

Tablet - August 2006



The Cauvery

The river attracts both locals and visitors at the cool times of the day. But even in the leaden heat of noon you can find a villager washing himself or his compliant cow. The Cauvery is the sacred river of southern India. Like the northern Ganges it feeds, washes, refreshes and is an ever-present source of contemplation. It is vastly wide and majestic and at this time of the year largely dry.

Shantivanam, the Benedictine ashram that Fr Bede Griffiths made famous, where he welcomed pilgrims for forty years and where he died and is buried, rests on its banks. In the relaxed rhythms of the ashram that make the life of western monasteries seem driven, or in walking beside the river, time brakes, reality sharpens and, most surprisingly, what you desire begins to change.

If you want to be alone you should not go to the river. The young will soon flock round you: *what is your country, what is your name* ? Their eagerness to know you is no less genuine for the transparency of their thinking how you might be helpful to them. It is the naive visitor who thinks he can blend in unseen and become local. Chandru comes up beaming with curiosity, meticulously courteous but fixing me with his attention – obviously one whom shyness has never troubled. Soon we are discussing his favourite English authors, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and trying together to remember an exact line of Donne and then he reminds me of the plot of *As You Like It*. He passionately loves his subject and his own proficiency in it and wants to do a masters. He looks crestfallen, but only momentarily, if I mention an author he does not know. His hope and ambition and self-confidence are constantly bursting what little self-doubt remains in him. He would be a delight to teach. Like most Indians he has a profound respect for the teacher and longs to be one himself.

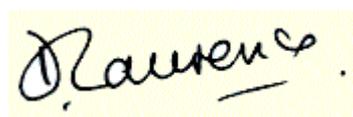
Chandru's father is dead and his mother raises him and his brother alone, he tells me. They live in what we would not call a house with no electricity or gas. Food is cooked on a wood fire. His mother works in field labour for 40 rupees, less than a dollar a day. As we talk on I realise that his charming voracious ego is not consumed by the purposelessness of western narcissism. What's the point in wanting something just for yourself? He dreams of success

because it would mean he can support his mother and help his family. That would be – I'm sure one day *will be* - his sense of greatest success. The self in Asia is so different from its western counterpart because its natural context remains so securely in the family.

The ashram is helping Chandru and other young people realise his dream. In the nearby village of Thanirpalli it has also started a home for the elderly, a school and a weaving business run by poor families that it has bought out of the indentured service that amounts to sheer slavery in many parts of India. The spirit of contemplation has bred compassion in Fr Bede's disciples. They make their gospel witness locally and concretely, not with the depersonalising abstractions of convert-seekers. But around them all India is exploding. Through Chandru and the billion other lives of his countrymen an historical movement is passing, as mighty and impersonal as the Cauvery in flood. Mumbai crackles with the electricity of money like Shanghai. The steep decline of the west, call centres in Bangalore serving customers in Kensington and Detroit, many of the world's richest people and most conspicuous spenders, the environmental pollution that proves progress. Yet, as the wheel of karma turns and the tide of wealth rises and India becomes a superpower, the poor who will always be with us get poorer.

Of course I wonder how long will the experience of the spiritual here survive this rollercoaster of mammon? As the signs of consumerism increase it is hard not to fear that the all-pervasive religious sensibility will fragment as in the west. Except religion here is not an institution. It is a way of responding to every situation of life. God is everywhere and good and bad alike believe. It is in every heart as well as mediated by nature and guru. Life itself is the sacrament. So atomic physics coexists with the Dancing Shiva. Logos and mythos are not severed as in the western psyche. Visitors to India should not be looking for holiday mysticism but for inspiration in dealing with the diseases of affluence and the capital sin of superficiality. India might just still be able both to prosper and to retain the remembrance of God.

That night I heard a strangely familiar mechanical rumbling in the dark. Next morning three huge yellow earthmovers had appeared with their proboscis raised ready to scour sand from the river bed. For three days I was ready for the assault to begin and then overnight, for no apparent reason they disappeared. The river won. It is still India after all.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, followed by a period.

Laurence Freeman
www.wccm.org

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