

TOS “Sacred Sights Tour of Southern India”

Reflections by Olga Gostin

Twenty-eight of us Aussies set out on this latest TOS fundraising trip organised by Jean Carroll to slot in straight after the Convention at Adyar. It would be true to say that the impetus for many of us was the excellent experience that we’d formerly had under the same leadership in Bali/Java, and again in Cambodia. This time though, several of us were visiting India for the first time, and for some, myself included, the opportunity to visit Adyar and attend the Convention was an occasion not to be missed. The Convention theme, ‘From teachings to insight: the altruistic heart’, was an additional drawcard for TOS members.

And we were not disappointed. While the lectures were thought-provoking, for me it was the greater ambience of Adyar and peripheral activities that remain the lasting memory. Thus there was the special exhibition on Annie Besant’s impact on Indian society in its struggle for Independence and the associated opportunity to visit her apartment as well as Krishnaji’s above the Headquarters Building. It was also riveting to explore the Museum and see so much memorabilia associated with the founders of TS. Extracurricular activities gave us the opportunity to see displays on animal welfare and ethical living, while visits to the vocational training centre, the Olcott Memorial Secondary School and the local school for girls (aged 3-18) from disadvantaged and violent backgrounds brought home very realistically that every cent raised by TOS activities is worthily invested at Adyar.



1 Procession in Madurai

Adyar! How that name has resonated for 30 years of my TS membership. I availed myself of every opportunity in the well-spaced lecture program to explore yet another nook, another connection with the founders of the Theosophical Society. But behind the exhilaration of discovering the Garden of Memory where all the founding members are commemorated; behind the exhilaration of sitting in the shade of the legendary Great Banyan Tree; discovering the Buddhist temple and the various places of worship of all major religions; I also saw the derelict state of many buildings, the overgrown bushland, heaps of garbage, signs of neglect and careless past stewardship, so symbolic, possibly, of our own richly endowed lives. And amidst this chaos, a neat row of new saplings carefully planted in the hollowed-out 1-metre trunk section of a dead palm tree, each plant further surrounded by three or four little upright polyester pipes, half-filled with coconut fibre and sand, acting as conduits for twice weekly watering, direct to the roots of the new plant. As I marvelled at this inventiveness, the head gardener passed by and explained the system to me as his own cheap ‘drip-irrigation system’ that would be able to withstand future flooding like the sudden storm that had uprooted the original plants only two weeks earlier. When I asked to photograph him alongside his irrigation system, Mr Devadas smiled his decline and pointed first to the plant, then to the sky: “This is my duty, my labour of love, but it is for that honour.” Nor was this noble man the only sign that Adyar is on the path to revival and consolidation under the able leadership of the Boyds. But that is another story, and the very task of revitalising Adyar is surely another form of service.



2 A mobile shop

All too soon, the Convention was over and we set out on our 1,600 km journey through the hinterland of Tamil Nadu to the very tip of the continent at Kanyakumari, then up coastal Kerala to Kochi. In a way, we had been prepared for this journey by the outstanding Besant Lecture delivered during the Convention by Professor Lokesh Chandra on “Tamil: the glory of India.” The erudite nonagenarian sage had spoken seamlessly and without notes about the antiquity of Tamil and the role of its pioneer navigators in exploring the world, back to Roman times and earlier; introducing writing, trade, mining in Africa and numerous other exploits. My lasting memory of the landscape is of a lush, chequered countryside with every inch under cultivation as far as the eye could see: rice paddies, cornfields, coconut plantations and banana groves (ah, those bananas – what varieties of them and so delicious). Small villages with their jumble of wayside stores, colourful art-deco type houses jostling with meagre thatched cottages, gave way to large cities like Tanjore, Trichy and Madurai where we were ensconced in comfortable hotels. The object in these centres was to visit noted temples and/or ashrams. To be honest, the various temples now blur their separate identities, but I retain a sense of grandeur, unparalleled craftsmanship, myriad of multi-coloured deities and heroes, whose epic stories escape me, and the recurring theme that non-Hindus are not to enter the sacred precincts. The inclusiveness of the morning puja at the Bharata Samaj Temple at Adyar was, in retrospect, particular to the multi-faith sanctuary that epitomises Adyar, and Theosophy in general. We were also surprised by the electronic scanners that preceded entry to most temples – a reflection of underlying tensions even in this southern part of the sub-continent. It is interesting that neither St Thomas Basilica in Chennai nor St Francis Church in Kochi (the oldest European church in India, dating back to 1557) had these safety guards, nor did the historic Synagogue tucked away in the heart of so-called Jew town in Kochi. The latter bore testimony to the reputed trading connection between Kerala and King Solomon’s empire. Later the Maharaja of Kochi offered a haven to Jews fleeing their homeland after the second destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Our bus journey was enriched by the contribution of various members, elaborating on thoughts for the day, spiritual snippets, explanations of the countryside, notably the inselbergs (island rocks) sticking out of the flat plain, and excellent insights into India’s national anthem and its source. Strangely, though we drove through areas that were the heartland of the 18th century Carnatic Wars between the British and the French for trading dominance in India, none of this was explained, as we crossed the rivers crucial to these engagements – now dry river beds as the monsoon has failed since 2011. The superb Gandhi Memorial

Museum in Madurai gave us ample time to fill in gaps and to ponder on the life of this extraordinarily humble champion of India against the might of the British Raj.



3 Giri girls greeting

Reaching Kanyakumari through the largest wind farm that we have ever seen, we found ourselves overlooking the confluence of the Sea of Bengal, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. The excellent location of our hotel enabled us to oversee the two small islands commemorating the visit of Swami Vivekananda, the Indian philosopher, who had meditated there for three days before setting out on his mission of revealing the wisdom of ancient India to the west, notably at the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago in 1893. We visited the shrine and its associated meditation room and sacred space. For Hindu devotees, the visit to this site is equivalent to the pilgrimage to Mecca for Muslims. Later that afternoon we had time to wander down the foreshore along the famous Ratchagar Street and engage with the Christian community at the very tip of India and its myriad of chapels and churches, including the Gothic-style Shrine of Our Lady of Ransom (1900-1956) and the associated quirky outdoor shrine explaining the function and layout of the Rosary.

Our journey along coastal Kerala was very different from the wide-open cultivated vistas of Tamil Nadu. Here we negotiated tortuous roads with lush overgrowth, and with almost constant (often luxurious) housing interspersed with rich banana and sugar-cane groves, giving us occasional vistas onto the coast that we were hugging on our journey northward. Communist flags and posters of the hierarchy of the past festooned the roadside: Marx, Engels, Stalin and Lenin in glorious technicolour. Our guide explained that Kerala is the most economically

advanced state in India, with 100% literacy, and health facilities and schools in every village – (and according to the *Hindu Post*, also with the highest rate of suicide). At Trivandrum we visited the Shri Chitra Art Gallery, that not only housed the famous epic paintings of Raja Ravi Varma but also 16 paintings by Nicholas and Svetoslav Roerich. A group of Russian tourists were being shown around and this encounter was the preface to further connections with Russian tourists at Kovalam Beach, our penultimate stop. Here we had a free day to roam along the beach and the wall to wall boutiques and restaurants along the foreshore. Climbing to the top of the Lighthouse we sat with a newly-wed Indian couple from Mumbai and engaged in an hour of soulful and gentle conversation that we had missed in our headlong quest for temples and exotica. It was a salutary encounter and contrasted sharply with our subsequent accidental meeting with PV, our 28-year old guide of 12 days, who had been chased from the tourist beach at Kovalam Beach by a local official, and told to swim on the segregated Indian beach round the corner. As I expressed contriteness at this impasse, PV simply shrugged his shoulders: “*What can you expect after 200 years of colonialism?*” What indeed!



4 Farewell dinner

And so to Kochi, our final stopover. It was very touching to visit St Francis Church, the oldest European church in India, dating back to its Portuguese roots in 1557. Here we found the tombstone of Vasco da Gama, the explorer who had also chartered the South African coast and made landfall in the Cape of Good Hope, once upon a time, my South African homeland. I felt a deep sense of connection here, a compelling sense of the oneness that binds us all despite the vagaries of time and place. This feeling was further entrenched on our last day,

at the Sri Narayana Orphanage at Aluva, on our way to the airport. It is a matter of pride that this extraordinary venture was set in motion partly, at least, by Celia Novy and that it has been supported by Blavatsky Lodge for many years. There are now over 130 girls and 67 destitute elderly women harboured in this sanctuary. Here, for our edification, was service naked and raw. The children (aged 3 upward) sat in 4 long rows on the floor and sang songs, while some of our wonderful TOS members joined in with high fives, selfies and songs of their own. My heart broke for the mothers who'd had to give up these precious daughters, and for some of the kids who bore the hurt of their condition as an open scar. May they find peace and solace in the complex, confounding and challenging world that is modern India. Our profound, heartfelt thanks and indebtedness to Jean for having made such an encounter possible. May we live the life of service that has been so graphically exemplified to us on this memorable trip.