

## Travel report February 2024

Nothing stays the same. Since I first visited India in 2007, the country has developed at a rapid pace. Back then, you could still see many bullock carts on the country roads, but today they have completely disappeared and made way for a large number of cars and lorries. There are hardly any more through roads, which were picturesque but also time-consuming. The legendary Hindustan Ambassador taxis, which were modelled on the English Morris Oxford from the 1950s until 2014, have disappeared. Four-lane motorways criss-cross the country all the way to the south. Even if the on- and off-ramps do not yet consistently meet European standards and not all drivers adhere to the rules of the right lane as an overtaking lane (equivalent to the left lane here), the new motorways make long journeys much easier.

Years ago, I could hardly imagine that European cars would be able to cope on Indian roads, but today this is obviously no longer a problem. And the development is continuing at a rapid pace. From 2030, no more cars with combustion engines are to be sold in India and the end for diesel vehicles is set to come sooner. Electric cars are hardly to be seen yet, but they already exist (with green licence plates).

However, another related development is causing people in India a lot of trouble. It is getting warmer and warmer and the heat starts earlier and earlier in the year. As I always visit the same places at the same time, I can confirm this. Whereas in Kovalam in Kerala it used to be 27-29° at the end of February, this year it was 34° throughout and it hardly cooled down at night. In Paramakudi in eastern Tamil Nadu, the thermometer rose to 38° after my departure and also in the mountains at an altitude of 1,600 metres, where I spent most of my time, to 25 - 27°. These are temperatures that are usually only seen at the end of March and in April. As more and more people are moving from the hot plains to the mountains, provided they can afford it, property prices are exploding and the original population is being squeezed.

However, the friendliness and helpfulness of the people has remained and made my stay a wonderful time again this year.

On Shrove Tuesday, I flew from Munich to Kochi in Kerala via Dubai together with two friends. Then we took a taxi together to Perumalmalai in Tamil Nadu, where the Jesuit and Zen master Ama Samy has built his new Zen meditation centre. Unlike Bodhizendo, which he founded 25 years ago not far from here in a Jesuit plantation, the new centre is located in the village.

On Friday, there was a welcome party for us at the neighbouring Montessori school (preschool) with dance performances by the children. A total of around 80 children between the ages of 3 ½ and 5 ½ are taught there by 7 teachers. Chitra, James and Miriam are in charge. From 16:30 - 18:00 there is tutoring for the school children from the surrounding schools of CSI (Protestant) and St Joseph (Catholic).



On Saturday, we travelled to Paramakudi for two days to visit PEARL, the second major project that our association supports in Tamil Nadu. This time only Sonja Leeb from the board of Little Flower was with me. Paramakudi is located in the plains near the east coast and can now be reached by car from Perumalmalai in less than 4 hours thanks to the better roads.

At PEARL, we were warmly welcomed by Amala, the staff and many children with songs and flowers. After a delicious lunch and a short break, we first visited the card embroiderers who had also come to their workroom at the PEARL Centre on Saturday in our honour, some of them with their children. Some of the cards are now also made at home.

We then made our first visit to the new PEARL library, where we met several reading children as well as the librarian Clara. The library now has more than 2,400 books from all areas, from picture books to books on religion and spirituality. It is used by preschool children, older students, parents and the PEARL staff.



together with 10 other toilets with the help of interest-free microcredit from PEARL, which must be repaid by the families within 30 months, and with self-help. A small kiosk was also built last year with the help of a microcredit from PEARL.

In addition to the bird catchers, there is a small group of snake catchers who gave us a performance with a cobra. They catch the snakes in the wild and extract the venom from them, which is then processed into serum. Nevertheless, the sight is a little frightening.

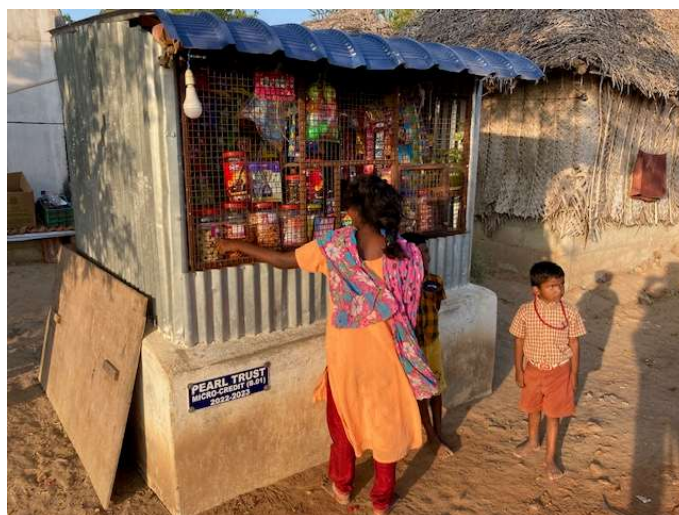
Accompanied by a group of young men drumming, we walked back to the Learning Centre. There we first visited a small exhibition that the children had set up for us. On posters with photos and drawings, they provided information about their lives, environmental issues and the new library. One pupil had built a model of a spacious toilet out of various materials.

Then we visited the library branch, which is housed in a large glass cabinet. All the while, the children and young people sat quietly and disciplined on their mats on the floor in the hall and waited for the subsequent programme.



Then, as we do every year, we travelled to Leelavathinagar, the village of the birdcatcher who have been supported by PEARL and us for over 25 years. We were already expected there. We met at the PEARL Learning Centre. It was completed in 2022 and primarily serves as a base for daily tuition, which is still very important now, long after the school closure due to the pandemic. Around 90 children are looked after by 2 teachers and a social worker. In addition to tutoring, the new building also serves as a meeting place for young people and for other events. The Play Ground has now also been completed with a toilet building and lots of plants to provide shade in the future.

Before the welcome in the courtyard of the Learning Centre, we had the honour of inaugurating a private toilet in the village by cutting a yellow ribbon. It was built



First we were officially welcomed and decorated with scarves. Then young people who are doing an education with the help of PEARL and Little Flower introduced themselves. They gave short presentations in English and all showed admirable self-confidence. There is no longer any trace of their origins as "untouchables". We were then asked questions again, some of which referred to our answers from last year. The war in Gaza was also a topic and what we thought the war meant for the children there. One boy asked me if and why reading books was important to me. After a short speech from us and the presentation of two books for the library, the rousing programme began. Just like last year, it was a series of folk dances in wonderful costumes and pantomimes about correct environmental behaviour.



It was already dark and late when we arrived back in the centre of PEARL and after a great dinner we went to bed tired and happy. Sleep didn't come straight away with the 30° room temperature and sometimes loud music from the neighbourhood, but eventually it did.

The next day, just like last year, we helped distribute food parcels after breakfast. Since the pandemic, during which many people have become unemployed, PEARL has been supporting some families on a regular basis. Many of them are also suffering from illnesses. PEARL employees visit the villages to check whether they are in need.

We then visited the library again, where the children of some of the bird catchers, who still live in tents and bast huts in the riverbed near the PEARL Centre, had set up an exhibition for us. Every day after school, they come into this beautiful, bright room to read and learn. Afterwards, they write summaries of what they have read. The library is also open for them at weekends. They have been supported by a young teacher from the PEARL staff for many years. In the exhibition, they showed how they come out of the bast huts in the morning with clean school uniforms and then after school sit in the library in the afternoon. The teachers in the schools are delighted with the progress the children have made since the library was set up.

Then there was a big programme with the children who are supported by PEARL through sponsorships. Four former children from the sponsorship programme, who now work and support children, introduced themselves. Current sponsored children also introduced themselves with short presentations. One boy read from an English picture book, another played a short piece on a keyboard.

And then there were lively dance performances and a pantomime. The atmosphere was great. Afterwards, we ate together with the young godmothers and godfathers before they set off on the long journey home to their workplaces in Coimbatore.



Of course, there was also a discussion in Paramakudi about the future budget. As the level of donations has fallen somewhat, expenditure must be reduced or new sources found. In the early afternoon, we set off on our return journey, richly rewarded. We were not the only ones sad to say goodbye.



I then spent a few days at the new meditation centre in Perumalmai with many inspiring conversations and daily exchanges with Ama Samy. On the one hand, you can look into a wonderful gorge and hear the waterfall, and on the other, you are directly connected to the village and its many sounds.

Of course, we also took the opportunity to sit down with the children at the Montessori school several times and visit the afternoon tutoring sessions. It was amazing to see how calmly the children worked with the Montessori materials. They put shapes into matching openings with great concentration or built towers out of small boards. They attentively wrote letters and words in English and Tamil. They receive intensive support from the teachers. At lunchtime, the children are served a healthy lunch prepared by Esther and her staff.

As in Paramakudi, it would be difficult for many children and young people to succeed at school without free tuition. This has always been the case, but now that schools have been closed for so long during the pandemic, this support is particularly important. Around 90 children and young people are taught for one and a half hours from Monday to Friday. Little Flower has employed 6 teachers for this purpose. There is also a small group of around 20 children who are looked after in a small settlement on the way to Bodhizendo. From next year, special English lessons are planned.

One day, we travelled with Chitra and James to a slightly more remote village that we had already visited four years ago. It lies at the beginning of the "Spice Valley", where pepper plants climb up the trees. Signs warn of wild elephants.

In the village, we met a 24-year-old young woman who had attended tuition at the Montessori school. After completing the 12th school year, she had married and now has two children. Nevertheless, she is preparing for the exam for a government job through distance learning. It is not clear whether her husband and his family will allow her to work.

In the small village school with 10 children, the teacher was not there. She was replaced by two assistants. The children in classes 1 - 4 had exercise books in English and Tamil in front of them. One of the helpers was preparing lunch. There were no children in the neighbouring kindergarten. Only the kindergarten teacher was there. The walls were colourfully painted with a donation from a TV station.



After a total of 14 days, it was time to say goodbye to all the lovely people who look after the projects and the friends who were able to stay for a while.



I travelled back via Madurai and spent a few hours in the temple before boarding the night train to Trivandrum shortly before midnight. There were over 40 Krishna pilgrims with me in the sleeper car. An elderly woman next to me knelt on her bed for hours and prayed aloud.

I had a nice experience in Madurai beforehand. On my departure from Perumalmalai, a handle on my suitcase was torn off. By chance, a man had a small suitcase repair shop opposite my hotel. He replaced the handle in 10 minutes and for only 2.20 EUR.

I spent the last day of my trip in Kovalam again. The container harbour at Vizhinjam is now in operation. The picturesque fishing village, with its Christian and Muslim sections, has changed rapidly. The formerly poor Muslim part in particular is now lined with restaurants and small shops. There are also plans to use the harbour for cruise ships. This will bring another massive change.



The alarm clock rang at 1:00 on Saturday morning and at 1:30 Babu came with his tuk-tuk to drive me to the airport. My nice landlords had got up to see if I would be able to leave on time.

Christian Herde  
Munich, 15 March 2024