

Travel Report February 2023

It is just two weeks since I returned from India and I am already looking forward to the next visit. After the three-year break caused by Covid, everything was a bit more exciting before, but then India welcomed me as usual with all its kindness and made everything easy.

The flight via Dubai was full as usual, the Dubai airport with its overabundance of things no one really needs was full of people even in the middle of the night and almost no one wore masks anymore. From Kochi in Kerala, we took the pre-booked taxi to the mountains. After about 6 hours we reached the new meditation center of Ama Samy in Perumalmalai at about 1,600 m above sea level. From there it is only a few minutes to the Bodhizendo. There I also met Sonja Leeb and Barbara Hofmann.

After a day of rest, we had a big welcome party on Friday at the Montessori school with dance performances of the children. A total of 72 - 100 children between 3 ½ and 5 ½ years are taught there by 7 teachers. Afterwards we had a long talk with the head of LF in Perumalmalai about the budget for the next financial year and the increased costs. India is also suffering from inflation. Since India has no gas and oil reserves, it is heavily dependent on imports, which currently come mainly from Russia.



Before we went back to the Bodhizendo, we stopped by the dispensary, which is now located in the Montessori school. A trained young woman gives first aid here and also dispenses medicines if necessary.

On Saturday we went for two days to Paramakudi to visit PEARL, the second big project our association supports in Tamil Nadu. Again Sonja Leeb, Barbara Hofmann and another friend were with us. The almost 200 kilometers down to the plains, previously time-consuming and exhausting, have become easy and comfortable thanks to the new highway. Now there is also a bypass around Madurai, where we were otherwise regularly stuck in traffic jams. In contrast to Peru-malmalai, it was warm in the plains with about 30 degrees.

At PEARL, we were warmly welcomed by the teachers and the children of the playschool with songs and flowers. They seemed to be really happy about our visit. Later we read in the guest book that there was only one entry since our last visit in 2020. Afterwards we visited the card embroiderers who had also come to their workroom in the PEARL centre on Saturday in our honor.

After a delicious lunch

and a short rest, we went to Leelavathinagar, the village of the Bird Catchers, who have been supported by PEARL and us for over 25 years. We were already expected there. First, we visited the PEARL "Learning Centre", which was completed in April 2022. It serves mainly as a base for daily tuition, which is especially important now, after more than 500 days without school due to the pandemic. There is so much to be done so that the children and young people do not lose their connection at state schools. About 90 children are looked after by 2 teachers and a social worker. Besides tutoring, the new building also serves as a meeting place for the young people and for other events. There has already been a meeting of the local communist party.





Three wings enclose a paved courtyard planted with palm trees. In the middle is the hall open to the courtyard, to the side there is a closed classroom and on the other side an office, with a side room and a toilet for the teachers. Opposite the courtyard there is a small sports field with toilets for the children and young people. The building stands on a plot of land at the edge of the settlement and is by far the largest and most magnificent structure. The walls were built in a special hollow-chamber construction method (Rat-Trap) of burnt bricks, which was developed by the famous alternative English architect Laurie Baker from Kerala, who died in 2007. The artfully perforated wall that surrounds the property is also striking. It protects and at the same time provides a view of the interior.

Before the welcome in the hall of the "Learning Centre", we had the honour of inaugurating two toilets by cutting a yellow ribbon. They were built together with 8 others with the help of interest-free micro-credits from PEARL, which have to be paid back by the families within 30 months. We also visited a house renovation that is financed with a micro-credit. The inside of the toilets is covered with colourful tiles and the masonry is so neatly jointed and plastered that it looks as if it wants to compete with the new building of the Learning Centre. The impression is that the good design of the new building has a positive effect not only on the children, but on the whole village.

Before we went back into the building, we were given scarves to put on, in my case in the form of a turban. Accompanied by villagers and the drumming group of young men from the village, who contribute to the family income by playing at funerals, we walked back. All the time, the children and young people sat quietly and disciplined on their mats on the floor in the hall, waiting for their performances. As every year, they were joined by villagers who took this as a welcome change.



First, our small delegation was officially welcomed and decorated with scarves and jasmine wreaths. Then young people who are doing their education with the help of PEARL and Little Flower introduced themselves. They gave small presentations in English and all had an admirable self-confidence. There is no trace of their origin as "untouchables". An Indian friend who was present said they seemed like middle class children. Perhaps this is also reinforced by the prestigious building.

Afterwards, we were asked questions. For example, how it was in our country during the pandemic, whether the refugees from Ukraine are supported by us and whether the Ukrainian children are attending school. Of course, they also wanted to know what we thought of the new "Learning Centre" and we were able to express our admiration quite honestly.



After a short speech from us, the exciting programme began. During the dance performances, once again one did not know whether to admire the children or their teachers more and everything was performed with obvious joy and self-confidence. Many of the dances are based on traditional folk dances and even the boys did not find it uncool at all to join in. A pantomime, performed by boys dressed in black with white gloves, pointed out correct behaviour towards nature and our fellow human beings.

It was already dark and late when we arrived back at the PEARL centre and after a wonderful supper, we went to bed tired and happy.

The next day, after breakfast, we helped distribute food parcels. Since the pandemic, during which many people became unemployed, PEARL has been supporting some families regularly. Many are additionally limited by illness. The neediness is checked by PEARL staff during visits to the villages.

Then there was a big surprise. The room where sewing classes used to be held has been transformed into a library for the children. One side of the room has already been fitted with shelves and there are also already a number of books that have been purchased from a specific donation. We had the honour to inaugurate this room.



Afterwards there was another meeting with children who are supported by PEARL and then again great dance performances. The highlight was a dance medley performed by the teachers. The whole hall clapped along enthusiastically to the rhythm.



Then there was also a discussion in Paramakudi about the future budget. Here, too, the costs have increased and some money is to be saved for the teachers' security. Since we hadn't seen each other for so long, there was all kinds of paperwork to do and reconcile.

Afterwards we had earned the delicious lunch with Biryani and it took a little while until we started our way back, richly gifted. We were not the only ones sad to say good-bye.

The following sesshin in the Bodhizendo (meditation course) with 5 days of silence and a strict daily routine from 5:30 - 21:00 o'clock did us a lot of good after the first days. The weather was great during the whole stay in India. There was hardly ever a cloud to be seen. After the sesshin, I used the free Sunday for a short trip by bus to Kodaikanal. The Sunday market with fruit, vegetables, fish, meat and spices was great and colourful as always. At least for me, there was nothing to see of the consequences of the pandemic.



Only the old owner couple of KIKI Bookstore, whom I visit every time, complained that the business had not recovered since the pandemic and that they were still suffering from the consequences of the long closure.

The remaining days until my departure from Perumalmai were filled with talks about the future of the projects and the Bodhizendo. Ama Samy's new meditation centre within sight of the Montessori school was also a frequent topic of conversation. In addition, we took the opportunity several times to sit with the children in the Montessori school and to visit the tutoring in the afternoon. It was amazing to see the calmness with which the children were busy with the Montessori materials. With great

concentration, they put shapes into suitable openings or filled water from one container into the other. The restlessness they showed during our welcome programme had disappeared.

As in Paramakudi, without the free tuition, it would be difficult for many children and young people to get through school successfully. This has always been the case, but now after the long school closure during the pandemic, this support is extremely important. There are more than 120 children and young people who are taught for one and a half hours from Monday to Saturday. Little Flower has employed 6 teachers for this purpose. Miriam has taken over the management of the kindergarten and tuition. After school, she was trained as a Montessori teacher and is also responsible for the continuous training of the other teachers.



Then it was time to say goodbye to all the dear people who take care of the projects and the friends who could stay for a while.



As always in the last few years, I drove back via Madurai. A city with about 1 million inhabitants, which has retained a lot of charm despite growth and traffic. In the streets you still see mostly saris and many men wear dothis and lungis. The few tourists are mainly from India. For Hindus, Madurai is considered one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the south. The main attraction is the Minakshi Temple in the centre of the city, the oldest parts of which date back to the 12th-13th centuries. It is actually more like a whole temple town, surrounded by high walls and only accessible via the imposing gate towers (Gopuram) in the south, east, north and west. There I enjoyed the silence in the evening, surrounded by bats. The next morning I was also there before sunrise and experienced the sunrise on the steps of the water basin Porthamarai Kulam ("Pond with the golden lotus").

The following journey by express train in an air-conditioned carriage to Trivandrum went smoothly and fast. Conversations with fellow passengers made the time pass quickly.

I spent the last day of my journey at the Kinhin Centre in Kovalam, met friends, stuck a toe in the sea and looked at how far the container port in Vizhinjam had progressed. The taxi driver told of resistance from local fishermen who fear for their livelihood. Of course, the port will be built in spite of this, but it is expected to take another year until the opening. Nothing remains as it is. With the rapid development that India is showing, this can be observed particularly well. Of course, a lot of beautiful things disappear in the process.

On Saturday morning at 1:00 the alarm clock rang and my nice landlords knocked on the door. They waited until the tuk-tuk with Babu arrived at 1:30 and also carried my heavy suitcase. That too is India. The great willingness to help and the matter-of-factness with which people get up in the middle of the night to take a guest they have just met on their way to departure.

Christian Herde

Munich, 17 March 2023

