

Travel Report February 2019

The new Cochin airport, where we landed after our flights from Munich via Dubai to Kerala, is the world's first airport that relies 100% on solar energy. A Metro connects the airport to the city ca. 40 Kilometres away.

There is no lack of sunshine in Southern India and Summer came early this year. The local people said it came a month too early and that it didn't rain at all in January. I have never experienced the mountainous area around Bodhizendo so warm.

In Bodhizendo, Indian Zen Master and Jesuit Ama Samy's meditation centre, the traces of cyclone Gaja which devastated parts of Tamil Nadu in November 2018 were still visible. In less than two hours, many of the great silver-oak trees were uprooted and heavy rains destroyed retaining walls. Roofs were also damaged and for several days there was no electricity.



The day after we arrived we visited the nearby Little Flower Montessori kindergarten where more than 120 children are looked after daily by seven lady teachers. In the afternoon over 130 children from the surrounding schools come for tuition for which a computer room is also available. On the ground floor there is a large multipurpose room and a kitchen, where a healthy and delicious meal is prepared daily for the kindergarten children.

As always there was a big welcome party for the visitors from Germany with many dances and wonderful performances. We were delighted that a group of Bodhizendo guests accompanied us thus giving the children a large and thankful audience. It was obvious that it was a lot of fun for the children.

We then met the people cared for by Little Flower within the framework of "individual help". Sickness, old age and poverty are their recurring themes and by now, most of them are old acquaintances. Part of the individual help is of course financial support, but we had the feeling that the loving and personal care of the Little Flower staff is even more important than the money.



After that there was a meeting with students whose college education is also supported in the context of individual help. We were particularly impressed by two young girls who had come with their mother. Both are law students and have now secured state scholarships because of their good grades. Jobs in the civil service are also guaranteed following their graduation.



The next day, the annual meeting of former students of the Montessori School took place. More than 100 children came and talked about their lives in their secondary schools.

There was a surprise when visiting Kodaikanal nearby. There were no more plastic bags, none at all, without exception! They are banned not just here, but in about half of India's states. High penalties can be imposed on anyone still offering them. Of course, I do not know if the ban is enforced so strictly everywhere. But in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, which I visited, I did not see any more plastic bags and the success of the ban was also visible on the cleaner roadsides.

After many discussions with the project managers and a Sesshin (5 days strict meditation course), we visited PEARL, the second large project we support, in the following week. PEARL lies about 4 hours east in the city of Paramakudi in the plain. While it was a pleasant 20° - 24° in the mountains, the temperatures here reach 35° in March and 40° and higher later.



PEARL also operates a large kindergarten (play-school). What's special about it is that not only Dalit children (untouchables) attend, but also middle-class children of higher castes. Of course, we visitors did not notice any difference looking at the children. The middle class parents were at first hesitant to negative about letting their children attend school with Dalit children but the high quality of education provided convinced them to change their minds. They thus also support the poorer children with their school fees.

Unlike in Germany, kindergarten does not just mean playing, but mainly classes in writing, arithmetic and geography.

A kitchen house was opened in December for the preparation of lunch on a gas cooker. Cooking on wood and the associated smoke is a thing of the past.

In a room under the roof the greeting cards that are so popular are embroidered. Sonja Leeb, who is responsible for this project, was very enthusiastic about the new Christmas designs that must be ordered already to be ready for Christmas. We also had a short visit with the seamstresses, who learn how to sew sari blouses and thus contribute to their families' income.



The day ended with a visit to Leelavathi Nagar, the bird and snake catcher's settlement just outside the town. This year a building should be completed here to house the daily tutoring, that PEARL has been offering for over 10 years already; finally providing a room for the teachers with a toilet and space for teaching materials. The students will have a roof over their heads; in rainy season everything turns to mud in the loamy soil. PEARL already bought a plot of ground for the building some time ago. This project is mainly supported by donors from Sweden and an Indian green energy company.

After a tour of the village we had a conversation with the leader of Leelavathi Nagar. Above all, he wishes that the next generations will have a better education and thus better opportunities. He wishes to see Leelavathi recognised as an independent community, which hasn't been the case up to now, most likely due to caste reasons.



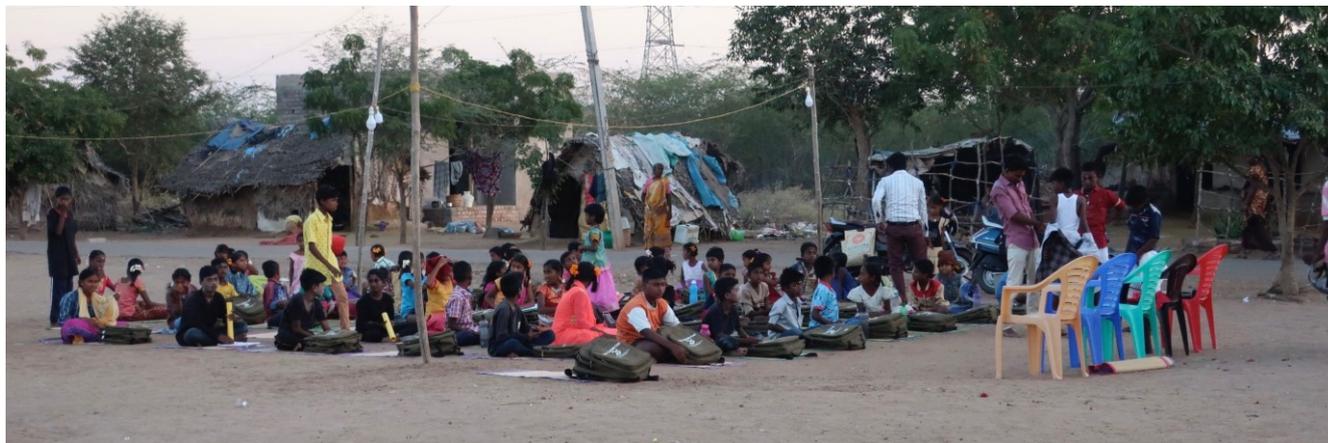
Amala explained the amazing self-management of the bird catchers to us with their committed monthly meeting of all (male) parishioners and a fine for no-shows. The board is also elected at this meeting. All agreements are only passed on orally and not recorded in writing. The assembly also voices opinions in matters of marriage and can impose fines when a violation of the rules occurs. In one such case, a conflict with PEARL occurred (as explained below).

The pedagogical concept of PEARL has always included not only school education, but also socio-political issues. The biggest problems in communities such as Leelavathi Nagar are still child labour and the marriage of girls before the age of 18. Both are prohibited by law and there is a public authority (Child Line)

to watch over it. Nevertheless, it happens again and again that children miss school because they need to work at home or help support the family.

Girls are promised to a partner at a young age and there are still marriages before both partners have reached the age of 18. These are very sensitive topics because the families do not want outsiders to get involved in any discussions on their children's upbringing.

In the autumn of 2018, a boy from the bird catchers returned to Leelavathi Nagar with an obviously underage bride whom he met in another village. Shortly thereafter, he was visited by representatives of Child Line, who asked the PEARL social worker to accompany her. Among the bird catchers a rumour spread that PEARL had reported the young people. This misunderstanding made PEARL's work more difficult for a while.



Now everything seems to have been clarified. Together with the community board we enjoyed the great performances of the young people who come here for daily tutoring. There were several folk dances with wonderful costumes and a pantomime presentation about safety in the home and in traffic. Our short farewell addresses were translated from English into Tamil by a girl from the village.



I started the next day with a walk through the awakening city. Soon after, the kindergarten began to fill up. At the door the children were welcomed by their teachers. Before the beginning of the lesson, everyone sat down for a fifteen-minute meditation. During the night, the cherry branch which I had brought from Germany had blossomed, and now stood next to the Buddha statue in the hall.

Afterwards I met with a group of young girls in the yard, who are being supported in their nursing education as part of the sponsorship program. Some of them had travelled from quite far to attend this meeting. They talked about their education and their hopes for a good job. The courses last from two to three and a half years.

Another meeting followed with women from self-help groups. With their colourful saris they were a beautiful sight. I was able to hand them over cotton bags PEARL had made. On one side there is an advertisement on the thoughtful use of water, and on the other an advertisement for the protection of trees. For years PEARL has been fighting for the avoidance of plastic bags. Now it has finally become a law.



After lunch it was time to say goodbye. I really hope to be able to continue accompanying these great projects and their many committed people for a few more years. With few resources, a lot is being achieved.

We returned to Madurai on the new four-lane highway. Travel times have been drastically shortened with the introduction of this modern, not very busy road. There are no more picturesque journeys through villages. Safety has also improved. In the past you had to share the road with oxen carts and there were always dangerous overtaking manoeuvres. Meeting a tractor on the wrong side of the road is an exception today which nobody seems to get upset about. The driver drives around the obstacle calmly. Indeed everything has many different sides.

After so many impressions, I spent most of the rest of the afternoon and evening in the great Minakshi Temple in Madurai. A few years ago it got a colourful paint job for an anniversary. Now the colours are already fading and are disappearing discreetly into the background. A cowshed is also part of the temple complex. There I bought a bundle of straw and fed the sacred animals who gladly took it from me.

The next day I took the Intercity (superfast) train from Madurai to Trivandrum, from where I started my journey home, but not without taking a last look at the sea.



The picture was painted on a piece of cloth by Montessori School child

Christian Herde
Munich, 19 Feb. 2019

[transl. Ken Hennessy]