



Splendid encounters in God's Own Country

If there was much to be derived from the profound exchanges at the seminar on whether development had reached the grassroots, students of the Statesman Print Journalism School found there were lessons galore in the simple encounters with the natural wonders of Kerala



TRAVELLING to a place unknown is essentially an exercise of leaving one's comfort zone. But when this does happen, it doesn't just dispel false feelings of comfort but presents an invigorating reality outside the life that one is so firmly attached to. It gives one the opportunity to see a world that is unknown and enables one to turn the searchlight inwards — with the help of family or friends or people one may meet by chance.

All this is particularly true when one encounters a climate and culture so inviting as Kerala. A journey to the magnificent beach at Kovalam for a seminar on the functioning of NGOs and issues relating to governance hosted by the Madras Management Association in partnership with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung was an excuse to explore the wonders of what is described as "God's Own Country".

As the train from Chennai chugged its way to Thiruvananthapuram, the excitement was palpable. Standing near the door of the compartment early in the morning, one rediscovered the beauty of the rising sun and the famous backwaters that gradually came into view behind the coconut palms. It brought an indescribable feeling of happiness and the promise of more excitement during the few days when one would experience the unique blend of urban luxury and an undiluted communion with nature.

Arrival began with a pleasant surprise. A group of pretty ladies welcomed guests with a *tika*, a coral garland and a smattering of Bengali. The hotel, on the top of a cliff overlooking the Arabian Sea, allowed for a sight for jaded eyes, with the waters stretching to the horizon and white frothy waves gently touching the shore. As the buggy took visitors from the lobby to cottages on the beach front, breakfast awaited — a sumptuous offering of sausages, smoked ham and a delicious array of cakes and desserts. This added to the thrill of slipping into walking shoes to discover the natural wonders.



The Sunday crowd didn't affect the pristine warmth of the beach as the feet sank delicately into the sand. It was the best way of shaking off the drowsiness that may have crept into the participation in the protracted debates on whether the government and the people at large were doing enough to encourage the herculean initiatives often taken at the private level to change the quality of life in India's remote areas. The other alternative was to surrender to the languid delight of informal exchanges described as *adda* back in Bengal but which, in this case, was spiced with wholesome encounters with the refreshing breeze from across the sea.

One of these animated sessions brought us into contact with Dr Lars Peter Schmidt, resident representative of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in India. It began with stimulating recollections of his experiences as an erstwhile East German during the fall of the Berlin Wall. As he recalled those eventful days in November 1989, there was a sense of wonder. Twenty years of his life had been spent with an agonising sense of hope that the nightmare would end, the Wall would come down and he could cross the border into a new life. Somehow the environment cast a spell on the group and the candour that everyone shared was touching. If there were stories to be told

about life in Germany, there were equally exciting tales that were dug up about tragedies and triumphs, tribulations and tender thoughts that made life in India so gripping, even to those who hadn't been around for very long. Whether it was Germany or India, the experience of sharing thoughts and feelings was among the best things to be taken away.

The three-day seminar had speakers who gleefully mentioned that Kerala had a lot in common with Bengal. Political colours bore a similarity — that is, before the Trinamul wave that swept the state in 2011. Kerala claims to be less affected by corruption than Tamil Nadu but unionism is as real in both Kerala and Bengal as the fondness for rice and fish. The real surprise is that the high literacy rate has had no impact on the caste system. It has a firm grip on society, so much so that members of rival castes seldom choose to live in the same village. But the social rifts don't cause much tension. On the other hand, literacy has produced an understanding that doesn't come in the way of political adjustments where members of different castes subscribe to the beauty and peace of God's Own Country.

Time was running out. There was only half an hour for a splash before preparing for the concluding session. The moment we stepped on the sand, the gentle breeze seemed to have a heady influence on the mind and body with the temptation to break away from the shackles of an urban mindset. We were in the lap of joy as we splashed water on each other and allowed nature to give us a few dying moments of freedom. The memories of those glorious moments were mixed with the spices that Kerala offers in abundance. A string of cottage industries caters to tourists who cannot help being drawn to impeccable carvings of Lord Ganesha and the backwater boats as much as to the quintessential sartorial traditions. An opportunity to visit Mamallapuram, the historical township known for its Pallava architecture in Tamil Nadu, was a bonus. Having dug into continental food at the Kovalam hotel, it was an altogether delightful experience to be treated to authentic recipes served on palm leaves in the temple town where we marvelled at magnificent boulders balancing on narrow points on sloping surfaces.

We clicked away at the Dravidian monuments and the Shore Temple — a world heritage site with the Bay of Bengal as a splendid backdrop. The ride back to the airport revealed a suppressed mood of resentment against the incarceration of a former chief minister among the locals. It included protest hoardings and posters and even stray remarks from the driver — none of which suggested any kind of public unrest.

If there was much to be derived from the profound exchanges at the seminar on whether development had reached the grassroots, there were lessons galore in simple encounters with natural wonders. A study tour developed into an occasion for social insights and a rediscovery of one's natural roots — something that added a new meaning to an academic exercise.

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