of the State of Andhra Pradesh (in southeast India).

My teacher was Suresh - a very personable and engaging young man, 21 years old: a seminary student enrolled in a librarianship program at United Theological College in Bangalore. Suresh and his mother and father joined me for a long day-trip from cosmopolitan Bangalore (the new IT—information technologies-- center for India) to the historic "garden city" of Mysore. As part of an intensely scheduled day-long coach trip (led in a rather heavy-handed, authoritarian manner by our tour guide), we visited the incredibly opulent Mysore Palace, climbed to the top of Chamundi Hill-- providing us with a 1,000 meter high overview of the entire city of Mysore learned a bit about pre-colonial battles between Hindu and Muslim ruling elites, visited several Hindu temples as well as a Catholic cathedral (with our tour guide earnestly reassuring us that it is "all one God"); gained some insight into the cozy political and economic linkages between the ruling Indian Raj and the British Empire; and

finished the day with a visit to the scenic Brindavan Gardens, widely touted for its lighted water fountain display shortly after sunset.

As always, there were beggars and street merchants with a special eye and fond regard for foreign tourists and a persistence that borders on harassment. Their heavily accented, attention-getting cries of "Sir," "Hello," "Uncle" and even "Master" -- as well as rapping on the bus windows and their "strategic body placement" appear to be a ubiquitous part of the India tourist experience. Indeed, at one point, I intervened on behalf of two women visiting from Nanjing, China when a ten-to-twelve year old Tamil boy (selling postcards) simply would not leave them alone. (Note: in a deep voice, I sternly swore at the boy in Welsh, and he readily understood my tone and body language!) I've noticed that visitors to India struggle with these encounters with poverty (both internally and externally), but that more prosperous Indian citizens often simply reach into their pockets and pull out a rupee or two and hand it over. One is left with the impression that this is done on a habitual basis.... or simply to stop the lingering harassment. At Hindu temple sites one also must respond to Sadhus (gnarly-looking ascetic holy men, dressed in traditional orange, often on a pilgrimage). After touring the Alagar Koil Temple, a friend though told me that a true Sadhu would not actively solicit for money or food and would only accept charity offered at the initiative of the donor.

To return to tribal peoples in South India: they are also known as "scheduled tribes" or as Adivasis (First People). There are numerous parallels with native peoples found across the world: Native Americans in the USA, First Nation peoples in Canada, the Aborigines in Australia, Maori in New Zealand, etc. India's tribals, too, remain unconnected (sometimes by choice, often by circumstance) to the mainstream of Indian life. In ethnic-cultural terms they are neither Dravidian nor Aryan; while in religious terms, not only are they neither Christian nor Muslim, but they have never converted to Hinduism or Buddhism.

Many of these peoples live in remote forested areas (land that was considered too poor and isolated for agricultural development, let alone industrial development). Most tribal peoples in India could be categorized as "hunter/ gatherers folk"..... but by the end of the 20th century they are increasingly coping with the intrusion of modernity into their once sheltered and self-contained lives. The majority exist outside the workings of a money-based economy and tend to either be very shy or actively hostile toward intruders from "civilization," but some individuals have found their way "into and through modernity" while retaining their tribal

cultural identity. Such individuals have benefited from the Indian commitment to a form of affirmative action which designates job quotas as well as scholarships and other grants for "government recognized," "scheduled" tribal peoples. Indeed, one such tribal "success story" is now a professor at Union Theological Seminary and a committed spokesperson for feminist and Dalit theology in India. Imagine my great surprise when she identified herself to me as a "Welsh-Presbyterian" from the far northeast state of Mizoram (!)but that is a story for another occasion.

Suresh's father (a contemporary of mine who speaks Telugu, a tribal language and some Hindi -- but very little English) is an Indian army veteran who was called to tribal ministry over twenty years ago -- but has chosen to work independently without any denominational or church affiliation. Undoubtedly through hard work, devoted faith, and the support of an equally committed spouse, Suresh's father has gained the trust of one group of tribal peoples and has been allowed to "spread the Gospel" and also to assist with the many basic medical, health, and educational needs of the community. (The family's latest project is to build and staff an orphanage.) Suresh (speaking on behalf of his parents) emphasized the humanitarian Christian outreach of his family. Indeed, he himself grew up with tribal friends and seems to have led a fascinating life learning Telugu and Christianity from his mother and father; tribal ways from his young friends; and English and the "ways-of-modernity" from his high school and college experiences.

Given the context: an intense one-day tour, the challenge of language and translation, our first meeting -- I could not explore in any depth the obvious ethical questions and concerns focused around preserving an ancient cultural heritage, fulfilling an evangelical commitment, forgoing any church or denominational affiliation and support, and providing sorely needed humanitarian service. However, I was taken aback when Suresh (almost casually) mentioned to me that the tribal peoples in "his" part of Andhra Pradesh still regularly practice human sacrifice. He was able to provide detailed responses to my barrage of questions: each year one family is chosen to provide an eldest son (a teenage boy) and following a day of drinking, the boy's life is sacrificed. The liquor is a native concoction, not alcohol provided by "mainstream" society; and it is consumed in great quantities on the day of the sacrifice (particularly by the boy chosen to be sacrificed and his family) . The religious ritual itself takes place deep in the forest; and neither Suresh nor his parents have ever actually witnessed a

human sacrifice although they know families who have lost their sons (willingly and not so willingly) . Suresh explained that pieces of cloth are dabbed in the blood of the sacrificed boy and then are distributed to all in the community to be used for one year as a talisman against the evil spirits that bring disease and ill health to one's household.

Well, I leave it to those who have chosen to read this far into my missive to ponder the ethical and spiritual dilemmas and questions that are posed by this tale.....

Commentary on Train Travel in India

On a lighter note, I now have had the experience of traveling "first class" on an overnight train; this involved sharing a small open space with eight other individuals (male and female) and triple layer of fold-down bunk beds that are just short of 6 feet in length. I'll put it this way: despite the "first class designation," this is not a travel experience that I'd recommend to those who suffer from claustrophobia, yearn for private space, or are taller than six feet. As for me, well, this is all "part of an experience" and although I had a sleepless night, it is a small price to pay for a "cross-cultural" venture

A Visit to the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation

Late March 2005

Tucked away on an autonomous college campus in Madurai, South India, there is a literary-resource jewel christened with a rather "homey" sounding acronym: SCILET. The setting is the American College of Madurai (started one-hundred and twenty-five years ago by Yankee Congregational missionaries); and the acronym stands for "**Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation.**" Ironically, by 2005 there is nothing particularly "American" about the college (other than its historic roots and Dr. Paul Love, one of the Centre's founders), nor is there anything especially "homey" or provincial about SCILET and its three co-founders what-so-ever. These unassuming, collegial scholar-teachers (two of whom now serve as retired English faculty) continue to work as directors of this rich and under-utilized resource centre (at least by non-Indian scholars); and they are obviously keenly aware not only of developments in the diverse literatures of India but also of the various cross-currents in international literary movements and trends. When the term "post-colonial" was bandied

about, Paul Love -- with a wry smile --opined that it may be time to become post post-colonial. His esteemed colleagues, R.P. Nair and Premila Paul studiously avoided the trendy jargon of post-modern literary criticism and instead talked with direct passion not only about the goals, visiting guest authors, and programmes of SCILET but also about the astonishingly diverse range of Indian authors and poets (both within India and in diaspora) --making specific references to those literary works which led to the creation of SCILET in the first place.

Whether labeled as “Post-colonial” or “New Literatures in English,” it is now clear that the days in which instruction and scholarly discourse in English literature narrowly understood as “British-English” have ended. Since the early 20th century -- even within the British Isles themselves -- we’ve witnessed the emergence of distinctive Anglo-Welsh, Anglo-Irish and Scottish literary voices. And, in the past quarter-century we’ve now seen other English-language writers emerge from across the old Commonwealth: men and women who choose to express themselves in English but may or may not have an affinity for the traditional canon and British-English cultural authority. Not only have English-language Asian poets and authors been creating a distinctive voice (different too, from American literature), but they’ve also found an eager reading public and several world-class publishers willing to promote their work. (It is claimed, for example, that Arundhati Roy, winner of the Booker prize for her outstanding first novel, **The God of Small Things**, received a huge publisher’s advance.) Although by some estimates only about ten percent of India’s citizens are active readers in English, this alone qualifies populous India as the second largest, English-language “readers market” in the world; directly stated, ten percent of India translates into over one-hundred million readers of English. . Moreover, there are many millions more English-readers across Pakistan, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, South Korea and other parts of the Asian continent who appear to be interested in reading something more than *Business Week* and *The Economist*. For readers and writers in India, Salman Rushdie’s **Midnight’s Children**, in particular, is often cited as a key seminal work in which new Asian-Indian English literary conventions and themes fully emerged -- setting a standard for others to either emulate or respond against .Clearly, the trans-global spread of English, the emergence of economic globalization on a corporate and multi-national scale, the example of new literary forms emerging from North American Asian diaspora, and the continuing evolution of personal and cultural identity in a world in which people communicate instantly and travel extensively are among the important factors shaping the

themes and forms of new English literatures across Asia and also among Asian peoples scattered across Europe, North America, and Australia & Polynesia.

To return to SCILET: the centre is located on the quiet, green-canopied American College campus which, in turn, is situated in a bustling and congested temple city: what “locals” refer to as an overgrown Tamil village (of over one million). Madurai is a “developing world” tropical, urban community coping with the difficult infrastructure challenges brought on my rapid growth of government and various soft industries, the rise of a prosperous (and “consuming”) middle class, the lingering presence of urban poverty, and (somewhat ironically) a burgeoning tourist industry -- actively seeking to promote the city as an international destination. At times one is astonished by the jarring co-mingling of “urban suits” with cell phones and their late-model luxury autos with a/c -- with peasant folk, dressed in a simple lungi (white cloth) and perched high on an ox-drawn cart loaded with sugar cane. SCILET, too, in its own way appears to blend a high- tech approach (with its well-designed web-site and distance services providing global access to its resources) and a decidedly low-tech, cordial air of gracious hospitality (tea or coffee included).

In traditional terms, SCILET can be seen as a thorough, spacious, and well-organized library collection including such clearly labeled sections as “Tamil Literature,” “Indian Cinema,” “The History of Indian Literature,” “Poetry Criticism (of Indian Literature),” “Anthologies of Indian Literature,” *etc.* In addition, the library includes strong sections on Women’s Studies and works written by Indian women authors; this is one of the library’s most rapidly growing collections reflecting a particular commitment to condition and activities of women across India. Their journal and periodical collection, too, is comprehensive including over seventy titles ranging from *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* to *The London Review of Books* .

However, there is more going on at SCILET than a solid collection of books and periodicals: one senses a clear and passionate sense of mission from Professors Love, Nair, and Paul. Two decades ago, when they realized that Indian Literature in English had “arrived,” they also saw a growing public demand and scholarly need to translate quality literary works from India’s diverse languages (Tamil, Urdu, Telugu, Malayalam, *etc*) into English, thus making that literature available to a broader audience across India. This, too, is part of the calling of SCILET in their effort to create positive and creative linkages between

indigenous literary traditions and play a national role in establishing bi- or tri-lingual “literary cultures.” In this context rather than fight against the pervasive encroachment of “utilitarian and business-oriented English,” perhaps there is a way to nurture, celebrate, and widely disseminate co-extant literatures while also shaping written English in dramatically new ways. This may be an especially wise -- if unstated -- strategy in a nation-state which has sixteen major languages and yet, ironically, is linked nationally (and internationally) by a “colonially imported” non-indigenous language. Perhaps a major cultural assumption lying behind SCILET is the confident recognition that Indian English need no longer be regarded as either a colonial British import; a necessary national, political compromise; or even as a *lingua franca* for tourism and economic transactions.

The Centre has been drawing scholars from across India to Madurai since its inception in 1984 (including Meena Alexander, Kamal Das, Shiv Kumar and John Oliver Perry, to name only a few) and appears fully capable of serving the needs of both international scholars and writers as well as doctoral students and beginning faculty members in a variety of fields of study beyond literature: including Women’s Studies, Asian Studies, and History as well as other “cultural area studies.” Indeed, faculty housed in English departments, others who draw upon world literature and are committed to interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching about South Asia (and Indian cultures and languages in particular) may be very interested in drawing upon the services and resources of SCILET. Although, the Centre does not offer travel grants or scholarships, their fees are very modest; they are positively anxious to assist others with a shared scholarly commitment and interest; and the Centre clearly enjoys wide respect and support from its home institution from the College Principal to the friendly and helpful staff assistants.