LETTERS FROM SEVA NILAYAM

by

Dora Scarlett

Editor's introduction

I have brought together in this collection all the Letters from Seva Nilayam that could be found, both in digital form and hard copy. Dora began writing them in 1974 and continued until 1994. They were printed locally on flimsy Indian paper and sent to a world-wide group of friends and supporters. Some were bound into a series of five booklets with handmade Indian paper covers. They present a vivid and sympathetic picture of the authentic life Dora Scarlett had created for herself in this remote corner of South India, and show her deep love of, and respect for, village life and traditions at a time when India was rapidly modernising. She depicts and celebrates a way of life which is now mostly vanished. She is not idealistic or sentimental about the hardships and difficulties encountered by the local people she set out to serve; nor does she gloss over the agonising decisions the clinic staff had sometimes to make when treating patients. The picture is of a steady vision realised by hard work, commitment and dedication.

The Letters are of their time: I have not modernised the names of cities which are called in the 21st century by new names. Some of Dora's terminology may seem strange to 21st century sensibilities. I did not wish to alter Dora's words unnecessarily and trust that readers will appreciate the intentions behind the words: Dora's aim was promote understanding, empathy and respect. For interest I have included a selection of the simple illustrations that accompanied the Letters, hand-drawn by Dora or by a member of staff. Most Letters required minimal editing: minor errors of spelling and grammar arose from the type-setters' minimal knowledge of English. The later Letters required more attention as Dora's poor eyesight prevented her from checking them and they went out with a number of mistakes.

I am grateful to Tony Huckle of VST for helping me find all but two of the Letters, and to the Trustees of Village Service Trust for making space on the website for this large collection, which, together with Dora's memoir, already published on the website, and my book, *Love Made Visible: The Life and Work of Dora Scarlett*, published 2020, on Amazon, completes my work of recording and celebrating the remarkable life of a woman I was privileged to know.

Caroline Walker 2021

Why these Letters were written.

Until 1974 Seva Nilayam was supported mainly by grants from several agencies which give aid on a big scale.

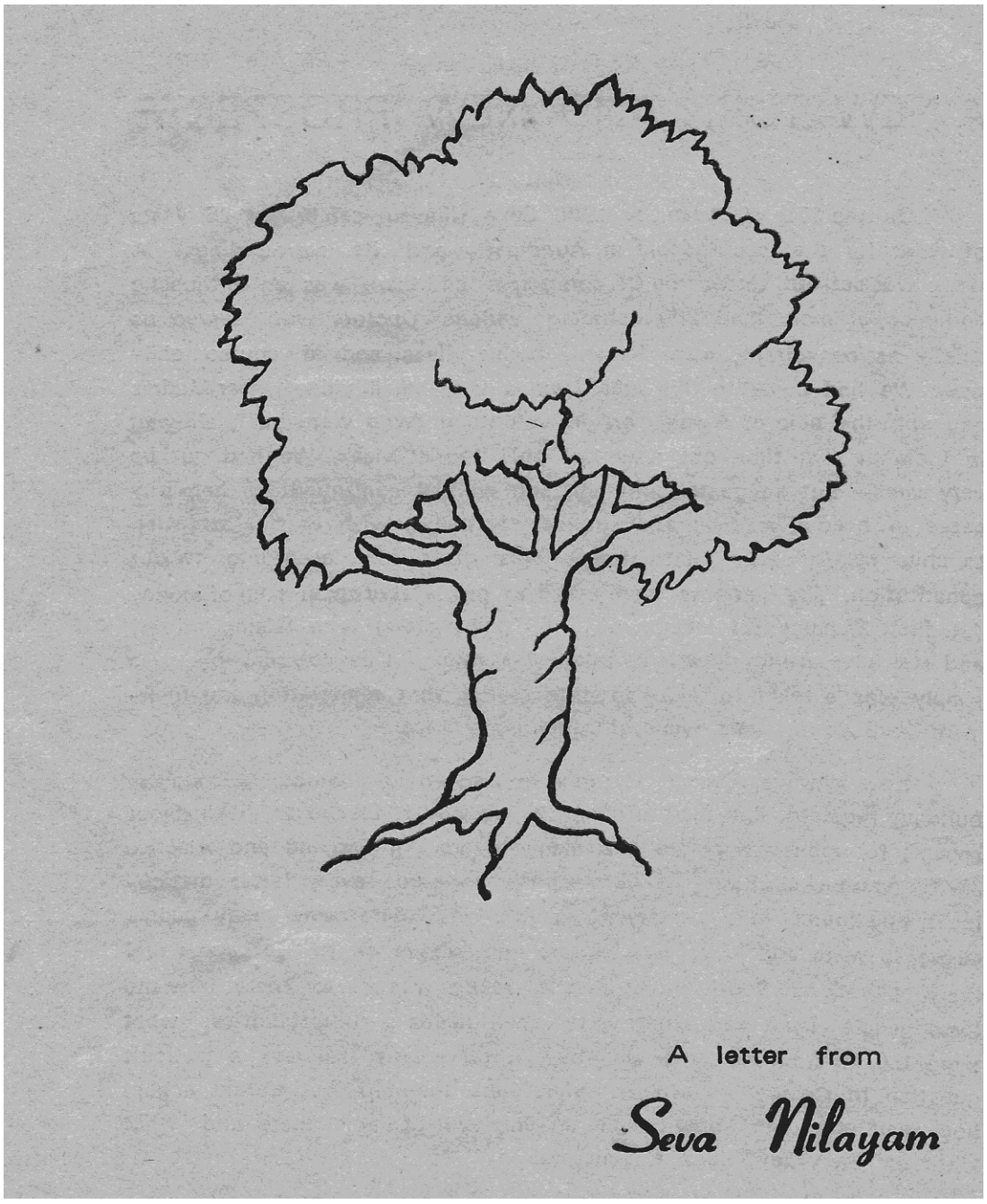
About that time, these agencies reviewed their policies, and most of them decided to place the emphasis on development projects and preventive medicine. They were still willing to send relief in national disasters, but they were not willing to support the day to day work of such a centre as Seva Nilayam, which, by its constitution is bound to give help freely to all who need.

In this situation there were two possibilities. One was to charge for medical treatment. But our observation has shown that if we do this the really poor will not come to us, and we shall end by treating the middle class and the rich, who are already provided for by many private hospitals.

The other possibility was to rely on the generosity of individuals. To make our work, and the ideas behind it, known, we started sending out a printed letter six times a year, describing our daily life and that of the people among whom we live.

The response has been overwhelming. We have discovered that people are eager for information about life – normal life – in the villages and farms of rural India. The concentration of the mass media on famines, floods, upheavals and catastrophes has given the impression that normal life does not exist. Many people have written to us about this.

The letters are sent free of charge to all who ask for them. Our main concern is to present a true picture, not to ask for any scale of donations. We leave that to our friends because we think that if they understand our work they will enable it to continue.


A letter from
Seva Nilayam

1975

BABIES

In the eleven years that Seva Nilayam has been in existence a number of our foreign volunteers have left, and have married. Almost all of them keep in touch with us, and when any news comes from them, the first question asked here is: "How many children have they?", and if they have none yet, there is some surprise. Can anyone wish to postpone the supreme joy, the birth of a child?

At the World Conference on Population last August one of the most interesting speeches was made by an Indian lady doctor, Dr. Mrs. Mascarenhas. She quoted the saint and philosopher, Vivekananda who said: "In the West the women is the wife of a husband; in the East she is the mother of a child", and added that no educational status or political power can equal motherhood or be substituted for it.

The point of Mrs. Mascarenhas' speech was that the appeal to Indian mothers to limit families had been made on the wrong grounds and had therefore met with little success. The mother who wants a house full of children does not want to be told that her health will benefit if she limits the number; she is ready to sacrifice anything for children. The right grounds for the appeal, the speaker said, would be that the child would benefit if births were more widely spaced. Even this the village mother will, in my opinion, find hard to believe, when she sees how they play together, being near of an age, and how the girl of eight acts as a thoroughly trustworthy little mother, carrying baby brother on her hip, or swinging him in his hammock.

Some women come to our clinic asking for advice on family limitation, and we help them. We often refer them to hospitals or Government clinics where they can get all they need, but we never try to coerce them. Some come asking for abortions, and some after having abortions done in the village, to the great danger of their lives. These women have several children already; they never come in the early years of marriage. We explain the risks, and we tell those who are pregnant to have the baby in the Government hospital, where they can get a sterilisation operation done after the birth.

But many more come to us because they want children and have none. They usually ask for treatment for some ailment, but before leaving they mention, hesitantly, "I have no children". We often find that the only cause for sterility is chronic debility or anaemia. If the case needs further investigation we send the women, with her husband to a maternity doctor who is a friend of ours. Sometimes laboratory tests are needed, sometimes a small operation. In due course many come back to us, delighted to show the first baby.

There has been an idea, fostered by Western journalism, but now, fortunately, being abandoned in many quarters, that Indians have a lot of children out of sheer irresponsibility. But in the villages, at least, where, more than seventy percent of India's people live, it is because of a sense of responsibility. The farmer needs sons to plough the land and tend the cattle, and as an insurance against destitution in old age. Is this irresponsible? People in Western countries often speak as if they are more responsibly minded because their birthrates are down. But the decline in birthrates in Europe and America began long before the present fear of world over-population,

and for quite different reasons. Some Western countries are now trying to step up their birth-rates because they fear their populations will actually decrease. East and West, I think people follow their own needs and wishes with regard to having children.

The Indian child is a little king. From an early age he knows his power. He rides proudly on his father's arm, and he goes to his mother's breast whenever he wants to. Though he may have no toys, he gets whatever he wants to play with. Fathers are seen carrying children nearly as often as mothers; this is very noticeable in our clinic. Children are not segregated from adult life; the market, the threshing floor and the harvest field are their playgrounds. The boy may have no shirt, but his name may mean "Golden King" or "King of the Forest", and the girl in a ragged frock may be "Queen" or "Pearl Lady". Life is insecure, but the child is not allowed to feel it in his early years; he is wrapped in love.

At Seva Nilayam Friday morning is the time for the mother and baby clinic. More than thirty mothers bring babies, who are weighed and supplied with medicine or milk powder according to need. All gather together to hear a talk on child care, nutrition or hygiene, and are able to tell their difficulties. Some babies whose mothers have died are brought by grandmothers, and there are some pairs of twins, whose mothers cannot feed two. Some mothers are very sick, and are receiving treatment themselves. We know that breast feeding is to be preferred to the bottle, but in these cases, if we did not give milk powder the baby would die. Milk is scarce in the villages, especially in the hot season, and few mothers who have to buy milk can afford enough. Besides milk, we give wheat-soya flour for weaning food. It is one of our greatest rewards to see tiny, shriveled babies put on weight, however slowly, the dry skin become glossy and the eyes bright and shining. Friday is a suitable day, because it is the day of Lakshmi, goddess of abundance.

The idea of fertility, abundance, increase, runs through the whole of Indian tradition, and it cannot be altered in a day. Those who are rightly concerned about population growth must take this as fact, and not try to achieve results by simply ignoring it. It is symbolised in many actions so habitual that people are barely conscious of them. A pot of water must be filled to the brim; a guest's plate must be piled with food; on ceremonial occasions when milk or sweet rice are boiled, the pot must boil over. The most productive plants, the banana and coconut are used for decorations at weddings and temple festivals. Anything like moving into a new house should be done while the moon is increasing, not when it is waning. A family which is decreasing in numbers is a sad family, and the greatest misfortune is to be left in old age without children. Indian villagers know that they have to be self-reliant, and their best means is to build a strong family.

OLD PEOPLE

The picture on the front of this letter is of an old lady called by us "Patti", which means "Granny". She came to Seva Nilayam about nine years ago; she was very ill then, with anaemia, caused by a parasite, hookworm, which is very prevalent here. She lay down on the verandah and said she would die here.

But her trouble was quite curable, and she was constitutionally very healthy. When she was better she asked if she might stay and cook for our in-patients, and she has been here ever

since. We pay her a small salary and give her a new sari on the festivals of Deepavali and Pongal, and she keeps all her money until she has a few hundred Rupees, then draws it out for some worthy purpose, such as a marriage in the family. She has a son and a daughter, and several grandchildren; they are glad to visit her and she receives them with dignity. She needs help with lifting the pots, but she is still very active. She sleeps on a mat on the floor and has no possessions but a box of clothes. She is very small, very wide awake, sharp-tongued and shrewd and not above picking a good rousing quarrel when so inclined. She is steadfastly faithful to Seva Nilayam.

There are many such unassuming old people in the villages. They remain an integral part of the family. Very often children are brought to our clinic by grandparents because the parents are both busy in the fields. There is plenty of useful work which is not beyond their strength vegetables to be collected and prepared, grains to be sifted, spices to be ground, chickens to be fed, and children to be cared for. Old men lead out the buffaloes to graze, or carry flowers or fruit to market. The household yard, with children playing, cattle munching and the hen brooding her chicks is the centre of a busy world.

It would be too idealistic to say there are no unwanted old people. There are selfish sons and daughters, and there are some old people who have no children. The state gives a small pension to those who have no property and no living relatives, but it is normal to expect parents and grandparents to remain in the home. There are, of course, complaints that "The younger generation don't respect their elders like we did in our day" but I think this has been a common accusation down the ages. Hinduism teaches that the parents stand in the place of God, and after death their pictures are place beside those of the Gods in the prayer room or niche. It is not considered that people get foolish with age, but that they get wiser, and indeed, those who have had a lifetime of experience of joy and sorrow, work and endurance, have generally learned much from the greatest teacher, life. So they must be listened to, and their advice followed.

In spite of having many of the troubles of age – joint pains, dim vision, loss of teeth – most of the old people in the villages seem to be basically healthy. This has been the opinion of most of our volunteer nurses who have helped us at Seva Nilayam. It is rare to see a bent back, as the women have always carried pots on their heads, and they can sit cross-legged on the ground without discomfort, as they learned to do in childhood. Some of them chew tobacco, and we rather frown on this in our clinic, but they have few indulgences. They carry money – only a little because the rest will be stored away in a pot at home – but enough for the bus fare and some betel leaf to chew will be in a small bag with a draw string, tucked in the waist of the sari. We never give an old patient careless or hurried treatment, but listen carefully to all the stories of what happens at the new moon, or what happens at the full moon, or what she suffered after a rat bite ten years ago. We know that telling and listening are important parts of the treatment. Most of them do not know their ages, and a bit of guesswork between fifty and seventy has to be done when filling in treatment cards. But a good guide will be the ages of children or grandchildren.

All human beings want to be needed by someone. They want to be able to exert some power over their surroundings, not to be utterly ineffectual and helpless. This is more important than any amount of luxury, coddling, or dutiful attention meaning nothing. The area in which India's old people find the greatest fulfillment of life is in the arrangement of the family's marriages. This is highest privilege and the most sacred duty. To see all the children well married is a crown to all the labours of life. Of course, no one person has the full power to arrange a marriage. A family council of all the elder members on one side meets the family of the other

side, and there are many visits and discussions. A good deal of secrecy is observed in the early stages, because it is not nice if a girl is considered and then rejected. Today, also, the young people are consulted. It is no longer the custom to present a young man with a bride he has never seen. He usually knows much about the girl and her family, and she about him. But if he has continued to respect his parents he will be ready to trust their judgement.

This is not the place to discuss the practice of arranging marriages. It is a big subject, and the Indian theory of marriage is very different from that held in the West. But the fact that old people continue to hold a place of honour and influence in the family as long as they live is one of the reasons why the querulous, the hypochondriac, and the discontented are rare among the old people of India.

WHAT KIND OF MEDICINE?

An English nurse, who stayed some weeks at Seva Nilayam, giving voluntary help, wrote something about her impressions. After describing the long and arduous day's work, the many people she had seen, and as far as might be, helped, those she had taught and those she had learned from, she wrote: "Before I settle down to sleep I think of all those homes where people are preparing to make a start at dawn tomorrow for Seva Nilayam clinic".

I would have known from this passage, if I had not known it otherwise, that she had really entered into the spirit of our work. When patients had taken their treatment and left the clinic, they had not gone from her mind, and she had the imagination to follow them into their homes, however poor and remote. She thought of the extra food cooked the night before and put in an aluminium carrier or wrapped in a banana leaf; she knew of the anxiety of a mother who would have to leave children along in the house, and who would ask a neighbour to give them their meals; she pictured the start, perhaps in the darkness before dawn, walking across fields to reach the bus may be carrying a sick child or helping an old person. All the preparations would be made by the light of a glimmering oil lamp.

What is that makes people take so much trouble? I think it is just this: that we try to see them as human beings, with all their needs and difficulties. A cure is not just a matter of finding the right tin or bottle of medicine on the shelf, but a consideration of the person. Most of the patients would be unable to put this into words; they say we "have good medicine" but, in fact we have only the standard drugs, and our treatment is not nearly as high-powered as that given in many places. But if someone is anxious about a child not growing well, or has an old neglected wound which will not heal, or has chronic skin trouble or feels too weak to bear the daily burden of work the other villagers will say: "Go to Seva Nilayam. They have good medicine".

This way of thinking is really in accordance with Indian tradition. There is a belief – which may contain many elements of superstition but also holds a basic truth – that medicine acquires much of its value from the way in which it is given and the relationship of the giver and the receiver. If that relationship is one of care, attention and sympathy many facts will come to light which will influence the method of treatment. We must know whether patients are working too hard, or whether they have special anxieties. We need not know all the details of unhappiness, but it makes a difference if we realise that they are in trouble. We must not ask the impossible, such as telling patients to come daily if they live twenty miles away In such cases we ask if the patient has any relatives in this area, or if he thinks he can get hospitality in a nearby village. If

this seems too difficult, we decide whether we can admit the patient here. As we have space for only about fourteen in-patients at the most crowded, this may be a hard decision. A woman will often come with some minor ailment, but when we show that we are prepared to listen she will tell us the real cause of the visit – she has been married some years and has no children. If we had treated her casually or automatically she would never have mentioned the matter, but simply have gone away with a few tablets. Once we know the trouble, we give her a thorough general checkup, and then, if necessary, and send her to a maternity doctor in Madurai who knows us well. In India there is an immense variety of culture, tradition, religion and occupation, and to work in the clinic is to be thrown into the stream of this complex society. There are field workers, women with faded saris and men with torn shirts or none. The hands always tell the truth of this. There are moderately well off farmers, who have put on a clean ironed shirt to come. There are women from semi-tribal villages, with impressive ornaments and beads. There are weavers, generally poor, and tired with too long sitting at the loom. There are Muslim women shrouded in white, and old pious Hindus who make a meagre living doing ceremonies at the temples. There are young girls carefully shepherded by their mothers, and naked children running about in freedom. In time, anyone working in the clinic develops a sixth sense regarding the condition, status, and thoughts of all these people. Many people in the West today regret the passing of the old Family Doctor. We would like to be Family Doctor to this particular patch of rural India.

In the most modern of health services, in the most affluent countries, there are always some people who are left out, or from some circumstance cannot fully benefit. How much more so in India, where distances are vast and modern medicine has been grafted onto an ancient traditional system, creating a mixture of ill-assorted ideas. The Government Hospital in Madurai, which is free, has very good facilities for diagnosis and treatment, but it is always overcrowded, and admission is not easy. So patients who come many miles find that after diagnosis they have no way of following up the treatment. It is then, very often, that they come to us. The charges of the private hospitals are too high for any but a very small fraction of our patients. So we feel there is a gap to be filled, not just a geographical one, but a social and moral one also.

Ours is not a gleaming modern hospital, with up-to date appliances and furniture. Our examination tables were made from packing cases. Our sterilising is done in a steamer on a kerosene stove. Our bandages are made from torn sheets collected by friends, and sent from England, Australia and Denmark. There are two reasons for working on this level. One is that we need all available money for medicines, and the other is that we believe that for our kind of treatment unnecessary complexity is a hindrance. People who have never been in a hospital, or those who have been in one, and have been frightened by its size and strangeness, do not hesitate to come to a place which feels more like home to them with children, especially, we wish to keep the frightening aspects tot he very minimum.

We have found, over a period of twelve years, that our approach has been successful. We have found, also, in spite of hardship, neglect and malnutrition, that these people have remarkable powers of recovery, and we believe that medicine should encourage the body to heal itself in every way possible.

Because people have not been accustomed to taking powerful medicines especially anti-biotics frequently, we find that lower doses often have greater effect than might be expected. We try to preserve this condition by relying on simple medicines whenever possible, and supplementing our treatment with extra food when really necessary. But I think, above all, that

the courage, endurance, and even joyfulness, we find in our patients is a great means of helping them back to health.

WATER

North of Seva Nilayam there are mountains rising almost sheet to seven thousand feet. The height is a good vantage point from which to study both weather and cultivation over a vast tract of country. For more than half the year, in the dry season, much of it looks brown, but there are always areas of vivid green – rice, sugar cane, maize and bananas – and there are dark green belts of mango and coconut trees. These are irrigated lands, drawing water from good wells, or from the lakes and reservoirs you can see as shimmering silver. It is water that makes the difference between fertile land and empty wastes.

Now, in this year of drought, 1975, much of the green is obscured by red dust. The parched topsoil is blown off by high winds. From the mountain, where you are well above it, you can see the dust storm start, and travel along the valley like a prowling animal. Down in Seva Nilayam our floors, our tables, our clothes, our books and our faces are covered in red.

We long for the joyful time when rain will come again. It cannot be yet-not until the north-east monsoon begins, towards the end of the year. Then great cloud masses form, and rain comes like grey veils sweeping down to earth. Everything changes; the ploughman brings out his bullocks, the patches of rice seedlings sprout, water rises in wells, lakes and reservoirs, the land grows green, and scores of waterfalls break from the mountain sides.

In India the question is not: “Did you have fine weather?”, but “Have you had good rain?”. Rain is happiness; people go barefoot in the mud, laughing and smiling. If it rains when a visitor comes, they say: “You are a luckbringer – rain has followed you”.

Bundles of rice seedlings, looking like tufts of grass, are loaded onto carts, and the women go out to plant them. (Rice must always be planted by a woman, for it is sacred to a goddess, and must have a woman’s touch). They tuck up their skirts and wade into flooded fields, bending to press each seedling into the mud. Once it has rooted, growing rice is a beautiful sight, with water gleaming between the tender green stems.

Water for irrigation is raised from wells by bullocks or electric pumps. As it rushes along the channels it serves many purposes. The field workers come to wash their clothes – thin cotton clothes which can be dried in the breeze. Mothers come and bathe whole families of children, boys splash and play, and flocks of goats stop to drink. Cultivation of most irrigated crops is done by flooding square patches divided by low ridges. The worker opens and closes these by removing a spadeful of mud, and letting the right amount of water into each patch before going on to the next.

Women go to the village wells with polished brass pots. It is hard work. I have often seen a woman with a full pot balanced on her head, another on her hip, and a baby on her spare arm. But the well is a meeting and gossiping place, as it always has been. When water is very short, waiting one’s turn at the well becomes dispiriting and dreary. Once, just outside a city, I saw a huge crowd, and thought that some political meeting was about to take place. Then I saw that

every member of the crowd had a water pot. They were waiting at a faucet fed by the town supply, and as this was turned on only at four in the afternoon, they had gathered in anticipation.

There is a saying, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick”, and you can know how true this is if you see the clouds gather day after day, only to disperse without rain. But if the rumble of thunder grows, and the first drops come splashing down, then hope revives. There are few sweeter sounds than the rush and patter and tinkle of rain, of water gurgling through the channels, dripping from the trees, and foaming along the once-dry water courses.

Now, in July, 1975, we long to hear these sounds. The underground waters are very low. We have a borewell 185 feet deep, but it does not give enough water for our cultivation. People are deepening wells, hacking out lumps of rock, but still the water sinks lower. I am often asked if more could be done for water conservation in this area. My answer is that it is already conserved very well. There are three reservoirs and countless village tanks. All water is saved from the catchment areas, and the whole valley is like a great basin from which nothing can run away unless controlled. More water simply is not there. The Government has planted shelter belts of trees where possible, but young trees need watering, and some may die in a dry year.

When there is little cultivation there is much unemployment. People are not passive. I have been struck by their courage and resourcefulness. They cultivate wherever there is any hope of succeeding, and if this fails they go to look for work in more fortunate places. They thresh grain and make roads, and whole families camp by their carts, cooking the evening meals on fires of thorns and maize stalks and sleeping by their bullocks. Many single men have gone hundreds of miles, into north or central India, to find work.

I honestly do not know if science could provide any more help. But it does seem to me bitterly ironical that human beings who are able to reach the moon, or to annihilate whole cities at the touch of a button, have found no way of giving more water to a thirsty land.

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

About five miles from Seva Nilayam is a range of hills inhabited by wild deer, hares, peacocks, a vast number of birds and small animals, with an occasional elephant. Sometimes a group of people from these hills come and sit quietly outside our clinic. They are not waiting for medicine; although most of them are very small in stature, they are nimble, lithe and tough, and never seem to have even a cold. They have curly, tousled hair, and the older ones are so wrinkled by exposure to weather that it is impossible to say if they are forty or seventy. Probably those who survive the first year of life are immune to almost any disease.

These are Palliyars, members of a tribe living by hunting and gathering wild roots and fruits; they have no houses, but shelter in caves; the land on which they roam belongs to the Government, but that means nothing to them, they have no notion of anyone appropriating any part of the earth. They come to us only for clothing; as they never go to a town or enter a shop their only covering is what they hunt, or what they are given. Nights can be cold on the hills.

Sometimes the thunder crashes and reverberates among the rocks. What do they think of it? Probably that the gods are riding out in their chariots. Occasionally, from Seva Nilayam, a man made satellite is seen. It looks only like a small star, and would not be noticeable except for its movement. If the Palliyars see it at all, it must seem of far less importance than the thunder. They know nothing of the nuclear age, and the threat of mass extermination which hangs over all civilised peoples has not entered their heads.

If you were to put a city dweller among these hills he could not survive for long. But the Palliyar race must have survived for thousands of years. It is older than the Tamils, who are considered the original inhabitants of South India. The Palliyars know the habits and properties of every animal and plant, and they can take wild honey from the crevices of apparently inaccessible rocks.

Our clinic is a small mirror of the endless diversity of castes, communities, tribes and races, in just this one corner of South India. There are even vaster differences between South and North; probably no country in the world can show such variety under one Government. All are recognisable to a practised eye, by features, dresses, behaviour, way of approaching us, and style of ornaments.

At the other extreme from the ragged, mop-headed Palliyars, we find, occasionally, patients who come to our clinic by taxi. This is not an everyday occurrence, and it is inclined to cause some stir and commotion. Such patients may be Government officials, prosperous shopkeepers from the market towns, or substantial farmers. They may bring the whole family, with the idea of getting all their troubles settled at the same time. There may be a young daughter still at high school, or one newly married, sparkling with her wedding jewels, beautiful and shy; sons or sons-in-law with well-oiled hair, nylon shirts, and gold watches; the mother in a dark, richly coloured sari of traditional pattern, as befits her age and standing; she is perhaps a bit heavy and rheumatic, but walks with conscious dignity. Such people are inclined to expect preferential treatment, and even look on it as their due, but we have one rule for everybody, and they must take their turn with the others, register their names at the reception desk, and wait till they are called. If this is explained to them they seldom object.

Most of our patients are between these two extremes of business people and hill tribes. They are hard-working country people, from scores of villages, near and far. The accidents we treat tell that tale. There are injuries sustained from falling stone during well-digging, gashes from the horns of cattle, bruises from an overturned bullock cart, or cuts made in wood-chopping. There are weavers, tired with long hours to the loom; there are tea pickers and farm labourers, and women who have been carrying bundles of firewood or sheaves of grain on their heads all day. Some live in brick and stone houses with flat roofs and painted ornaments, and some live in low huts thatched with grass. Some cook with finely blended spices, and some eat roughly boiled grain and vegetables. Always, in the clinic I look at people's hands, and most of them are hands which have done many years' useful work.

Our clinic is helped by friends in many countries, of the world, who send us clothing, and cloth for bandages, medicines, and food, or the money to buy it. Because we are a registered charitable society under Indian law, we have the privilege of duty-free entry for gift parcels. One condition is that we have to distribute the goods free of charge, and without distinction of caste, creed or race and we have to sign certificates saying that this has been done. This is a rule which we never feel any temptation to break. From the beginning we have been impartial, and the only

measure we apply is that of the patient's need. A wrinkled old man from the Palliyar tribe is as important to us as a college graduate or a successful business man. All the workers in our clinic, even if they are young and inexperienced, have to understand these principles, and resist any tendency to favouritism or attempts to get special treatment. This is not always easy in a country like India, where traditionally the young are expected to defer to their elders.

But if we are impartial, this does not mean that we are unappreciative of the rich variety of the life around us. Gandhi, who spent much of his life campaigning against abuses of caste and communal strife, and accepted all into his circle as equals, did not want uniformity. He recognised the value of every custom and tradition, as long as it did not harm others. He said that what India had to offer to the world was the ideal of "unity in diversity". We hope that this will remain true.

FARMING

Two weeks ago our fields, flooded ready for rice planting, were like smooth mirrors reflecting the passing clouds and the dark-leaved coconut trees around their edges. Then the women came, and pressed the thin, grass-like seedlings into the mud, one by one. Now these fields are an expanse of brilliant green, with the shining water visible only between the stems. The season promises well.

Twelve years ago this land was totally unproductive, without a well or a tree, or a single useful plant. We were living in a village two miles distant, and had to walk to the land to do some preliminary work, marking boundaries and choosing a site for the well and the house. The whole area was so featureless that I had to use a tall termites' nest as a landmark by which to know when I reached it.

The well was the first necessity, not only so that we could irrigate the land, but so that we could make bricks and mix cement for the building. Wells in this part of the country are usually fourteen feet square, and at least thirty feet deep, to give sufficient storage capacity.

While the local well-diggers were at work, with spades and crowbars, hammers and chisels, we prepared to plant coconut trees in a ring round the area, as it was time to do this. Our volunteer worker, John Davis, walked here every day – there were no buses on the road then, and we had no vehicle – and made ready the pits for tree planting, putting in earth and sand in the right proportions. It was heavy work, and until the well-diggers struck a spring he had to carry his flask of drinking water. There was no shop anywhere near at which he could buy anything. We have never forgotten this pioneering work, and I often think of it when I see the coconut trees, now thirty feet tall, standing like guardians and bearing their gift of nuts.

In our yard are cows, buffaloes, and working bullocks, and their manure keeps up the fertility of the soil. In our tree plantation, which also serves as a windbreak against the fierce wind in the time of the south – west monsoon, are mangoes, guavas, papayas and kapok. We give employment to local people, five or six steadily, and many more for planting, weeding and harvesting. In 1968 and the years following, we bought some further plots of land, to set up a leprosy clinic, and we farm these in the same way. We now have a total of 15 acres. Rice is the one crop which South Indians wish above all to grow, but besides that we grow maize and other grains, ground nuts, chillies, tomatoes, brinjals (egg-plants), onions, sweet potatoes, and a variety of vegetables. We have laying hens to provide for our own needs, not for market.

Our farm is of a special kind; it is a setting and support for our medical work. It provides rehabilitation work for our leprosy patients; only too often those who are stricken with this disease believe that they are unemployable, so responsibility for irrigation, or feeding cattle, or tending a vegetable plot helps to give them back self-respect. Our other in-patients, too, help in any way they can. They shell ground-nuts, pack tomatoes in baskets, drive off crows, carry straw, feed the calves. All of this involves a very active and social life. We would not, even for a larger financial return, plant a cash crop over the whole area. We would not use a tractor, which could be driven by one man, leaving the local villagers without work. I do not deny that tractors have their uses, especially where new areas of untilled land are brought into cultivation, but for us it would have no meaning, and only impair our relationships with the local people.

Farming, to us, is not an industry, it is a whole complex of relationships of man with the earth, with animals, and of ourselves with our neighbours. At planting and harvest time a group of polished brass and aluminium "tiffin carriers" will be ranged under a tree; these contain the mid-day meals of the casual workers. Babies are slung in hammocks from the trees, and a family goat may be brought along for a bit of extra feed. When we have had rain and the grass is lush, one of our in-patients may be seen leading a cow along the field borders to graze. A boy who was a tubercular patient, now completely cured, drives our buffaloes out to wallow in a nearby water tank. His mother, who is a widow, sweeps our paths, does weeding, and all kinds of odd jobs. When work is urgent, as when a harvest must be brought in before rain comes, our clinic staff, when the day's patients have been treated, are off into the fields too.

We have not branched out into any new and spectacular methods which might upset the structure of local farming. We farm as our neighbours do, but we try to do it extremely well, to the best of our ability. We help and advise them, and often get help in return.

We use many of the new and improved varieties of seeds, but we are quite aware that these have disadvantages as well as advantages, and are not going to solve all the farmer's problems. We are willing to try out new ideas, and think up some for ourselves, but we will not depart from our mixed and "family" farming. We are aware that it might seem trifling and laborious to those who are after big money or want to make big changes. But we have come through some bad seasons of drought without shortage. We are able to sell our surplus to those who need it, and obtain from them what we need. Market prices may fluctuate wildly, and of course, we are always glad if we get a good return for what we sell, but in all these years we have never been in want. We have many good things. In our garden we can always pick some fruit, some herbs or spices; we have coconuts to use in our cooking, vegetables and fresh eggs. Above all, we have made friendships which no money can buy.

We send this letter six times a year to all who are interested in our work and willing to support us in any way. Many of these "Friends of Seva Nilayam" like to have extra copies, so that they can pass them on. We gladly send these; it does not cost much to print more once the type is set up. At the same time, we do not want people to feel we are burdening them with copies which we expect them to distribute. Some have more opportunities for this, some less.

It would be very helpful if those receiving the letters would let us know how many copies they would like.

CLINIC

Seva Nilayam out-patient clinic opens at seven in the morning. Before that, we, the clinic workers, can look out from the kitchen where we are taking our breakfast, and see the first patients waiting.

This early start is a help to the people. Those who live near, and are not very ill, can have their treatment and go, and need not lose a day's work. Those who have come a long distance the day before, and spent the night nearby, can get away in reasonable time for their homeward journey. Many do this. The climate is kind, and people are hospitable; you can sleep on a verandah or under a tree. We also like to start work while the morning is cool and fresh.

Lying in bed late is not an Indian vice – if people want some extra sleep they usually take in the middle of the day. Even before it was light we heard parties of field workers going along the road, and the tinkle of goat bells as the flocks were driven up to hill pastures.

Buses stop at the end of the sandy lane leading to Seva Nilayam, and usually most of the passengers get out there. Others come walking across the fields. They are of all ages – sick babies, young mothers, farmers, workers on tea or coffee plantations, old men and women, Muslims, Hindus, high caste or low caste. All must come in the same way, and wait their turn. As they come to give their names they see a blue painted tin, and they are asked to put some money in this. It is a collection, and bears no relation to the amount of treatment they receive. Those who cannot afford anything are not refused treatment, nor do they get any less attention. The money obtained from the collection covers only a small part of the monthly medicine bills. Some patients bring presents in kind – perhaps some beans, or garden seeds, a few cardamoms (a much valued spice) or even grapes or oranges.

We are here to serve the poor patients, and those who have no medical help. By long experience we are very good at estimating the wealth and social position of patients, and if we think that some of them do not really need our services, we give them a prescription which they can buy for themselves. No one is ever charged for medicine at Seva Nilayam.

The cases vary from the very slightest – children from the next village with a grazed knee or a stomach ache – to patients with long-neglected wounds which have ulcerated and eaten deep into the flesh, tormenting skin infections, chronic coughs which may be tubercular, or infestation by hook worm, which drains the blood and leaves the patient gasping for breath and near to heart failure.

We seldom finish the clinic before two or three o'clock. Many patients bring their food – rice in a brass or aluminium pot, or just wrapped in a banana leaf and a cloth. They find a shady spot in which to eat it, and get some water from the pump. The day wears on, and we begin to feel weary; it is with relief that we see the crowd thinning out, and feel a cool breeze when the noontide heat has passed.

There are many problems. Some patients have to be admitted if we are to have any hope of treating them effectively. They may have spend their last money on the bus, or the last of their strength to reach us. They are sometimes in tears when we cannot admit them. We try to admit as many as really need it, but we are not a hospital, only a clinic with space for fourteen or fifteen in-patients. When they are admitted they receive a mat, a sheet, an aluminium cup and plate, and lie down in a room with a tiled floor and no furniture. They get all food free while they are here; if they had to pay they would be unable to remain. Also, good food, much of it produced on our own farm, is part of the cure.

When the last patient has gone we have to sweep the floor, sterilise the instruments and burn the rubbish. Tomorrow will be another day. Sunday is a holiday, but even then the in-patients have to be attended to, and we always have to be ready for emergencies. We treat most of the local accidents and cases of sudden, acute illness.

It is known that we treat the poor, and all patients are equal to us. So none are afraid to come. We are interested in their families, homes, circumstances and occupations, because the more we know about them the more effectively we can treat them. There is an old belief in India

that the efficacy of medicine depends on the person who gives it. This is not all superstition; there must be a human relationship between patient and medical worker. People value this, and continue to come, struggling for places on crowded buses or walking over rough roads.

We have an obligation to these people: help us to fulfill it.

HOW FAR WILL MONEY GO?

The answer to that question, at Seva Nilayam, is, "A long way". We think we owe it to those friends who send us money, to use it economically. But there is something more – we have a philosophy of life; we think there is value in what people make and do for themselves, and that local materials suited to the place are better than imported luxuries.

Our living quarters are built in village style, with tiled roofs and floors, and mud or mud brick walls. Our furniture is made by village carpenters. When we travel it is by bus or third class train. We do this, not only to save money, but because we know that by this kind of life we learn about the people, and they gain confidence and friendship towards us. We have daily evidence of this in their dealings with us.

Even in small things we choose always the traditional way of the village, which is also the economical way. I will give an example from the use of our coconut trees. This kind of economy is, of course, well known to my Indian readers but it needs some explanation for friends of Seva Nilayam living in other countries.

We have an enclosure of three and a half acres on which all our main buildings stand – our clinic, rooms for workers, and sleeping quarters for in patients and convalescent children. The land which is not built on is used to cultivate fruit and vegetables, rice, maize and groundnuts, and to provide a yard for our buffaloes and working bullocks. This enclosure is tinged with coconut trees, now in the tenth year of their growth, and bearing good bunches of nuts.

But nuts are very far from being all the trees produce. The coconut has a distinctive way of growing; as the trunk lengthens, the lower leaves fall off, and only the upper leaves remain to form the graceful head which sways in the breeze. The leaf stalks are surprisingly strong and heavy, and are a source of firewood. The leaf is divided into many long and narrow leaflets, and the central ribs of these, when shredded out and tied together, make brooms of just the right flexibility for the work they have to do. Every day all the paths are swept, as well as the area in front of the clinic, which has been crowded with patients in the morning. The clinic floors are cleaned by water being poured freely on them and swept out with brooms. Further, the coconut leaves, when plaited, are used for thatch, and at any time we can put up a 'pandal' – a roof to give extra shade – or a small hut, at practically no cost. Still further, part of the leaf stem, when soaked in water, and mashed at one end with a hammer, makes a most effective whitewash brush.

All this shredding and plaiting of leaves is done by patients or local people, while they sit together in a social group. This is the way people have lived and worked in the village from time immemorial. The ease with which useful things can be obtained makes it possible for the poorest people to spend most of their money on food and clothes, and very little on household articles. Clay pots, of beautiful shape and rich red-brown colour, are made by the village potter, and are

very cheap. All the leaves that are swept up are used for compost, and all the fallen branches for firewood. But I find that villagers can always give one a lesson in economy. One day I had some rather thorny branches which I thought could well be burnt up. But as I was setting light to them two women who were passing said: “Don’t do that, give them to us”, and they took them home to cook the supper.

At Seva Nilayam we have no electric fans, no air conditioning, no upholstery, no shiny office equipment. Of course, our climate is kind. A house which would be bleak and draughty in a northern climate is cool and pleasant here, and the less cluttered it is, the better. In South India it is the custom to slip off one’s sandals when entering a room, and the tiled or cement floor feels very agreeable to bare feet. We spend much of our time out of doors, and have the constant but ever-changing beauty of nature around us, the green of growing crops and the grey of rugged hills, dawn and sunset lighting up clouds and mountains. Some of us like to sleep on the flat roof of the clinic, under the stars.

But along with all this beauty, there is much poverty around us. Prices are rising so sharply that the poor are getting poorer, in spite of all efforts for social welfare. The inflation does not seem great compared with that in the West, but in relation to wages and farm incomes here it is frightening. We would wish all in the villages to have enough to eat, and to be able to buy the clothes they need, and not to live in broken-down houses. But we find that reasonable economy and simplicity do in fact lead to a dignity and beauty in home life which is the heritage of rural India. This is something preserved in villages, while the cities are fast losing it under the impact of Western goods, styles and manners.

Living in this way, we are able to use money for the most necessary things, and especially for medicines. The gifts we receive from friends of Seva Nilayam are carefully guarded, because we would be ashamed to waste even a Rupee avoidably while others are in want.

FESTIVALS

India has many festivals, and they differ greatly between the south and the North of this vast country. People need an excuse for merrymaking, so that they can spend a bit extra and stay off work without reproaching themselves for being lazy or extravagant. On the contrary; it is meritorious to keep festivals well.

Many local festivals arise from belief in the Gods who are venerated especially in certain places. But others are linked with the seasons of the year, with work, and with family life.

In October we have a festival which seems to me one of the most beautiful, and its underlying thought can be shared by people of any religious belief or none. It is Ayudha Puja, the day when each one pays honour to the tools of his trade. The carpenter brings his saw and chisel, the clerk or teacher his pen and books, the mason his trowel. I always find it moving to see the worn and dented spades which have been used day in, day out, in the mud washed and decorated, and laid before the images of the Gods. We don’t make a division between ancient and modern, as if only old things were worthy; the sewing machine, the microscope in the clinic, and the

irrigation pump are decorated with flowers. Man is offering his work, whatever it is, as the best gift he has.

At Seva Nilayam, in our tropical climate, we have flowers in the garden every day of the year – scarlet and orange hibiscus, jasmine, cannas, cassias, frangipani and bougainvillea. So decorations are easy, and the rest of the materials, coloured powders, and incense sticks, cost only a little in the bazaar.

In November comes the festival of Deepavali. Before man understood why the sun seemed to retreat and the days grow shorter towards the end of the year, he felt he must do something to assert this hope and belief that the darkness would be only transitory. With us, in South India, the shortening of the days is not pronounced; there is only a variation of an hour or so between June and December. But the darker days come at the same time as the onset of the North East Monsoon, which brings towering clouds and majestic thunderstorms. Deepavali, in mid-November, is a festival of light. It may be raining – indeed, it should be, for rain here is longed for. When it rains you see smiling faces, and people wade cheerfully through mud and water even if they have no raincoats and very few have umbrellas.

Deepavali is the time for fireworks, and stalls appear in the local bazaar and the streets of Madurai, selling catherine wheels, red and green flares, fire fountains, jumping crackers, sparklers writhing snakes, and somehow keeping them dry. They are small scale fireworks and setting them off is a domestic occasion. Seva Nilayam invites the poor children from round about.

Deepavali is also an occasion for new clothes. At Seva Nilayam we have about thirty in-patients and workers on the farm. We manage to provide something for all, and also for neighbours who have been helpful and some very poor families. We start saving up clothes many months before; some come from parcels sent by friends of Seva Nilayam; some are made by the village tailor, and some picked up as bargains from travelling salesmen or on shopping expeditions. So the cupboard slowly gets full.

Before Deepavali it is a pleasure just to go to Madurai to see the crowds of shoppers. The cloth shops hang out displays of saris glowing with entrancing colours. Many shops close in the mid-day hours and stay open late in the evening. So the sunset light, usually in monsoon time a fiery glow, mingles with the lights of the shops, and clothes the moving crowd with splendour. Those who spend are happy, and those who sell are happy too, as the make a hard-earned profit, to which they have been looking forward for months. Those who have no shops sit on the pavement with pieces of cloth for blouses and skirts: with aluminium kitchen pots, fruits, mats, hair ornaments, towels, anything they can invest a little money in. Madurai is never so cluttered, never so good-tempered, so expectant and so glad.

On the festival day, at Seva Nilayam, the children are up at four; they take their bath and put on their new clothes, and then they have their special breakfast of iddlies – steamed rice cakes. And in the evening come the fireworks.

What about Christmas? Where we live there are very few Christians, but Hindus are usually very ready to rejoice with all who keep their own festivals, believing that everyone has his own path, and finds help in his own way. No image of the Divine could be more acceptable in India than that of a mother and baby. Where there has in the past been fierce resistance to Christianity it was because those who became Christians were expected to repudiate all their own

traditions and sacred symbols, and to believe these were of the Devil. But those days are over. So we keep Christmas. We have no pine or fir trees, but we can make garlands. We have sweets and fruits and every boy gets some glass marbles, and every girl some new bangles or hair ribbons.

What of India's poverty? Can people be so happy? You would have to be at Seva Nilayam to see what joy can be given by glass marbles costing about twelve English pence a hundred. Or a breakfast of rice cakes. Or a sari of printed cotton. Or a shirt made out of dressmaker's pieces. It is one of the paradoxes of life that only those who know sorrow can truly know joy, and only those who are poor know what it is to feel rich.

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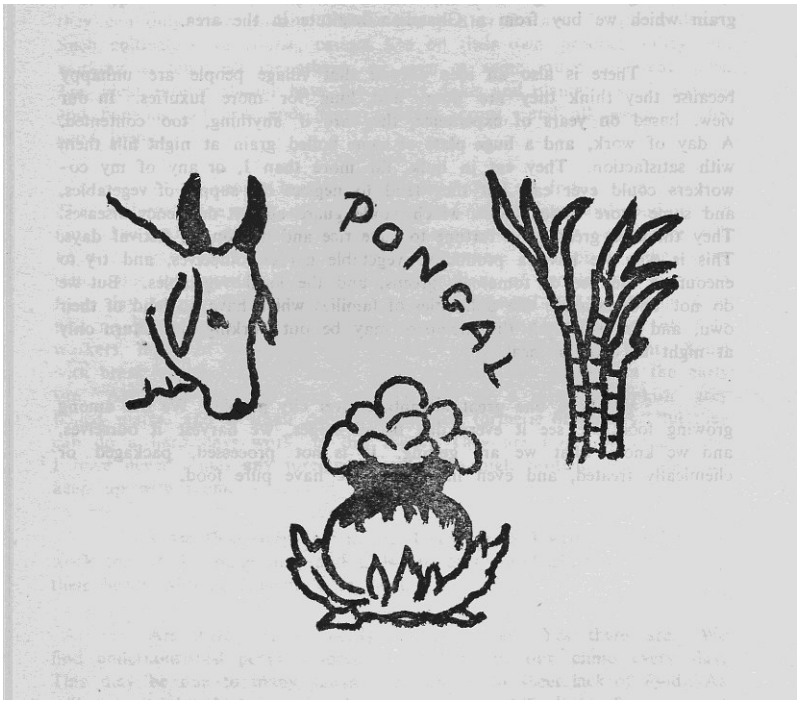


PONGAL

The rains are over, cool weather has come, days are serene and sunny, and dew falls in the silence of the starry nights. There is a feeling of having come into some quiet place from which troubles have receded into the far distance. It is hard now to imagine the burning heat of May, the cutting winds and raging dust storms of July, the empty wells and the parched fields. Nature has grown wealthy and kind.

The paddy fields turn from green to pale gold. The rice is harvested, and everyone is out in the fields, cutting, threshing and stacking. Sometimes we thresh the grain by moonlight; four pairs of bullocks tread the sheaves, going round in a circle while the workers throw more and more sheaves under their feet, and excited children shout and play.

In October, we sowed pumpkin seeds, and the plants have ramped over all the available space, even climbing trees, where the ripening fruits hang like huge orange moons. They will be ready for our Pongal feast.

Yes, we must be ready by the fourteenth of January. Every building must be whitewashed inside and out; all the damage of the past year must be repaired, and many cottages are painted with freehand designs, or with the auspicious red and white stripes. At other times it may be difficult to persuade busy workers to spend time and energy on whitewashing, but at Pongal it is done spontaneously; there is no need to ask. Quicklime is fetched from the bazaar, and brushes made by hammering and fraying out the stems of coconuts. When the whitewashing is finished the floors are decorated with traditional "kolam" patterns done with white powder.

Pongal is the chief harvest festival of South India. It lasts three days. People buy new pots and baskets, and for weeks the village potter has been busy making clay pots and large storage jars. On the first night of Pongal a bonfire is made of all the worm out mats, brooms and baskets, before the new ones are taken into use.

The second day is the great feast. Everyone, even if poor, tries to have new clothes. At Seva Nilayam we give a present to each of the friends who have helped us during the past year, the neighbours and their children, our clinic staff and field workers, the washerman, the tailor, the barber, and some poor families round about.

No one sleeps very much. The cooking goes on all night; it is a communal task, and all the women lend a hand There is no room for it indoors, so it is done outside under a trellis covered with climbing gourds.

A fireplace is improvised with large stones, and the fire is fed with sticks and brushwood Piles of vegetables are cut and rice is boiled in a great brass vessel. Even those who sleep are astir by daybreak, bathed and wearing their new clothes. By about ten-thirty in the morning the feast is ready. It consists of a special *pongal* sweet rice, plain rice with spiced vegetables, green beans and sweet pumpkin, followed by *payasam*, a sweet made from tapioca, cashew nuts and raisins, delicately flavoured with cardamoms. Mats are spread on the floor, and the diners sit down on these, each with a freshly cut banana leaf for a plate. There will be at least three relays of feasters, including ragged children from the lane, cleaned and tidied up for once. It is always a delight to see rows of children sitting in the dappled shade of the trellis, eating their fill. The food is simple enough, being mainly our own produce, but it is well cooked, and served with care. In the afternoon the cooks make up for lost sleep, and others rest or play as they feel inclined.

The third day of Pongal is dedicated to the cattle. Our beautiful white cart bullocks are scrubbed clean, and their horns are oiled. They do no work, and all the animals have a special feed. All, right down to the newest calf, wear flower garlands. The cart has been freshly painted, and a ceremony with camphor lights and incense is carried out in front of it.

Near the cow shed a fire is lighted, and a pot of sweet, milky rice is boiled. It must boil over, as a symbol of plenty, and then all shout, "*Pongal O! Pongal O!*" The rice is shared out, and eaten with bananas and pieces of sugar cane.

I think it is good to have festivals which remind us of all those things we depend on for our living. Cattle are the mainstay of India. If a supernatural power wanted to disrupt the country totally the quickest way would be to get rid of all the bullocks. We can survive stoppages on the railways, cuts in electricity, breakdown of the telegraph system, lack of kerosene and of buses – indeed all these have happened since we have been at Seva Nilayam – but without the bullocks

we would be lost. Farming would stop, markets would dwindle, and life would be impoverished. So we like to show our gratitude in the best way we can.

Last year, 1975, was a year of disastrous drought. Someone asked me how we could keep Pongal when we knew we were not going to enjoy prosperity. I said that people should always keep their festivals, even if it was only as a gesture of courage and unquenchable hope. To abandon Pongal would be to give in. But this year we have reason to think that the promise of plenty will be fulfilled.

This letter is sent with thanks and good wishes to all who have helped us.

Many friends of Seva Nilayam send parcels of used sheets, clothing, medicines and dried foods. These have been much appreciated, but some of the senders have felt that with the increased postal rates the parcels may not really be worth sending.

I can answer that simply. Old sheets may seem valueless, but if we make them into bandages, and calculate the cost to us if we had to buy new bandages, we would find it was prohibitive. It is true that clothing is cheap in India, but still the postage on a bundle of shirts is far less than the cost of buying an equal number here. It is also very useful for us to have small pieces of bright cloth, felt or wool, for our toy-making handicraft, and these are light to send.

Nothing heavy should be put in, and parcels may be sewn up in cloth, to save weight, rather than packed in cardboard boxes. We have a Customs Exemption Certificate, and the current number 35/75 PAD, should be written on the outside of the parcel, with the words: “For the village poor only”. If our friends can still manage to send occasionally, I can assure them that it is worth while.

MILK

One Friday morning I happened to be coming back to Seva Nilayam on an early bus, having stayed the night with friends in Madurai. The bus looked as if it might have been going to a baby show, it was so crowded with mothers and babies. It would, however, have seemed and unusual show because, although some of the babies were fat and well, others were weak and puny. It was, in fact, carrying them all to our Mother and Baby Clinic, which is held every Friday.

I knew everybody on the bus, and I was expected to look at all the babies and hear about them. Those on distant seats were help up for me to see. So we had a happy time as the bus bumped along the uneven road between red ploughed fields, past mud-walled villages, and willy-nilly bounced the babies up and down on their mothers’ laps. At the stop outside Seva Nilayam the bus was emptied of most of its passengers. We walked down the narrow, sandy lane bordered with thorn hedges and turned in at the entrance to our clinic building. The desk was ready, the weight cards in order, and the baby scales set out on the verandah.

If Friday morning is the busiest, it is also the happiest, morning of the week. There are usually about fifty mothers present, but instead of only fifty babies there are sixty five or seventy. How is this? There are fifteen sets of twins. Poor working mothers seldom have enough milk for two babies, and the word has gone round that we are willing to supplement the feed with milk

powder, and so twins born within a radius of twenty miles are brought along. We are able to make the birth of twins a joy instead of a misfortune. Almost all twins are called Raman and Lakshmanan, after the heroes of the well-loved Hindu epic, the Ramayana, if they are boys, and if girls they are called by the equivalent names Ramuthai and Lakshmi. Besides the twins there are a few motherless babies, brought by grandmothers, elder sisters, or sometimes fathers. These depend on us for their life.

It is not very easy for mothers to get themselves registered in our Baby Clinic. They have to show real need, and we have to use the milk for those who need it most. We never encourage bottle feeding if breast feeding is possible. We examine the mothers carefully, and those who are sick have to take treatment themselves. If the baby is still young there is a good chance that the mother will get her own milk after some help in the early stages. The most common cause of loss of milk is anaemia due to hookworm, and this is curable. Sometimes the lack of milk is due to sheer hard work and poor food. There is just no surplus nourishment for milk production. Some of the babies have been very ill with dysentery or bronchitis, and need good medical care as well as feeding The medicines, vitamins, and protein foods we give form quite a heavy item in our expenditure.

Some of the babies are so tiny and wrinkled when they are first brought that they look hardly human. It is a great joy to see them slowly recovering, putting on weight, getting smooth skins and bright eyes, and laughing back at us when we talk to them.

We expect mothers to start giving solid food from the age of nine months, so that we can reduce the allowance of milk powder, and give more to those who need it more, the new born and the very sick. It is a custom in the villages to keep babies at the breast till they are well over a year old, sometimes two years. This milk looks to the mother like free food, and the practice may not be bad if the mother is strong and healthy, and gives solid food as well, but it is disastrous in the case of undernourished mothers and weak babies. So we warn the mothers that they must start the babies eating early in life. We also keep a strict watch on the attendance and the weight charts. If the baby is not putting on weight we have to find the reason, and in one or two cases we have admitted babies here as in-patients, with their mothers, to have special feeding. If any mother does not attend regularly, and gives no good reason, we stop giving milk, as it is clear that she is now able to manage without it.

Milk, in Indian tradition and culture, is held in high esteem. It is offered in worship, and is surrounded by a wealth of symbolism. It therefore seems paradoxical that here, in South India, it is often scarce, especially in the poorer villages. Cows do not thrive easily in the tropics; they do well in the mountain areas, but fine cattle introduced to hill farms lose quality when they are brought down to the plains. The huge, plodding, black buffaloes are hardier than the cows, but to yield really well they need to wallow in a river or lake during the heat of the day, and such water is not everywhere available. There is always a shortage of green food during the hot weather, and this, along with harsh, drying winds, brings down the yields. As we have kept both cows and buffaloes here for many years, we know all the difficulties.

But even large quantities of fresh milk at Seva Nilayam would not enable us to feed the babies. Most of the mothers come some distance, and have to walk far or pay bus fare. They could not come daily for a small pot of milk We insist that they come regularly once a week, and this is hard enough to be a test of their earnestness and their need. They must have a week’s supply of powdered milk to take away with them.

When we first started work at Seva Nilayam there were large quantities of milk powder available through various relief services. It was on this basis that we had the confidence to build up our Mother and Baby Clinic. Now the supplies are no longer coming. The only powder milk we could buy is in tins of baby food under brand names, and this is far beyond our means. One tin costs as much as two days' wages for a rural worker. We still have stocks of milk, but in a few months the end will be in sight unless we find another source. It will be a tragic day when we have to turn away these earnest, hopeful, thankful mothers because we have no milk.

THE LAST JOURNEY

The letter I wrote about our baby clinic was a happy one. In spite of all trials and anxieties we can see the result of our work, in the faces of babies eager to live, to love and be loved, and to find out about the world into which they have come.

But sometimes, with that sense of life and hope still in my mind, I have to think about the end of the journey. People ask me: "Does anyone die in your clinic. If so, what do you do?"

As we have only a simple country clinic, we do not aim to take very serious cases, or those whose lives are in danger. We must try to get such patients into adequately equipped hospitals and, as no ambulances ever come here, we often have to help the patients' families in their transport difficulties. But we know very well that most people would choose to die in their homes, surrounded by their relatives, rather than in a hospital bed. Usually, those who feel that they have fulfilled their lives accept death easily, and would not want to go to extraordinary lengths to preserve a spark of life when further existence has no meaning.

An individual life, dear though it may be, is like a ripple on an ever-moving stream. Very long ago, in the morning of the world, the Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, reached out to two great beliefs – that every human action brings its inescapable results, and that the world we see is not the ultimate reality. The prayer used at the time of death says: "Ashes are my body's end … O mind, remember Brahman. O mind, remember thy past deeds." And there is a much-used Sanscrit invocation: "Lead me from the unreal to the real; Lead me from darkness to light; Lead me from death to immortality."

This does not mean that there is no mourning. Women, especially, are by custom obliged to take part in ritual lamentation, beating their breasts and crying to the dead one: "Why did you go? Why do you leave us unconsolable?" But, at the same time, there is a very matter-of-fact side to funerals. The men of the house and the neighbours get together and bring bamboo poles to make a bier. A large coconut leaf, platted like a mat, is laid on these. Someone goes to the market, and buys a new cloth, white for a man, or a splendidly coloured sari for a woman, and the body is covered and garlanded with fresh flowers. Incense sticks are lighted. When all is ready, the bier is lifted, and carried to the burning ground. In the house, at the place where the body has lain, a lamp is lit, and garlands are placed there.

It has happened to us a number of times to have to arrange a funeral. Patients may come to the clinic in a state of collapse. They have used all their strength to get here, and can get no farther. We are obliged to try to find the family, but it may be a hopeless quest. This is an area surrounded by mountains, where there are plantations of tea, coffee, cardamoms and citrus fruits. In the dry season there is not enough work on the plains, but in the rainy, misty mountains there is more work and better pay. If there is illness or death in the family it may be impossible to get in touch with someone who has gone looking for work.

Some patients, tired of struggling with poverty and ill-health simply leave their homes and wander off, believing that they may somehow, somewhere, find a better a place. But it may be too late. There was one old woman who said: "I would know how to get to my house but I don't know any address. I can't tell you where it is." We sent someone to enquire at the village we thought was hers, but no one knew of her. It may not even have been the right village.

We inform the village registrar, but he can do no more than write down the name. So, if we have to carry out the funeral we rely on our own resources.

A young girl, who looked about sixteen, came to us in a critical condition. She was severely anaemic, due to hook worm, her hear was failing, and her breathing laboured. Her face was so swollen that I doubt if anyone who knew her could have recognised her. But no one knew her. We gave her the best treatment we could, yet knowing it was hopeless. Even if an ambulance had by some miracle drawn up at the gate, she could not have lasted out the forty-five miles to hospital – the only hospital with blood transfusions to spare. Before evening she died.

There are some local castes and communities who practise burial and not cremation, and it is easier for us to follow this custom.

We sent for the cobblers, who are also the traditional grave diggers, and they went two hundred yards up the road, to the barren and thorny piece of ground which serves for funerals. While they are digging, we removed her old rags, washed the body and wrapped it in a clean white sheet. The girls wove a garland from the garden flowers. We lit the lamps and burned the incense; it was dusk before all was ready. No one followed the bier but the grave-diggers and our clinic staff; no one saw us on the road but some children playing by the door of a hut. The last light lingered on the hills. The lanterns shone on the faces of the men as they threw earth upon the body.

Among all the funerals I have seen in my life, including state funerals of important persons, not one lives in my memory so vividly as this poor funeral of an unknown, ignorant girl. There was no place for sentimentality, for hypocrisy or empty show. Only one life gathered to the eternal unknown.

"From the unreal lead me to the real".

THE ONE AND THE MANY

I write to you six times a year about Seva Nilayam, and I am always very happy at your response, and very grateful, too. As my daily life is here, this place has become a small world of its own to me, surrounded by its hills, ravaged by drought or storm, and beset by human sorrows and needs.

Yet it is a minute speck on the map of India, less than a grain of dust. To reach the north of India you can travel three days and three nights by train, and after that, you will feel in your very bones the vastness of it. You cross enormous, dusty plains, where villages of low huts cling to the earth, and you go through towns where the new and garish jostles the old and decayed. There are great rivers, which are sometimes only wastes of sand, sometimes terrifyingly in spate; temples hidden in shady groves, sugar refineries and spinning mills, and cement and chemical works pouring out dust and fumes. Loaded bullock carts wait at level crossings, and there are bicycles, bicycles, and more bicycles. There are new, clean, white colleges, and classes of village children sitting under trees, near the school of mud and thatch which is too small to hold them. All these fly by, as the train goes on, for three days. What is Seva Nilayam? It has never been heard of. Its name, even, is in a different language, Tamil, the language of the South.

In India there are many, many hospitals, doctors, clinics, and leprosy treatment centres. A few we know; the great majority we know little or nothing about. There are areas where medical treatment is very thinly spread, and there are people who have to go miles walking, or on bullock carts, to get help. There are tribes living in jungles. It is like this in the area served by Seva Nilayam, and we know it is so in many parts of the country.

It can be daunting to break down the walls of one's little world by such travel. One returns to the familiar scenes with a mind still bemused by the sense of distance, and the countless pictures of the country, momentarily seen, but sharply remembered. It is salutary to feel like this, and not to believe the world began or will stop with one's own concerns. But at the same time, it is necessary to adjust the focus to the nearer scene, and the daily work.

The great Indian poet, Kabir, speaks of the human soul like this:

"Within this earthen vessel are powers and groves, and within it is the Creator;

Within this vessel are the seven seas and the unnumbered stars;

The touchstone and the jewel appraiser are within"

One human being is a work to himself; one cloud can darken his whole sky, and one sunrise can revive all his hope.

Belief in the value of the individual is our justification for trying to help all those in need. We cannot save the world; we can help only those who come to us, - and that keeps us busy enough, in all conscience. But if we can save one person from death or lifelong disability; if we

can cure a child of leprosy in the early stages; or if we can restore a sick baby to health, for that patient, or that parent, the whole world is altered. We have sent a boy to hospital with a deep bone infection in his leg. He is now twenty-two, and he has suffered from this infection since he was twelve. We have given him treatment, according to the prescription of the hospital, as our in-patient, for more that two years. Now the trouble has flared up again, and if nothing is done he will lose his leg. There is one doctor in one hospital, who has worked out a new treatment for this, and claims success in difficult cases. The treatment is not yet available free, in the Government hospitals. It will cost seven hundred Rupees, a sum which the boy's family could never find. So we must pay it, and save him. In this teeming world, what is the life of one young man, poor, barely educated, without any prospect but years of hard, unskilled work? The only answer is, that it is his life, and his all.

That is why statistics play a small part in our work. To keep the Government rules on leprosy work, we have to make surveys, and maintain registers. We have to supply our figures every month to the State Leprosy Officer. This is right; it is part of a nation-wide scheme to control leprosy. The local Government bodies ask for our statistics every quarter, and some agencies supplying food stuffs need figures. But in a world of computers, surveys, mass movements, and statistical tables, we must not lose sight of the value of the individual. We can never measure success in numbers.

Another Indian teacher gave a striking image: The sun, which is the symbol of divinity, is one. There may be thousands of dewdrops in a field, but when the sun rises, it is reflected in each dewdrop, and one does not detract from the complete reflection in another.

I once heard something said in praise of a very busy, hard-working doctor. It was said that when he is treating you, you feel as if you were his only patient. I think that is very high praise, and an ideal worth following.

BEGINNINGS

Seva Nilayam was started in 1962. A small group of people – an Englishwoman resident in India, an Indian farmer and his wife, a Canadian girl volunteer, and later, a young man from the United States, living in a small, mud-walled house, began giving milk to village children, and went on to treat their simple ailments.

This was the first nucleus of a community which has been in existence ever since, and, through many changes, has preserved the same spirit and intention.

The intention was to do something for the villages in a part of the country remote from cities, with little medical care, and no transport but the bullock cart and t he bicycle. They had no detailed plan, and no special training beyond a previous knowledge of village life and needs. To learn more about the people and the country, these first members of Seva Nilayam walked through all the villages within a radius of six or seven miles, carrying a bag of medicines – simple and innocuous preparations, such as ointments, bandages, liniment, eye and ear drops, ordinary digestive and cough medicines. It was clear at once that a great deal could be done, even with these restricted means. The workers were generally invited to sit in the yards of the larger

houses, where the villagers came in to tell their troubles, and they were larger houses, where the villagers came into tell their troubles, and they were often asked to enter some dark, smoky hut, where a sick person lay.

They learned so much. They knew the crops that were grown, the way the women went to the hills to cut firewood for sale, and how they cooked at home with small sticks and maize stalks; they heard the singsong of children reciting the alphabet in school, and watched their play when they came out; they saw old people sitting in yards, sifting grain or feeding calves. They tramped stony roads and dusty field paths. There were no buses in the area except on the main road that ran right along the valley. After some months the group received an offer of money to buy a pair of bullocks and a small covered cart. With this they were able to do their marketing in Aundipatty, six miles away, and take very sick patients from isolated villages to the bus route, so that they could get to hospital.

The region is one of great natural beauty. The red earth and growing crops of the cultivated land run right up to the foot of steep, rocky hills; across the valley, to the north, the Palani range rises to seven thousand feet, often roofed by dark storm clouds, or with its green forests glistening in the sun. In the midst of this beauty was much suffering and poverty. The nearest city, Madurai, is over forty miles away, and many of the men, and most of the women, had never been there – or, indeed, to any place larger than a small market town. Understandably, those who most needed to go to hospital could not face the journey, and had no idea how to set about getting there. Many were frightened by the mere idea, and though it unlikely that they would come back alive.

There were many leprosy sufferers not receiving any treatment at all. Yet this disease is curable in most cases if tablets, which do not cost very much, are taken regularly over a long period. There must be someone to supply the tablets, keep the registers, and persuade and encourage the patients to come, even though the cure seems slow. Elaborate buildings and equipment are not necessary for routine treatment but only for cases in which operations or physiotherapy are done. In such a totally neglected area, it is more important to start the treatment and to let patients know that if they come to a certain spot at a certain time – even if it is only in an old shed, or the shade of a tree – the medicine will be there for them. The first leprosy clinic was attended by seven patients, in a tamarind grove. A leprosy specialist working in an adjoining area came over, at only the cost of his bus fare, to diagnose and prescribe the dosage.

Today Seva Nilayam has a special leprosy treatment centre at a convenient spot just outside Aundipatty, with regular attendance by a doctor, and para-medical workers going out to roadside clinics ten or twenty miles away. There are more than two thousand patients on the register, and a small number are taken as in-patients for special care. There is a farm of eleven acres where those who are fit for work can be employed, and so increase their self-respect, and abandon the old idea that leprosy sufferers are useless outcasts.

One of the important things that these first workers of Seva Nilayam learned was the extent to which the villages are left in a vacuum between the old native medicine and the practice of modern doctors trained in the medical colleges. The old country medicine had its virtues, among which were cheapness and ready availability of herbs, stems, and seeds in local surroundings. But today it is half forgotten, and often used superstitiously and ignorantly, when it can indeed do harm. But the use of modern medicine can itself be a superstition, when people ten

to believe that injections, for example, are essential, without understanding at all why and when injections should be given. People sometimes go long distances to private medical practitioners, and receive treatment which, by their standards, is quite costly, but they are not able to go again, or keep on with the medicine, so, if the illness is not cured in one visit, the whole effort and expense is wasted. This is especially the case with tuberculosis patients, one of whom may have ninety injections of streptomycin prescribed, and may only be able to pay for ten out of the money he has. At the same time, he is not able to afford sufficient food, sot he attempted treatment does more harm than good. If a patient lives near to a Government hospital he can get daily injections free, but the Government Health Centres out in the country are quite far apart, and he may have a ten mile walk each way, which will tire him out or a bus fare which costs as much as the injection would. In the case of children suffering from malnutrition, one visit to a doctor, and a week's vitamin tablets, will be useless without care and nourishment.

We felt that in these village areas a quite special approach was needed. We must consider what people can rightly be expected to do, having regard to all their circumstances; where they need help, and what help is in our power to give. We are dealing primarily with people, who have families, who may have to work very hard, and may suffer many deprivations. We are not just treating diseases, which are written in a book, along with the medicine which may be prescribed. For that reason we know that we have to admit some patients at Seva Nilayam. Although it is not a regular hospital, we can give food, rest, daily treatment and observation, which they could not get in their homes.

We now have a resident qualified doctor, but we know that we have to differentiate between those cases which we can treat with the means at our disposal, and the minority of serious cases, which have no hope except treatment in a fully equipped hospital. It would be wrong for us to tinker with such cases, although patients often say they cannot, or will not, go to hospital, and plead with us to keep them. They often cite a case in their own village in which we have effected a cure, and they assume that we can cure them also if only we will, not realising that the illness may be of a totally different kind. But over the years we have seen a change. There are more buses, and several a day pass by Seva Nilayam, and people are more used to travelling. Also, we have sent many cases to hospital, with frequent success, and the old attitude of fear is largely broken down. Many patients actually ask us to refer them to hospital, believing that with our letter they will get extra consideration – and this is in some measure true, because we are on very good terms with many of the Government doctors.

Another thing we realised is that if we want to get the really poor patients, we must not charge for medicine, and if we admit them, we must give free food. In their homes, people can live very cheaply, on grain they can buy locally, or get free for harvest work, and the greens they can pick in the fields. But if they are in a hospital where no food is given, and they have to buy it ready prepared, this will be beyond their means, and they will cut short their treatment and go home.

Readers of this letter may ask, what do we do about richer patients, as some will certainly come. Our policy is still not to charge anything, and to help with advice if it is needed, but to give a prescription so that such patients can but their own medicines, or a referral letter to a suitable doctor.

If we chose a symbol for Seva Nilayam, it would be a tree. A tree does not grow according to a plan, but in relation to its environment, the soil, the water, the climate. It does not

change its nature. All the qualities of the greatest tree are already contained in the seed, and unfold slowly, over the years. You cannot hurry it, but when the tree is grown it will not easily be blown down. Its beauty comes simply from its own natural from; it does not need extra adornments.

From the mud hut, crammed between other mud-walled dwellings in the village, we came out to some empty land about two miles distant. Here we put up our permanent buildings, more commodious but not essentially different from the village house. We have no three-storey buildings to dominate the scene; the low, red-tiled roofs are only partly visible among the trees, which have grown up since we came here and planted them in an empty field. Seva Nilayam now looks like a small village. There is no showy entrance gate, only a sandy lane. Inside, the buildings are dotted about. First is the out-patient clinic, with a large verandah for waiting patients. Then a house containing the kitchen for the patients, and a room for the child in-patients to sleep and to keep their cloths and their very few belongings. There is an area where we dry firewood – mostly stems and leaves from the coconut trees, and whatever branches we find necessary to cut to keep the place in trim. We have to buy some firewood, but not very much. Beyond again is what is really the main building, containing the kitchen and common dining room for the staff, some storage, and a sewing room. The sewing machine on the verandah is in very frequent use. There is a yard for bullocks and buffaloes, a flower garden, and our irrigation well. Beyond again is the "hospital", which is merely a room for in-patients, like all the other rooms, whitewashed, with a tiled floor. There are no beds. The patients sleep on mats, and roll them up in the daytime. This is what they would do in their homes. Few of them will ever have slept on a bed. Around all these buildings is cultivated land, now, as I write, green with the tender seedlings of the rice, which is being planted out today in the mirror-like flooded fields. On the west, the windy side, is a barrier of tall trees, mangoes, other fruits, and kapok.

Because the place has grown so slowly, being added to from time to time, it blends with its surroundings. There is nothing to make patients, or the local children, feel shy or afraid when they come into Seva Nilayam and indeed, the proof is that they come so freely. The buildings may be more spacious than their homes, and not huddled together in narrow alleys, but there is no difference in kind or style. The most destitute and the most hopeless have no hesitation in coming.

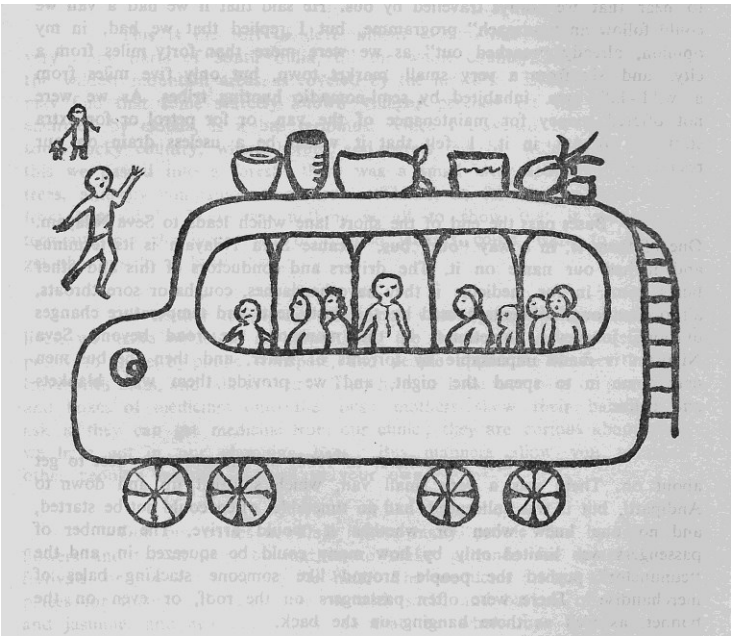
One benefit of growing slowly is that you can avoid many mistakes. You do not do anything until the need for it is felt. We did not plan to have a leprosy treatment centre, as we did not at first know that the incidence of the disease was so high in this area. But having found it out, we felt compelled to do what we could. To return to our simile of the tree – the roots feel their way through the crevices of the rock, and they reach out the underground springs. So we have to bend to the wishes of the people, and to give them what they know they need, not what we might think they ought to need.

Owing to this slow and patient growth, we have wasted very little in money or resources, and done very little that had to be undone. We have, in fact, taken definite steps to see that we do not grow to a larger size than can easily be managed, and that we do not become an "institution", and lose the family and community atmosphere. Sometimes, when enterprises get too big, and too efficient, something precious is lost, as if some indwelling spirit had taken flight. And this is irreplaceable.

You may say, but do we not want to help as many as possible? Why should we restrict ourselves? I answer you cannot do more than is in you. You can perhaps deal with a larger number of people, but with less effect, less care and less humanity. It would be better, perhaps, if we could set an example, and if others might think and work on the same lines. I am not, of course, thinking of big development works, like well digging and dam building, but in the care of human beings I believe deeply that these principles are right.

From the beginning we have been supported by voluntary contributions. We have no security, but our friends have never failed us. By their aid we have been able not only to restore the sick to health, but to make barren land productive, to give employment, and to teach, and ourselves practise, friendship and co-operation.

THE COUNTRY BUS



The representative of a foreign relief agency strongly urged me to accept the present of a van for Seva Nilayam. He seemed a bit shocked to hear that we always travelled by bus. He said that if we had a van we could follow an "outreach" programme, but I replied that we had, in my opinion, already "reached out" as we were more than forty miles from a city, and six from a very small market town, but only five miles from a wild hill area inhabited by semi-nomadic hunting tribes. As we were not offered money for maintenance of the van, of for petrol or for extra staff to go out in it, I felt that it would be a useless drain on our resources.

Buses pass the end of the short lane which leads to Seva Nilayam. One of them is, in a way "our" bus, because Seva Nilayam is its terminus and it has our name on it. The drivers and conductors of this and other buses come in for medicine if they have headaches, coughs or sore throats, and occupational ailments caused by the dust, heat, and temperature changes of long journeys. Sometimes, in the monsoon, the road beyond Seva Nilayam is made impassable by torrents of water, and then the bus men may come in to spend the night, and we provide them with blankets and coffee.

When we first came here, in 1962, we had only our feet to get about on. There was a very small van, which shuttled up and down to Aundipatty, but it was unlicensed, had no timetable, often could not be started, and no one knew when or whether it would arrive. The number of passengers was limited only by how many could be squeezed in, and the "conductor" pushed the

people around like someone staking bales of merchandise. There were often passengers on the roof, or even on the bonnet, as well as those hanging on the back.

We bought a pair of bullocks and a small covered cart, since we could not rely on this van when we wanted to bring medicines or provisions. This was one stage better. Our cart could go through the low, muddy places where streams crossed the road, while the van got stuck. I have had to get out of that van in a pitch black night, in the rain, less than half way home, because it could go no farther. And I did not get my fare back.

The first sign of change was that the local authorities built four culverts over the sticky places; this made the road motorable. Then suddenly, one morning, looking across the fields, we saw a real bus approaching, gleaming in the early sunlight. It was an amazing sight. At first there were only two buses a day, but the service was increased till there were twelve, bound for various destinations.

This is the sort of development which has been repeated in very many parts of South India, till the whole country, except some of the wildest mountain areas, is covered by the network. Even up there, you may find that some scarcely known village, perched on the crags, and encircled by clouds, is a bus terminus. Once I travelled by jeep through some rocky country, where herons and egrets fed by wide lakes. From this we passed into a forest; there was a small clear space under some trees, and my companion remarked: “This is as far as the bus comes from this side”. There was nothing at all to show that it was a bus terminus, but the inhabitants of isolated villages could walk to it, and get the bus to a busy town.

As neither trains, nor cars, nor vans figure much in our daily lives, we make ourselves at home with the buses. It is our deliberate policy to travel by public transport, and people appreciate the fact that we travel with them, and talk to them. They help to hoist our bags of provisions and boxes of medicines on to the bus; mothers show their babies, and ask if they can get medicine from our clinic; they are curious about what we have got in our shopping bags. Bus manners allow your to mind other people’s business as well as your own.

Our bus passes a village where many people live by growing flowers and taking them to market, to make garlands for temples and festivals, or just for adorning the hair. The conductor always keeps some places for them, and they come on with sacks and baskets of marigolds and jasmine, and aromatic leaves, so that the whole bus is filled with fragrance. They usually take out some handfuls of flowers to drop in my lap.

We often have to change buses at Aundipatty, and the wait may be long and weary. In the hot weather the baked ground is glaring, and in the windy season it is swept by clouds of dust. But there are nearly always neighbours or ex-patients to talk to, and someone will offer a cup of coffee or an orange from the fruit stall.

Aundipatty is only a small town, so you would not expect the bus stand to be very lively. But there is the bangle seller, an old flower seller, and a boy with a basket of guavas. There is an old beggar lady with a cropped grey head and toothless smile, who expects a few pice from me. I do not often give to beggars, but I know that she has no other way of living, and Aundipatty is not a very rewarding pitch. There is the man who tells fortunes with green parakeets. The double cage is the polished wood and has brass bars; one of the birds is let out onto a little mat where a heap of cards is stacked. It waddles around, turning over the cards, and at last picks out one and carries

it to the man, who then reads the fortune to his client and rewards the parakeet with some grains of maize.

The bus is used by village shopkeepers who return with bananas, betel leaf, coconuts, brooms and bags of biscuits to sell in their shops, and by farmers who have bought ropes or iron goods. Sometimes there is a party of schoolgirls, who have been taken to Vaigai Dam, the nearest show place, where, besides the reservoir which supplies irrigation water to places even beyond Madurai, there is a park with a toy railway, fountains, waterfalls, and a slide for the children. Some of the girls have a lotus or a red lily, stolen from the park, in their hair, but they are as beautiful as flowers themselves in their brilliant holiday dresses.

The last bus from Madurai arrives at Seva Nilayam at 9.30 at night. It has started out crowded, but the end of the journey the passengers have thinned out, and it is nearly empty. It is good to be back after the three-hour journey in the dark. The driver sounds his horn so that the people in Seva Nilayam will know we have arrived. He waits till the light of a torch shows that someone is coming to help us carry our luggage and guide us down the dark lane; then he says good night, and the bus moves on. I do not think that the speed and comfort of a van could make up for what we should lose in human relationships if we did not travel by the country buses.

1977

FOOD

I have been writing these letters from Seva Nilayam for more than two years, but I have not written about one very important subject, how and what people eat. I feel a little difficulty about this, because our Letter goes to supporters in India as well as those abroad. People in Western countries know little about Indian food, but if I write about it I shall be telling Indians what they already know. I hope our Indian friends will bear with me.

I am writing, of course, about South India, where our experience lies. Most people know that the mainstay of this part of the country is rice. While it is growing, or still in the husk, it is called "paddy" and only when milled does it become rice "arisi". To grow paddy a lot of water is required: it stands in water until the latest stage when it is dried off before harvesting. The fields around us, which were a brilliant green a month ago, are now turning golden, and some have been harvested, and only dry stubble remains.

Paddy is not the only grain grown here, there is a small maize, rather like a millet, called *cholam,* and this is, in fact, the staple diet of many of the poorer people, who cannot grow rice, or afford to buy it every day. There are *ragi*, *tennai* and *cumbu*, all tasty and nutritious grains, which can be grown with less water, but these are light crops: only paddy is a heavy producer.

South Indians are often blamed for conservatism in diet. A friend visiting here asked me, "If water is scarce, why do they not grow something else, that takes less water?" I asked him what he would suggest and he said "Wheat". But rice is a tropical plant, and wheat, which is grown in North India, belongs to the temperate zone. These plants are distributed across the world in the zones in which they originated from wild grains. People love them because they have been the food of life from time immemorial. Such plants take on a sacred character. Just as wheat and the bread made from it, have had a religious connotation in Europe, so rice is enshrined in the rites of South Indians. It is offered in temples, and at marriages; it is dedicated to the goddess of plenty and is a symbol of fertility. Every farmer who can possibly grow even a small patch of paddy wants to do so: he feels then he is a proper farmer. Not far from Seva Nilayam there is an area of very barren land. The rock is near the surface and the fields are littered with stones. Here people can only cultivate a little grain during the monsoon, and they can only grow cholam. In the hot weather the area is like a desert. Such cultivators, of course, cannot live on their own produce; they are working as labourers for others, or even at some quite different jobs. The ideal farmer should have his paddy fields and plantations of coconuts and bananas, all lush and heavy yielding crops, and all essentials for good living.

Many people in the West believe that all Indians are starving. This is largely the result of the fact that bad news is news, and good news is not. The Indian climate is violent and uncertain. Every year there will be a drought somewhere, and a flood somewhere perhaps at the same time. But the country is vast, and the millions of people who carry on from day to day with what seems to them normal and sufficient food find no place in the news. Every morning I can see parties of field workers, many of them boys and women, going out at first light. Some with brass vessels on their heads, finely polished and glinting in the early sun. Ask them to open them and you will see a mass of pinkish grey boiled maize, and a small cup of vegetables, turmeric or chillies. But they

can do a hard days work on this food. They are lean and tough, and I have never found any foreigner, used to a high protein diet, who can keep up with them.

I see this every day: in fact I can see as I write some building work for which young men and girls are carrying baskets of stones on their heads without flagging a moment.

Are there then no needs for better diet? Yes there are. We find undernourished people, especially children, in our clinic every day. This may be due to many causes, but seldom to sheer lack of food. As milk is not abundant in tropical countries it is difficult to find a good invalid diet. People who have been ill, and have no appetite for the normal food are unable to afford the milk, eggs, or protein foods which would set them up. Children at weaning often go through a dangerous period, if they go straight from the breast to the rather harsh *cholam*. If they fall sick it is often very hard to get them through convalescence, and they can develop chronic diarrhoea, eye defects and even blindness, through lack of vitamins. But there are hosts of jolly, healthy children in the villages who have never had these misfortunes. There are old people left with no one to support them, and if they cannot beg they may be actually short of food. For these reasons we give in our clinic, to selected cases, milk powder, some very good blends of maize and soya flour which come through relief organisations, and "Winfood", a flour made of sprouted grain which we buy from a Gandhian institute in the area.

There is also an idea abroad that village people are unhappy because they think they are poor, and long for more luxuries. In our view, based on years of experience, they are if anything, too contented. A day of work, and a huge plate of some boiled grain at night fills them with satisfaction. They eat in bulk, far more than I, or any of my co-workers could ever eat, but they tend to neglect the supply of vegetables, and some more varied foods, which would guard against deficiency diseases. They think it great good fortune to have rice and mutton on festival days. This is why we have a productive vegetable garden ourselves, and try to encourage the use of tomatoes, greens, and the local vegetables. But we do not underestimate the difficulties of families which have no land of their own, and in which all the members may be out working and return only at night to cook a meal.

We have one great advantage over city people. We live among growing food, we see it every day in all stages, we harvest it ourselves, and we know what we are getting. It is not processed, packaged or chemically treated, and even in poverty we have pure food.

THE PATIENT AND HIS SURROUNDINGS

When we first came to Seva Nilayam the land was an arid waste, without a tree, and without water. There were very few birds; only the hawk was always present, as everywhere in India, slowly circling far above in the blue.

The change came gradually, after we found water, and started irrigating, and put up a fence to keep out the flocks of goats which would have devoured everything. It was discouraging work at first, as many plants seemed reluctant to grow. Now, with cultivation, manure, enrichment by fallen leaves, and some patches of shade, plants grow so lavishly that they get out of hand and overgrown if not trimmed.

The garden is brilliant with flowers every month of the year. There are masses of bougainvillea, cannas, poinsettias, hibiscus and amaryllis, against the background of the rich velvety green of banana leaves, and the dark foliage of mangoes. There is always fruit to pick, and the small striped squirrel knows this too, as he runs chattering up and down the trees. Flights of green parakeets flash in the sunlight. A flock of mynahs roosts every night in an orange tree, and greets the first light with a loud hubbub. The peacock steps slowly along the garden path. In the rainy season the paddy bird and the white egret stand motionless in the paddy fields, watching for frogs. Sometimes a kingfisher, passing from one fishing pool to another, alights on a branch and gives forth his trilling whistle. If you provide food and a resting place for any wild creature, surely it will come.

Occasionally we find a chameleon, and he can be great fun if we treat him gently. He is a slow-moving creature, with feet that look like hands encased in mittens, and strange eyes that can swivel in opposite directions at the same time. Put on a white cloth, he becomes almost white, with pale, yellow-green spots, but on a dark tree trunk he becomes almost black. The rule here is to admire without hurting, and to let wild things go their own ways.

There is an amazing richness of insect life; splendid butterflies, great moths and grasshoppers, and iridescent beetles. There is the praying mantis which folds its front legs as if in an attitude of prayer, while waiting for a smaller creature to come within its grasp; there is the leaf-cutting bee, which cuts neat circles out of rose or vine leaves, to make a tunnel for its larva, and another insect which industriously builds tubes of hardened mud for the same purpose.

Besides the wild life, there are the domestic inhabitants; cows, calves, and buffaloes; often a litter of kittens or puppies, and the broods of chicks which follow the mother hen out to scratch among the leaves.

There was no theory behind this development of wild life. We were farming the land, and at the same time running a village clinic. But we found how one reacts on the other. Our in-patients do not lie on beds in a row; they spread their mats for rest, and when they are fit to move about they feed the calves and chickens, pick vegetables, or bring sticks for the fire. They feel wanted, and useful, and the measure of this is their readiness to do these jobs.

Last week I had to take a boy to hospital. He has a congenital skin defect which we cannot do much to cure. It is a famous hospital with a very high reputation. The boy had to stay there a week, and when I left him he was crying bitterly. He was in a ward which was high and narrow, with nothing but masonry to be seen out of the windows. There was not a scrap of colour the greyish-white of walls and sheets, and the black of iron beds. There was not even a coloured bedspread. As the boy was just above the age for the children's ward, he found himself with only five or six men for fellow patients. The doctor – a very fine skin specialist – investigated his case with care and sympathy; the nurse was kind and cheerful, and the ward sweeper tried hard to console him. But he was terrified.

In India, there is far more difference between hospital life and normal life than there is in many other countries. In India, people spend a large part of their life out of doors; town streets are busy, with tailoring, ironing, provision, flower and fruit selling all in the open; people talk to one another on every occasion. The transition to hospital life is like that from the living world to a tomb. For a child it is especially frightening. The corridors are so long, the buildings so

labyrinthine, and there are strange objects of which he does not know the use. The child of rich parents need not suffer so. He can be in a private room, with his relatives round him.

Hospitals are necessary, but I am wondering why there cannot be some half-way house between their grim and sterile world, and the patient's home, which may be only a mud hut, in which medical care is impossible. Do not mistake me; I am not saying that we should do operations under trees or let serious cases wander round the farm yard. But there could be more places where convalescent and less seriously ill people – and especially children – could be treated as human beings, living as a community, sitting and working in groups, and surrounded by all the sights and sounds of nature which they are at home in their villages.

We believe we have found something valuable, and we wish others could share it.

THE WORST MISFORTUNE

There has been, in most periods, and in many countries of the world, a belief that to be stricken by leprosy is the worst misfortune that can come to a human being. It is true enough that in its most severe forms and its later stages it so alters the appearance of the sufferer that he becomes repulsive-looking, the face heavily lined, the bridge of the nose sunken, the eyebrows gone, and the hands and feet corroded with ulcers. By this time the patient has probably given himself up as a member of society and has no pride left to prevent his becoming a beggar. But it takes years to reach this stage.

There are many people walking about, and leading fairly normal lives, whose leprosy could only be detected by an experienced eye. It may be a patch which, on a brown skin, is not more defined than milk stirred into coffee. It the disease runs its course it will probably end in disfigurement and mutilation, but if treated in the early stages it is curable, and even if not treated it sometimes cures itself. This happens at times with children.

It is a mysterious disease. In spite of much research, there are baffling gaps in our knowledge. It is far more common in men than women; no-one knows why. It is far more common in a broad belt along the East coast of India than the West; again no-one knows why. It has many forms. The two main divisions are 'lepromatous' and 'non-lepromatous', the former being much the worse. But one type can change into another, for no known reason, and there are doubtful cases in between. Lepromatous cases sometimes cannot tolerate the drug which is used today to cure leprosy (a sulphone known as DDS) and these patients suffer from severe reactions, nerve pains, fever, or raised or nodular patches on the skin. Fortunately such cases are a small minority; others can be cured if they take DDS for a sufficient length of time.

Here is the snag. It may be necessary to take DDS regularly for years, and the benefit is felt only slowly, so that patients get tired of coming for their tablets. One of the main tasks of a worker in a leprosy clinic is to persuade the patients to come regularly and not give up hope.

For this reason, we, like other institutions treating leprosy., have established several roadside clinics. In our case these number five. Many patients live in out-of-the-way places, and because they have to take treatment for such a long time, we try to arrange that they do not have

more than a few miles to come for it. We have not put up buildings at these places. We use whatever offers – a spreading tree, an old building, a sheltering wall, at which patients can gather.

We have also our main clinic just outside the small town of Aundipatty and there we have permanent buildings, and can take in-patients. We have a physiotherapist, a young man whom we sent for training. He is able to give the necessary exercises, the oil massage, the wax bath(into which patients put their hands to get the beneficial effect of the heated paraffin wax), the plaster casts to rest and cure foot ulcers, and the splints for bent and contracted fingers. In many cases, after due preparation, reconstructive surgery is possible, to bring hands and feet back to normal, and even the face to a more normal appearance. Such cases we send to the large and well-established leprosy hospitals.

At Aundipatty, every Monday, we deal with more than two hundred patients. Our Doctor, who is an experienced leprosy specialist, examines all new cases, and checks the dosage for old cases as required. For the in-patients there is farming, gardening, and mat-weaving, in which they take part according to their ability. It is important that they should feel useful and wanted, and not consider themselves outcasts from society. It is important, too, that they should have pleasant, even beautiful, surroundings, and I have often noticed what good and willing workers they are, and what care they take of their gardens. It is as if the knowledge of their disease has purged them of pride and discontent, and they are happy if they can be restored to normal life.

You may notice that I have not used the word ‘leper’. We do not use it now. For many centuries leprosy has been considered a disease apart from all others, as if the sufferers were a different kind of people, and especially it has been thought of as a punishment for sin. Now that leprosy is curable, we have to overcome this old pessimistic attitude, and convince the patient that he is a normal human being. Precautions must, of course be taken against contagion, but leprosy is, in fact, not nearly as contagious as other many other diseases. It appears to transmitted mainly by continued close contact, as with members of a family sleeping together, and using the same bedding and utensils.

One lesson to be drawn from dealing with leprosy is the value of pain. Leprosy is in most cases painless, because the disease attacks the nerves, and a leprosy patients can walk miles with a deep hole in the sole of his foot, whereas a healthy person with the same kind of ulcer would not be able to take one step. Pain is nature’s safeguard, which forces us to look after our bodies,. Neglected ulcers pick up all kinds of secondary infections, and ultimately become incurable. So one of our tasks is to educate the sufferers in the care of their hands and feet.

I am sometimes asked about the numbers of leprosy patients, and whether disease is increasing or decreasing. Such questions are very hard to answer. Leprosy treatment today does to consist only in giving out medicine, but in a complex system of house-to-house survey, and following up not only actual cases but their contacts in the family. Very full records are kept. So if anyone goes into villages which have never been visited by leprosy workers, many new, untreated cases will be found. Therefore the number recorded is constantly increasing, and the increase is faster than the rate of cures. Still, the cures are there, and the best hope of eradicating the disease altogether lies in finding cases in the early stage and persuading them to take regular treatment. It is work which requires patience and undiminished hope.

PERIYAR

Seva Nilayam has recently lost a very good friend, and I would like to devote this letter to his memory, and to a description of the place where he lived and worked. It is one of the most beautiful places in South India.

E. T. Selvamonie was superintendent of Periyar Dam, about fifty miles from Seva Nilayam. He had held that position for fourteen years; he loved his work, and was loved by all who worked under him. The country surrounding Periyar Lake is a wild sanctuary, and Selvamonie had an intimate knowledge of its history, and of the habits of the wild animals there.

One hundred years ago this region was unknown and unvisited, inhabited only by hill tribes. It lies at the edge of the great Western Ghats, the mountain range dividing the eastern plain from Kerala. Many small rivers run westward through Kerala to the sea, but the drier eastern plain, which constituted Madras State, often suffers from water shortage. Towards the end of last century, an Englishman, Colonel Pennyquick, put forward the idea of turning one of these rivers, the Periyar, so that it would flow eastward, where its water most needed.

This was a very difficult undertaking. There was an ascent of two thousand feet to reach the Periyar basin, and the site chosen for the dam was in an utterly wild place, without roads. All materials had to be brought in. The story goes that there were many failures, and the project was about to be given up. Mrs. Pennyquick, who had inherited estates in Scotland, asked that it should be tried once more, and offered to sell her land if necessary to pay for it. That time is succeeded.

The Periyar valley was flooded, creating a star-shaped lake, with many islands, creeks and inlets, ten square miles in extent. The water was carried in four great pipes down to a power station, two thousand feet below. It is from this power station that we, and the whole of Cumbum Valley, receive light and power, enabling what was once semi-desert to be cultivated. After passing through the turbines, water for irrigation is stored in the Vaigai Reservoir, and goes more than a hundred miles, to some of the driest villages of the eastern plain.

One unexpected result followed the formation of Periyar Lake. Wild animals from all the surrounding forest came to it to drink. There were herds of wild elephants, sambhar, and some rare species of deer, occasionally a tiger, or a great black bison, otters and wild boar. Some tea planters in the hills discovered this, and formed a wild life association. They built a small stone house near the lake, which they could use to take time off, boating, fishing, and watching the birds and animals. The Government of India has now declared 260 square miles of forest a sanctuary, where no hunting is allowed. Motor launches carrying tourists from all over the world make a three-hour tour of the lake, but they do not land anywhere, and the animals, finding by experience that there is no danger, will remain placidly feeding while the boats come very near to them. Only the elephants, if there are young ones in the herd, will put them in the middle, so that they are screened from inquisitive eyes. They go on unconcernedly pulling up tufts of grass or blowing dust over their bodies.

I have been on the deck of such a launch with visitors from Germany, Holland, Japan, and America, with cine cameras whirring, and binoculars sweeping the hills. But tourists come and go, while the strange, secret life of the place continues. There are depths of trackless forest, where only the tribal people can find their way. The silence is broken by strange cries of invisible

beasts and birds; there are long, bubbling calls, trills and cooings, shouts, and the sound of crashing among branches. It is a world apart, where a mere human is a stranger.

I was happy to sit with Selvamonie on the porch of his house, where he lived with his wife and two small children. He was constantly on call from the workers in the area, always ready, friendly and cheerful. On one of my last visits there we had to go in the workers' launch, carrying materials out to the dam.

The dam has now been in existence eighty years. In order to find out if it was still sound throughout, holes were drilled right through from the top to the base of the dam. Cores were taken; I saw them laid out for inspection, and they appeared to be perfectly sound. Then cement was "grouted" or forced into the holes, so as to further strengthen the dam. Even today there are no roads to this place, and the tourists do not come this far. I saw six men toiling to land a machine from a boat and hoist it to the top of the dam. Then I sat under a wild mango tree in the sunlit afternoon, and watched the white clouds sailing overhead, reflected in the clear water. I thought: "This is a beautiful work. It is peaceful, and unpretentious. Nature is not disturbed. There is no ugliness or destruction. No wild creature has any fear, but indeed they have received benefits as well as man. Yet the value of this work can be felt two hundred miles away, on the dusty and parched eastern plain. If only all our dealings with nature could be like this!"

A few months after this visit I received the news that Selvamonie had died suddenly from a heart attack. We have suffered a great loss. Whenever visitors came to Seva Nilayam, if they wished for a few days' rest and recreation, Selvamonie would welcome them, give them help and hospitality, show them all they wished to see, and give them the privilege of learning the secrets of this entrancing kingdom. No trouble was too much for him, and he made his visitors feel that his pleasure was as great as theirs. We shall not forget him.

1978

OTHER LIVES

E.F. Schumacher, the author of "Small is Beautiful" once wrote, "All my life has been a discovery of the generosity of nature. I started out thinking that we had to do everything ourselves, and of course, we couldn't. But then I discovered that everything will be done for us, provided only that we realise our "nothingness", and thereupon start to search for a way of fitting in with the great processes of nature."

This thought comes to me strongly at times, when I have spent a morning in a busy clinic, where everything is centred on human beings, their woes and worries, pains and sicknesses, birth and death. But if I go out, into our through the fields of ripening grain, or up the road for half a mile to where we are planting a new mango grove, a whole new world unfolds itself, a world where strange and beautiful creatures go about their own business, oblivious of man.

On the open, sunbaked and windswept road a pair of beetles are busily rolling their ball of dung. Gathered from the dropping of passing bullocks, it is a perfect sphere, lovingly made, and stroked into shape. It is the nursery for their young ones. Braving the hazards of cart wheels and bullocks' feet, they roll it to a safe spot among grass and bushes. There, as I stand and watch, one beetle goes beneath the ball, and starts to dig the soil away. The other guides it, as it sinks into the ground, and in a few minutes it has entirely disappeared.

Demolishing an old piece of mud wall, we uncover a tube made of leaves. This is another nursery, and it is made by a leaf-cutting bee which cuts semicircular pieces of leaf as exact as if marked out by a compass. It folds them into funnel shape and fits them inside each other to form the tube. Occasionally it takes, not green leaves, but the flower of the bougainvillea, and the tube is a brilliant rose colour.

Another insect laboriously makes its tubes of mud, in the same way as the local people build cottages. In each house it lays an egg, and in each it places a caterpillar, which will be food for the young insect when it hatches. It seals the doors and goes away; it never sees its offspring for which it has provided so carefully.

There is a kind of ant which makes a funnel-shaped depression in sandy ground. Scores of ants ascend the funnel, each carrying a grain of sand to build up the sides. By what kind of team work can they make it a perfect round? Watching them, I see a larger ant, obviously the foreman, running about fussily, and telling them where to put their grains. But how does the foreman know? The funnel may be five inches across, and one ant is a tiny speck, and has no way of looking down on it. Yet the result is perfect.

After the rain, when the sunlight warms the soaked earth and shimmers on the wet leaves, butterflies and moths appear in great variety. Some are jet black, and some are black and crimson; some are smaller than your finger nail, and some would cover the palm of your hand. Some of the great moths have strange patterns of eyes and bands and bands and crenellations; some when folded, exactly resemble the bark of a tree, but open to reveal the deep orange of their under wings and bodies. They have spent weeks in the chrysalis to achieve this beauty, but in a day or

two they mate and die. Clearly, our ideas, based on our human time scale, have no relevance in this strange world of insects.

Strangest of all strange creatures is the mantis. There are many kinds. Some have a grasshopper-like body and slender neck, and are entirely pea-green, even to their little bulging, attentive eyes. Another kind resembles a wildly attenuated version of a child's toy horse. Its legs are spidery, and its body a thin stick, which hardly appears to have room for any internal organs. Its little horse-like head is carried on a thin neck. But on each of its joints there is something exactly like a withered, pale brown leaf. The result of this curious mimicry is that you can stare straight at the mantis when it is on a bush, and not see it.

Sometimes we find a chameleon, and then we see mimicry of another sort. I believe that chameleons are always about, but they live in the trees, and change their colour to blend with dark evergreens and black bark or young, pale green leaves and white blossoms. If, by chance, we find one, the children have fun, putting it on dark and light cloths in turn, and watching the colours come and fade, but, as always at Seva Nilayam, we insist that there is no cruelty, and creature is wantonly killed. Nature reveals her treasures to those who are willing to watch and listen, not to those who capture and kill.

There is a mongoose family of four living in the paddy field, and the women working there exclaim delightedly whenever they catch sight of the long, low bodies, pointed heads land bushy tails. For India loves the mongoose, the strong, brave animal, protector against snakes, and to kill one would be accounted a crime.

Overhead are flights of green parakeets, and these are also loved, in spite of mischief they do in nibbling fruits and nuts and flower buds. Two very tall trees are the roosting place of scores of mynahs, and very evening, as dusk falls, there is a loud scolding and chattering, as they seem to be jostling for places. But the tiniest of birds, the sun-birds and flower-peckers, that feed on honey, can only be heard if you listen in silence. Then there is a tick-tick-tick, like the sound of someone cutting twigs, or a soft sweet cheep, moving about, fitting here and there, in the deep foliage.

Our stately, half wild, half tame peacock paces along the garden path, his beauty a never-ending wonder. What strikes me about the peacock, even more than his glorious colour, is the supreme elegance of the design. Every part fits perfectly with every other; the delicate crest, the tight curled azure feathers on the head, the strong grey and white of the back, the deep bronze filaments that set off the hundred eyes of the fan. You could sit down with brush and paints and invent as gorgeous a bird as you please, but it would look awkward and bungling beside the peacock. Although he must have had his changes in the course of evolution, he now has the look of a perfect achievement, never to be altered or improved upon. No wonder he is sacred to Krishna.

I have written about creatures, which live their own lives quite independently of man, lives which are in many ways incomprehensible to us. What use is it to observe them and ponder on them? We learn that the world is rich and strange beyond our imagining, but we also have our place in it, not outsider or above it. We learn humility.

PAINTING

During the January festival of Pongal I was going through one of the poorest settlements in Madurai – a cluster of thatched huts, without room for even the smallest of gardens, not for one banana tree or a trellis for creepers. But I saw that many of the huts were newly whitewashed, and some had designs painted on them. These clay dwellings themselves will not last many years, and the decorations will perish even sooner, but the inhabitants were following a very old tradition, that of drawing symbolic designs on the place, however poor, which was the centre of their life and hopes. In some cases the threshold was simply painted with the sacred red and white stripes but others had geometrical figures which were, in fact, simplified forms of the great historic *mandalas* of religious or magical art.

There is an even more perishable type of ornament, and that is the *kholam* with which housewives decorate the patch of ground in front of the door in the early morning, after it has been swept and sprinkled. These designs of interlacing lines are done freehand, by pouring lines of white powder. During the day they are more or less obliterated by dust and the passage of many feet, but tomorrow will have its fresh *kholam*, showing that the household is cared for, and ready for each new day.

At Ajanta, near Bombay, are the famous rock-cut caves, which were once Buddhist monasteries. These caves were made over a long period; the oldest is probably about twenty-two centuries old, and the latest about thirteen centuries. The walls of many of the caves are covered with paintings, some of Buddha and heavenly attendants, some of secular scenes, courts and dances, pleasure gardens and palaces. The whole effect is of abounding life, and delight in beauty. The paintings, damaged and peeling though they are, show such mastery of technique, line and form, that it is impossible not to believe that pictorial and decorative art flourished widely in India during that time. In fact, literature tells of painted houses and ornamented halls, but almost everything on plaster, wood or cloth has disappeared. Only the dry shelter of the caves has preserved the paintings of Ajanta.

But a few other works of art have been preserved. These are Buddhist and Jain scriptures, many of them on books of palm leaves. These were treasured and cared for in temples and among devout communities. The colours are still fresh and the meticulously written script is a decoration in itself. The text is enriched with vivid paintings of scenes from the life of the Buddha or some saint.

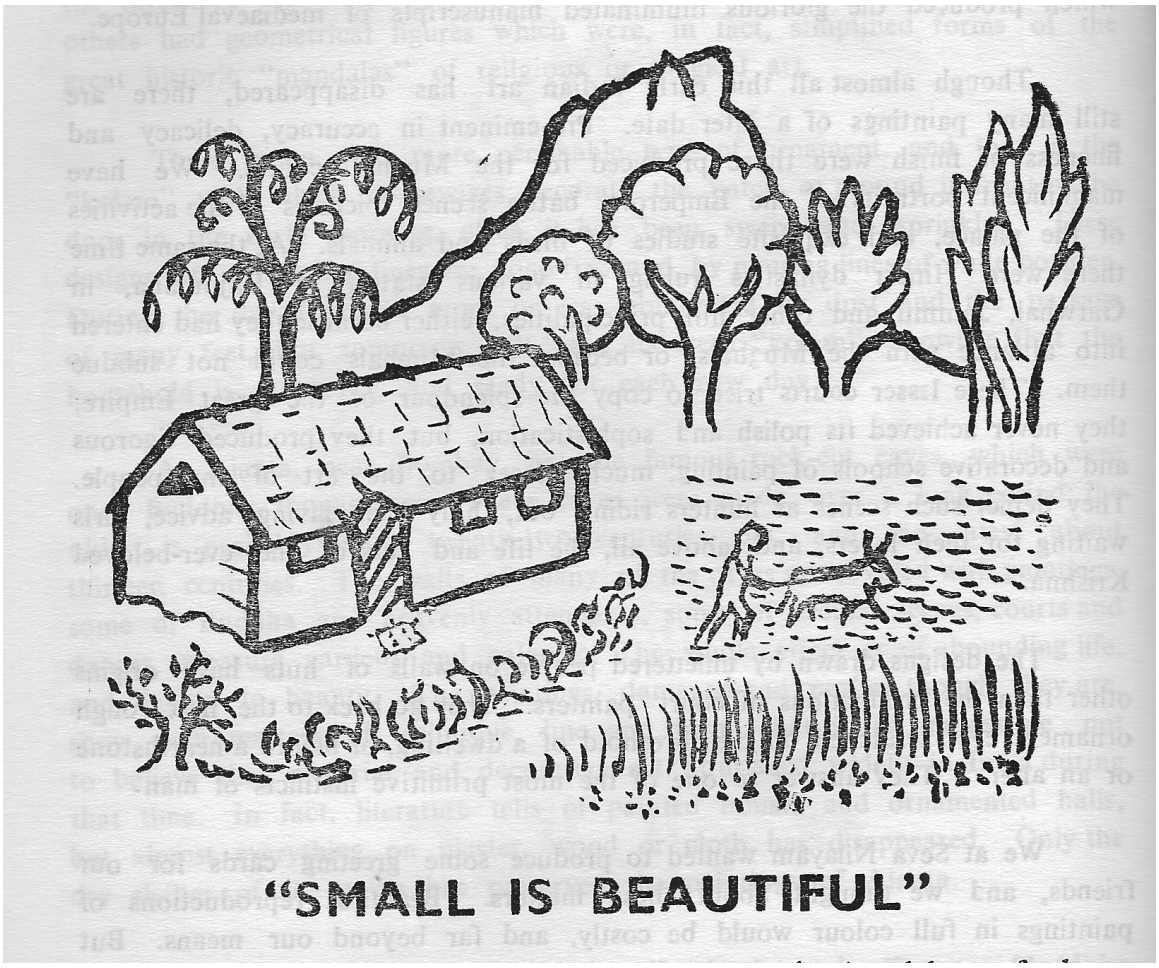
The purpose of ancient Indian art was not representation but adornment. It is a deep human instinct to decorate anything held precious. The work itself is an offering; it must be done with the artist's own hands. Nothing mechanically reproduced fulfils the same purpose. Hence the variety and the living quality of all such work. It was the same instinct for decoration which produced the glorious illuminated manuscripts of mediaeval Europe.

Though almost all this early Indian art has disappeared, there are still many paintings of a latter date. Pre-eminent in accuracy, delicacy and fineness of finish were those produced for the Mughal courts. We have magnificent portraits of the Emperors, battle scenes, pictures of the activities of the palace, and exquisite studies of birds and animals. At the same time there were Hindu dynasties ruling in various states, in Rajputana, in Garwhal, Jammu and other hill principalities, either because they had entered into alliance with the Mughals, or because the

Mughals could not subdue them. These lesser courts tried to copy the splendour of the great Empire; they never achieved its polish and sophistication, but they produced vigorous and decorative schools of painting, much closer to the art of the people. They depict such scenes as hunters riding out, holy men giving advice, girls waiting for their lovers, and, above all, the life and acts of the ever-beloved Krishna.

The designs drawn by unlettered people on walls of huts have origins other than the productions of court painters. They go back to the first rough ornament ever scratched on the threshold of a dwelling, or before a hearthstone or an altar. They answer to one of the most primitive instincts of man.

e at Seva Nilayam wanted to produce some greeting cards for our friends, and we thought about these matters. Beautiful reproductions of paintings in full colour would be costly, and far beyond our means. But we could get some very pleasing hand-made paper, and for the rest we had to rely on simple line drawings. We did not want to impose our own fancies, but gave them simply as they came from the hand of the village craftsman. So we chose an old brass lamp a quaint horse made by a village potter, details from the border of a sari, a bazaar picture sold to pilgrims, or a door panel. I think our friends have appreciated the fact that we are giving them, in a very small way, something of the true India.



"SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL"

I was being shown round a large training school and home for boys. The buildings had been very elegantly and efficiently designed by a foreign architect with original ideas. The Director of the school was with me. We came to a small thatched house, looking very odd among the impressive stonework. The Director said: "This is where we lived when we first came here. We didn't want to pull it down. Sometimes I think that those first days were the happiest."

I understood him so well. I am sure this story could be repeated many times, in many of the schools, homes and hospitals which have grown up in India during the past half century.

In the world today it is often easier to be big than small. Very often, the money is there; materials, technique and workers can be provided. If you can be big, why be small? You can reach more people, you can do more good.

Can you? In fact, you cannot. After a certain point in growth you begin to lose something. Your are seduced by plans and figures, gadgets and luxuries, all in the name of saving the world from poverty and pain. You can lose your discrimination, your sensitivity, your compassion. You begin to feel you can do anything.

There may be an old church – in fact, there are many such, with uneven floors, worn by the feet of generations, bringing their joys and sorrows, hopes and fears Money is given for rebuilding, and the floors are torn up and the walls torn down, and a raw new church of modern design is constructed. Now your attention is distracted by architectural quirks, and it is not so easy to feel compassion and humility. It is as if a spirit had flown away, or a precious aroma had been dissipated and lost. It is a mistake to think that anything which cannot be weighed and measured is unreal.

It is not possible to define the point at which we begin to lose direction. For every step on the road there is a good excuse. This will save time, that will make life more comfortable, something else will enable us to start some new activity. Improvements are not wrong and there is no virtue as such in anything that is tumbledown or worn out. So how can we decide our course? Only by discrimination, and a steady vision of our first inspiration, using this as a touchstone in any decision.

The beauty of nature depends on limitation. Each tree has its proper size for full growth, and within those limits it can achieve complete grace and beauty. A healthy tree can bear a certain amount of fruit, and at the same time replace its leaves and growing twigs. If, for any reason, it bears too much fruit, it will be weakened, and probably die. The strength and swiftness of an animal depend on the due proportion of its limbs. We live in a world of limitations, but man alone thinks he can have expansion without limit, and continual gain without loss. This fallacy is at the bases of many ills of the modern world, as E. F. Schumacher has pointed out in *Small is Beautiful*. But here I am not concerned with economics only with the running of some social service.

Happiness is easily lost. By happiness I do not mean freedom from worry or want. I am sure that in the early days of that training school the Director suffered from lack of means, insecurity, and many nagging and intractable problems. But joy in work comes from within. I

might have said to him: “What does your happiness matter?”, but I did not, because this question goes very deep.

The kind of happiness I mean is an indication of the rightness of the work. It can communicate itself to others but only if the scale of work is small enough to permit a personal relationship. If we get stuck behind a barrier of facts and figures, and if we begin to work through intermediaries, because we have not time to work directly, the spirit of joy will fly away. And others will feel it, although they may not know what is wrong.

Of course, we are not always radiating smiles. We can get irritated with the patients. Sometimes they start a quarrel among themselves, pushing each other, and arguing in shrill voices. Some are garrulous, and it is hard to sympathise with people who will not stop talking about trifling or imaginary ailments. Some exaggerate their symptoms, and some, for one reason or another, do not tell the truth. Sometimes we feel just too tired to deal with all this. It seems all very far from any idealistic picture of ourselves healing and consoling the afflicted. But then, perhaps, we ask a patients who has come an unusually long distance: “Why did you come here?” and we get the answer: “They say you take very good care of people.” So we may feel a bit ashamed of short temper, but also reassured that the deep relationship is there.

In India today there is one person whose fame is world-wide, and whose success may seem to disprove my thesis that in this matter, as in many others, “small is beautiful”. She has started homes for the aged and dying for the sick and destitute, for orphans, mothers and babies. Hundreds, even thousands, come forward to do her work. But if you visit any of her places, you will find that each one, in itself, is “small and beautiful”. Because she is a genius at imbuing others with her own spirit each part of her work has preserved the simplicity and directness of the original vision. There are very few who could hope to rival this achievement of uniting greatness and smallness.

For all of us there is a limit to our powers and opportunities. To recognise this is not to spoil our work, but to give it the best chance of lasting success.

HOSPITALS

From time to time a brochure is published or an article appears in the press describing the opening of a new hospital in India and its special field of work. There may be a picture of a shining white building, white robed doctors and nurses, and perhaps a patient lying on a cot receiving their ministrations. The reader will perhaps think in straight arithmetical terms – more hospitals, more medical treatment available, more patients served and cared for.

It is not quite as simple as that. Pay a visit to a big, free, Government hospital, like the one in Madurai. Here, every morning, a vast tide of human misery flows in through the open doors. By afternoon the tide has flowed out again, leaving its residue of newly admitted patients, some on cots, and some on mats. The hospital is always full. After out patient reception hours it seems a calm and cool place; the floors are washed and the outer doors are shut, only here and there, at some special room or clinic, groups of patients are waiting.

They are waiting for review of their cases, for results of tests, or for some special treatment, but whatever the reason, nothing is obtained without long waiting, simply because of

the vast numbers dealt with every day. When I think of it, I realise what suffering may be entailed for a sick person; first, in a two or three hours bus journey, then a long wait, then an instruction to come next day, which may necessitate sleeping on the ground or in some nook between buildings, then, again, waiting.

Out here at Seva Nilayam, forty-five miles from Madurai, we see the workings of the system from the other end. In our general clinic we treat 150 – 250 patients daily. Among them we find many who need hospital treatment. When we first came here sixteen years ago, very few of the village people ever went to hospital. Business men and rich farmers knew Madurai, but buses were few, and travelling, except on bullock carts, was not a habit of the poor. Over these years there has been a great development in public transport, with a corresponding development in the habit of travelling.

Along with the old stay-at-home attitude went fear and suspicion of hospitals. We had many a hard struggle to persuade patients that they could only be cured by hospital treatment, and that we could not cure them no matter how much we wished to. There were no buses at all serving the villages around Seva Nilayam, but we had a small bullock cart on which we were willing to take patients six miles or so to a main road where they could get a Madurai bus. In very serious cases, if the patient would but consent, we ourselves would go all the way with him, starting the previous day and sleeping at the house of a hospitable friend, so as to get to the hospital in time for admission in the morning.

In spite of our best offers of help the patient might refuse to go. He had "heard of someone who died in that hospital" and "he would rather die at home". Many, especially old and poor women, said they had never travelled so far, and did not want to, now. Mothers of young families, who could find no one to look after the children in their absence, were really unable to go.

Slowly, through the increased custom of travelling, and also because there were many successful cases among those we persuaded to go to hospital, the attitude has changed. To begin with, we always give a letter to one of the hospital doctors, if possible, a particular doctor addressed by name. In India the written work is all important. With a letter the patient feels less lost in the great maze of the hospital, more sure that he will get attention, and what he would call "good medicine". Now, surprisingly, many are willing to listen to our explanation that their case is outside the scope of a simple medical centre like Seva Nilayam (perhaps needing surgery, which we cannot do) and willing to take a letter; some even come for the purpose of asking for a letter.

Fifty or so years ago there would have been no chance of a baby born with some defect having it corrected surgically. More recently it would have been possible, by going to some famous hospital like Vellore, but that, for a field labourer, would be a prohibitive expense. Today there is a plastic surgery department in Madurai Government Hospital which can deal with such cases as burn scarring, talipes (turned in feet) hare lip and cleft palate. This last interests us very much, because hare lip is more than usually common in this area, probably because of some inherited factor. But even today many parents do not know that such defects can be remedied by plastic surgery. They believed that the baby must grow up with this disfigurement, and only brought it to us for some ailment. We have been able to persuade them to take their child to hospital and, after preparatory treatment for weight and general health, to have the operation. Needless to say, the mothers are overjoyed.

But since we have been working here we have learnt how much good investigation and careful diagnosis on the part of the hospital is wasted because it is not followed up. The patient may need a course of daily injections. If he lives in Madurai and can attend daily he can get them at the hospital free of charge. But out in the country it is another matter. If the patient has tuberculosis he may be registered at a Government treatment centre, and so get free injections. But for a variety of serious ailments there is no provision outside the hospital, and the hospital is quite unable to keep patients for many months, or even perhaps a year. For example, osteomyelitis, a deep bone infection, needs this kind of treatment. Many have come to us with old hospital reports and prescriptions which have never been acted upon. We felt that these were important cases, which we could help. Now we have an agreement with the doctors concerned that if they send cases to us we will follow the treatment here, referring the patient back to hospital for review at the prescribed intervals. It has meant considerable expense for us, but for the patient it has saved a limb and perhaps his life.

In some cases the fault lies with the patient – it may be ignorance, lack of faith, or sheer poverty. Some patients go once to hospital, and are asked to return on a later day. They think that the doctor is unwilling to treat them, or that what they have been given so far is the whole treatment, and it is obviously no good. Or even they may have gone a few times but the results have not been spectacular. They come to us hoping for something new, potent, even magical, and we have to explain that we have no different medicine, but that perseverance is necessary. Others have found it too hard to raise the money for regular visits to hospital, and have dropped the treatment. Among very ignorant country people there is often a belief, based on the idea of status, that "important" people have a right to the best of everything, but unimportant people should not be so demanding. They do not understand the impersonal professionalism of modern doctors. Therefore they say, "The doctor did not want to treat me", but when we see their report we discover that full and precise investigation has been made.

After we have struggled with all these varieties of cases there remain the obstinate ones whom it is impossible to help. We know that they need to go to hospital, and also that they will not go. Perhaps it is some work-worn and unkempt old village woman who needs investigation for suspected cancer. She may not have long to live anyway. She begs us: "Just give me one week's medicine", and we know that if we do she will certainly not go to hospital. She will come back and say it has done her good, and she wants another week.

So far, I have mentioned only the Government Hospital, Madurai. The reader may ask: "Is there no network of health services covering the countryside?" Yes, there are Government hospitals in a number of country towns. We often refer cases to these, for example for surgery which we cannot do, and which does not seem serious enough to need to be sent to Madurai; accident cases, after we have given first aid, or difficult maternity cases. But Madurai is the only fully equipped hospital for the investigation of serious cases.

There are a number of private hospitals, convent or mission, and private nursing homes. These cater very well for the middle class and the rich, but our aim is to treat the poor, and those who, for any reason seem to be left out of the health services.

There are many local Government Health Centres, but their resources are small, and they cannot deal with serious cases such as we refer to Madurai Government Hospital.

In all this we can see that it is not a matte of simple arithmetic. There is a complex web of social circumstances, financial and geographical difficulties, deeply rooted traditions, and the fears of the poor and lonely. We believe that the setting up of hospitals is only one stage; to see that the people get the treatment they need is another.

GARDENING

Half a mile from Seva Nilayam is a village where flowers are grown for market. There are rows of oleander bushes and trim fields of marigolds, jasmine, and an aromatic grey leaf which is used for mixing with the flowers in garlands. All these are sold in Aundipatty market. People get on the bus with sacks full of jasmine buds which will be twined into strings by the market vendors, or with large flat baskets in which the already made garlands lie coiled. There are sold in lengths, cut off as required. Girls going to school love to have their morning-fresh knot of jasmine; women and girls going on bus journeys fix them in their hair; shoppers take them home for their family shrines, and many of the buses have a sacred picture on which a fresh garland is hung daily. Thicker garlands, usually containing roses, and bound with silver or gold thread, are made for weddings. Flowers have their place in every devotion, every festival, and in the welcome given to guests.

In spite of this great love of flowers there are almost no flower gardens in the villages. Flower growing, to the villager, is a commercial undertaking, a means of making a living.

There are several reasons for this. One is that in this part of South India the villages are built in a very cramped fashion. The surrounding mountains are inhabited by wild animals, which, until recent times, were a considerable danger. With the growth of population, the animals have retreated farther in the hills, but they are still there. For centuries it has been the custom to build houses around yards, with a solid door which can be shut at night, when cattle, goats, and all the family are safe inside. Very often several houses open into one yard, so there is no place for a flower garden. Today there are many more single houses, and houses by roadsides but the old pattern of close building persists.

Another reason is the sheet hardness of life for many people. If you get home at dusk, after working in the fields all day, and there is cooking to be done and the family to be fed, you have not much time for ornamental plants. Water may be scarce, and have to be carried some distance for essential needs. If you want flowers for holidays and festivals, it is easy and cheap to buy them.

But probably the most important reason for the absence of flowers is the prevalence of goats. As long as the goats are there, very few roadside trees or flowering shrubs will survive their early stages, but thorns and cacti will be safe and flourish.

It is said that dependence on goat keeping is the mark of a poor community. Over the past ten years there has been a considerable increase in the wealth of the town dwellers, the middle classes, and the larger farmers. Constantly more shops are being built, more goods are on sale, people are better dressed, and they travel more. New holiday homes are built, and tourist buses are plentiful. But this does not reach the landless poor in the villages. They have no income but what they can earn with their hands, and often there is no work.

The advantage of goat keeping is that no privately owned land is needed for it. A man can buy a kid very cheaply. His children will lead it out on a string along the roadsides and the grassy bunds between fields. When it is older it can be put in the village flock and taken out to graze all day on waste and scrub land. If it is a female it will soon have kids, and these can be sold, or used for meat for the family, or kept to build up the stock. It is a little property which costs practically nothing to acquire. But goats are voracious, and an interest in goats and in gardens can scarcely co-exist.

But India has an abundance of flowering trees some of them among the most beautiful in the world. In South India there is no winter and no frost, and trees are in leaf and flower every day of the year. At Seva Nilayam plants are protected by a ring fence, so it has become an oasis of colour and beauty. There is the glorious Gul Mohur, or flame tree, entirely covered with scarlet blossoms in May; the Indian Laburnum, with drooping gold chains; the Frangipani, or temple tree, which strews the ground with waxy-white, gold centred blossoms, and the Bougainvillea which will climb over roofs, or up tall trees, covering them with rose, red, or purple flowers. In every odd corner we have planted Hibiscus bushes which put forth flowers constantly, in shades of yellow, orange and red, and, for contrast, the brilliant blue Morning Glory ramps over the roof.

None of these bring any financial return, and we do not give up food-producing land for them, but we use the spaces between buildings, and provide shade in the places where patients have to sit. In addition there are fruit trees, oranges, mangoes, papayas, guavas, coconuts and bananas, which keep up the supply of fruit for ourselves and our patients. They also provide nesting places for a large variety of wild birds.

Our work is often far from beautiful, or, if we may say it has its beauty, it is not in any visible sense. Daily we have to deal with a long line of people complaining of their ills; we have to dress neglected wounds and ulcers; we have to try to solve insoluble problems. Many of the patients, who have had a lifetime of poverty and ignorance, seem insensitive to their surroundings. But we think if we cultivate our garden, its peace and beauty cannot fail to have their effect, and it is a constant delight to us.

THE CYCLONE

It has happened many times, sometimes even twice in one year, that some part of India has been devastated by a cyclone. Standing crops are destroyed, houses swept away, and torrential rain causes floods, drowning many people and their farm animals. Such news is seen on television, and makes the headlines in many countries of the world. There is a certain monotony about bad news; each time, floods, destitute families, hastily erected shelters, soup kitchens, and distribution of food and clothing.

At the end of November the country around Seva Nilayam and the nearby Palani Hills were caught in a cyclone. The damage did not merit a place in television news, and received slight mention even in the India newspapers, because there was far worse devastation in Ceylon, where bodies were being washed ashore for days afterwards. But it might be interesting to our friends to hear something about a “mild” cyclone.

As Seva Nilayam is in a fairly mountainous region there is no danger of floods, but the hills which shelter us are exposed to the full blast of the wind. The Cumbum Valley, in which we

live, is bounded on north and south by hills; on the north the Palani Hills, about twenty miles away as the crow flies, rise so steeply that they look like a wall. The bus journey takes two and a half hours to ascend from one thousand feet above sea level to a height of between six and seven thousand feet. The road plunges into deep forest where monkey families swing through the trees, past rich plantations of coffee, bananas and oranges, through groves of towering eucalyptus trees, to an area of grassland, rock, and pines. Here is the hill station of Kodaikanal, which although far in the tropics, has a cool, and often cold, climate. There are fields of potatoes, and apple and pear orchards.

On November 23rd, a cyclone warning was given. During the night of the 24th, the wind began to rise, and wild gusts swept across hill and plain alike, accompanied by torrential rain. At Kodaikanal this ended in a whirlwind, which sent thousands of trees crashing down.

When daylight came the damage could be seen. Small houses, roofed with galvanised iron sheets, had their roofs torn off bodily; others caved in under the weight of fallen trees. Roads were blocked, electric wires forced down and tangled, concrete posts broken off short or bent like hairpins.

Surprisingly, only one person was killed, but two thousand homeless people had to be given shelter in the Government High School. Relief work started immediately. The Government sent a ration of grain, and convents and social workers distributed clothing. Fortunately, after the storm abated there was not much more rain. The Electricity Board started at one erecting new posts, before clearing the broken ones, so as to get a line to the town, which was without light or power.

It is a good thing that even in a calamity someone may benefit and especially good when those are the poorest. Everyone who could use an axe was assured of work clearing the fallen trees, and the sound of the strokes rang continually from forest and hillside. Vast trunks had to be sawn through to open the roads for vehicles. Men, women and even quite small girls and boys were seen everywhere carrying head loads of twigs and branches, or sacks of wood chips. Little boys loaded up their home made carts – a plank on four wheels drawn by a string – and merrily tugged them along. Much of the wood was pine and eucalyptus, both of which burn like torches and give out aromatic smoke. (One of the local industries is the production of eucalyptus oil by distillation from the leaves.)

Where was Seva Nilayam in all this? After a night of roaring wind and driving rain we saw by the morning light nine great trees, which had stood in a row on the roadside, fallen like skittles. They were of a kind called *Pannir* tree and had heavy leafy crowns and were loaded with white jasmine-like blossoms. Their roots were in the air and the masses of blossom crushed into the mud. The soil had become waterlogged and the roots had simply pulled out. All of them lay across our fences, breaking down the wire and lying on the fields of young green rice or banana plants. It took two days to clear them.

A few days previously, on the roadside just outside our entrance, a young man had put up a small shop to sell tea, sweets, biscuits and sundries to passers-by, many of them patients coming to our clinic. This man is a good friend of ours and as he was not able to do heavy work because of ill-health, we had encouraged him in this venture. We had been present at the little opening ceremony which is held according to custom with worship, camphor lights and offerings of fruit and flowers.

The shop, like many on the roadsides of South India, was a portable one; it was brought here on a bullock cart. It was like a large box on legs, with a pitched roof and a door which could be closed. And now, when trade was just getting under way, a tree fell exactly on the shop, crushing it like a matchbox.

But there was no weeping and wailing. Our staff and friends gathered round to see what cold be salvaged. Amazingly, the copper tea urn and the glasses were brought out undamaged, having been protected in a little hollow under the shop. Tins of sweets and biscuits were found safe. A tarpaulin was stretched across some poles and the shop was soon open for business. The copper urn steamed merrily and probably more customers came than would have visited the undamaged shop.

The cost of such a wooden box shop is about two hundred rupees (£12-13), and with a loan from us the proprietor soon bought a new one. Many patients come into our clinic, get their number in the line, then go back for cups of tea and a chat.

There are a great number of such people in India, people who meet adversity with courage and resourcefulness and are virtually unsinkable. Unfortunately they do not get into the news because the accent today is all on distress, disaster and helpless suffering. There are real enough, indeed, but there are other and unrecorded sides to the story.

1979

THE YEAR OF THE CHILD

The year 1979 has been named by an international committee of the United Nations as "The Year of the Child". In many countries social workers will discuss the condition of children, articles will be written and lectures given; there will be commissions to investigate the exploitation of children and the quality of education. Children's hospitals, creches and homes will be opened. I do not know what will be done in India. But I do know much about the way children live and how they are regarded here.

To the average Indian the child is a treasure beyond price. In many affluent countries married couples may discuss whether they should have a new car, or go on a world tour, or move to a better house, rather than have another child. But in India the child will always win. If there is a roof, even if it is of palm leaves, there will be children under it. The infant mortality rate is high, owing to poverty malnutrition, and in our clinic we find that many couples have lost one or two children, sometimes more, but their happiness is great in proportion to their sorrow, when they succeed in having a family.

The increase of population has slowed down, but not enough to satisfy the family planning authorities. The high birth rate is not only due to ignorance or irresponsibility, as critics may maintain. Most Indian couples want four or five children. If asked why they want children, they would very likely say: "To give us joy, to share in the family work, and to look after us in our old age."

In rural India sharing the family work means driving out the goats and buffaloes, collecting firewood, harvesting crops, learning to control irrigation water, and as soon as a boy is big enough, learning to plough and to drive the cart. For the girl it means fetching water and firewood, husking grain, and also taking part in the harvest. Most children are very proud of their usefulness, they are important enough to express their opinions and be consulted as affecting the family economy.

There is a school in every village, but these would be far too small to hold the entire child population, supposing the Government made attendance compulsory. New schools are built, and old ones enlarged, every year, but the Government has a long way to go to catch up. Meanwhile the majority of country children do not go to school, either because of poverty, or because the family sees the acquisition of farming skills as more important than book learning. Many children attend the first five standards and then leave to take part in the farm work. Education is free, but it does cost something to send a child to school. Books have to be bought, clothes, perhaps uniforms, and sometime bus fares have to be paid. The family has to forgo the child's help and earnings.

The point I want to make is that it is impossible usefully to discuss the situation of the child without reference to the condition of society as a whole. What, in some circumstances, would be harsh exploitation is, in others, a mere necessity. In the case of family life the test is whether the hard conditions are shared by the whole family. When work is scarce the boys and girls in this area go to the hills to cut firewood. They may have to walk five or six miles to the

places where they can find the right kind of fuel, chiefly thick-stemmed creepers and brushwood, which they can cut with their small hand choppers. The wood is bound into head loads which are canoe-shaped, so the bearers can lower one end to the ground when they need to take a rest. They have to carry these loads back on their heads till they reach a village where they can find a purchaser. They can get four rupees a load, which is a fair day's wages, and they sell the wood directly to the villagers without a middleman. But it is hard, and not work anyone would care to do if there were any alternative.

At harvest time whole families fo out into the fields to pull round nuts, dig and sort sweet potatoes, or cut paddy. The mothers take their little ones, who sometimes help and sometimes play, but children over eight can earn a small amount, and at fourteen they can get full pay.

By Indian law children under sixteen may not be employed in factories or on any dangerous work. It would be difficult to say how far this law is strictly observed. Certainly, in the large cotton-spinning mills around Madurai, children are not employed. The Trade Unions are very strong in the mills, and as there is considerable unemployment their own interest, if nothing more, would lead them to take a stand against the possibility of child labour.

It may be otherwise in small factories. Recently there was a terrible accident in which a bus crossing a river bed by a causeway was caught by flash floods. Such floods are not uncommon in South India in the rains, and are so swift that drivers of vehicles can be taken unawares, as in this case. Thirty-seven passengers were drowned, and all were children under sixteen. The bus belonged to a match factory and was sent round the villages every morning to fetch the workers.

There seems to have been no shortcoming as regards rescue efforts, some of which were heroic. The company bore hospital and funeral expenses, and paid generous allowances to the families, some of which will be continued for five years, but the management was in trouble because the accident revealed that children below the legal age were employed. The children worked six hours a day, and the work was light; still the law had been broken.

The management said that three years ago the employment of children had been temporarily stopped under Government pressure. The first to complain were the families, who had lost this additional course of income. The place where this factory is situated is very dry and so is suitable for the manufacture of matches. But for the same reason, agriculture is very poor and the are long periods when work on the land is unobtainable. When whole families were suffering it was a help to them to have a place where some members could have continuous employment.

We all agree that working conditions which involve cruelty or danger to health should be prohibited. But, short of that, we have to realise that to stop anyone, adult or child, from working, without providing an alternative, is no solution, and may inflict further hardship.

For, as I have said, the child cannot be treated as an isolated individual. He is part of society, and society is a living and developing organism. From experience of Indian families I know the place children hold in them; it is a very high place, and acts of cruelty to children are very rare indeed. If children suffer, it is a suffering shared by all.

Postscript:

Visitors have remarked that money seems to go a long way at Seva Nilayam. This is because we ourselves produce much of our food and other needs. We all live (by choice) very simply, and we avoid waste. Some of our correspondent may like to know what money can do, so here are a few figures. These are of course approximate, as we have to take a monthly average, and also the rate of exchange varies.

Food for in patients: these are usually about 20, and we use our own products, chiefly grain and vegetables for them, but we have to buy these at times when we are short. Cooking oil, spices, pulses, (similar to lentils and lentil flour) meat and fish have to be bought. Our own hens supply eggs.

Cost per month: Rs 500	Pounds sterling	32.05
	US dollars	63.00
	Australian dollars	54.55

Medicines for treating 160 – 250 out patients daily as well as the in patients:

Cost per month: Rs 6,000	Pounds sterling	384.06
	US dollars	756.00
	Australian dollars	654.06

THE GIFT AND THE GIVER

There is a story that the Goddess of Mercy and the Goddess of Luck were passing through a crowed bazaar when they saw a miserable-looking man begging. The Goddess of Mercy said: “I am sorry for this man. I want to make him rich to compensate for his past sufferings”. So she gave him fifty thousand rupees.

Astonished and delighted, the man ran about buying all sorts of luxuries which he had never dreamed of enjoying. His acquaintances all flocked round, to see how much they could get for themselves. He decided to build a house, but he had wasted so much money that he was unable to finish it; he borrowed money and got deeply in dept. By the end of a year he had lost everything, and was back in the market place begging.

The Goddess of Mercy and the Goddess of Luck happened to pass that way again. “Here is our man, you see,” said the Goddess of Luck, I think it is my turn to try.” So she gave him twenty rupees.

The man wondered what he could do with this small sum. He saw that some pears were being sold, but there were not enough to satisfy the demand. Resolving not to waste money again, he went to a merchant and bought a basket of pears. He sold these at a profit, and was able to buy his evening meal, and also a bigger basket of pears for next day. So he went on,

making small profits, and adding other fruits, till he was able to put up a stall, and finally to open a modest shop.

It is easy to be tempted to do too much for people. The impulse may be unselfish, or it may be based on possessiveness. Having cured someone of a serious illness, and experiencing his gratitude, we may feel that we could re-make his whole life, so that he would be "one of ours" and a credit to us and our work. But supposing the man is not a credit to us after all, and turns out badly. When he is suffering, the impulse of mercy covers all his faults, but the disillusion is all the greater afterwards. And it is self-love that feels hurt.

A gift should suit both the giver and the receiver. Supposing a young man is cured of a long and crippling illness, after we have expended a considerable amount of money on his treatment. What is his future? He will have to go and work on his brother's farm, a small patch of land, on which very little capital can be spent. It seems harsh, but there are hundreds of thousands like him, and just because we have done one important thing for him we should not try to cushion him against the struggle of life. We must work within the structure of life as it is here. We can always help people to turn a difficult corner; a loan to repair a house that has been damaged by a cyclone, or to replace a bullock that has died; a few clothes to enable a child to start school, or an advance to buy rice after harvest, when it is cheap; these we can give, but we leave people's lives in their own hands.

We receive some amounts of milk powder as free gifts. It would be very easy to give this out to all mothers who liked to ask for it. We could write the names in a book, and I do not think anyone would censure us. But our conscience would not approve. We need to find out why milk is required. Perhaps it is for a motherless baby, and that is a clear case. Perhaps the mother is ill – but then, is she taking any treatment? Is it likely that, with treatment, she will later be able to feed the baby herself? To get a supply of free milk powder is an easy way out but not necessarily good for either mother or child. The mother should not neglect her own health, and she should understand that breast feeding is far the best for the baby, whenever possible. There is always someone ready to buy milk powder, and if it is not really needed there is the temptation to sell it. The mother must be sufficiently in earnest to come regularly, week after week, and to follow all advice given, and the baby must be weighed and must show satisfactory progress. This kind of supervision entails a lot of work; how easy it would be to dole it out to all comers, and take a photograph of a ring of smiling faces!

It is always possible, as well as flattering to our self love, to underestimate the resourcefulness and independence of Indian villagers. How often I have seen something very like the story of the man who received twenty Rupees from the Goddess! A new bus route is started. The terminus may be in a place where there are no shops. A man will come along with his tea kettle and put a small awning; the waiting passengers will be glad of a cup of tea. In time he will have a bamboo and thatch hut, and a charcoal stove, and he may provide sweets and biscuits, and set out benches for the customers. Or a new college is built outside the city, where there was nothing but empty fields; it will not be long before there is tea shop outside the gate, and ultimately perhaps a restaurant. Nothing costs much, everything is used, and nothing is wasted.

Such gifts as we decide to give should be without regret or afterthought, and without making any demands on the receiver. We must first be careful in our decisions, but, having chosen to give, we should not take any credit, nor allow ourselves any feeling of possessiveness. Because, if we do it for our credit, we are giving to ourselves, not to others.

SNAKES

The harvesters are working in the field when a sudden cry goes up: *Pambu! Pambu*! – Snake. People come running to the spot, boys and young men arming themselves with sticks, and if the snake has not already made its escape, it will not have long to live. Although snakes are quite common they cause far more excitement than any other creature to be met with in daily life. Besides the deep-seated fear and mistrust of snakes which seem to be universal, they are most strange and beautiful.

Unfortunately, such is the dread of snakes that the rule is strike first and look afterwards, so that many harmless snakes which are the majority, are needlessly slaughtered. They are not only harmless, but they prey on the rats which cause so much damage to stored grains and crops in the field. There have been many instances where the mass extermination of snakes has led to a great increase in the rodent population.

Contrary to widespread belief, snakes are shy and unaggressive. They know the approach of a human being by the football on the ground, and, if possible, they glide away soundlessly. Only if they are trodden on, picked up, or hit, do they bite. The danger comes, not from seeing a snake on the road, but in picking up straw or firewood in which the snake is hidden. We see quite a number of snakes around Seva Nilayam, but there must be many more which remain unseen. We find more snakes in rainy weather because their holes may be flooded with water. Last monsoon season a Krait was found in our kitchen, and a Rat snake ventured into the clinic. Recently, one of our field workers discovered a Cobra in the blanket in which he had been sleeping. It is a measure of the docility of snakes that over the years at Seva Nilayam no one has been harmed.

In India, snakes have inspired many myths and legends. Few temples are without snake carvings, and they are often shown as Cobras with seven heads and expanded hoods. Small "snake stones" carved in the same way are found by many sacred trees in cities and villages. These are called Naga's and were regarded as enemies until subdued by the Gods and taken into their service. The Creator of the universe is depicted as asleep before the creation, watched over by a seven headed Naga. There is a day each year especially for snake worship, and in some places people put saucers of milk for them.

In any large city there are many "Snake charmers" with snakes in round covered baskets. They usually have some tricks and a lot of patter, but there are very few who can really mesmerise their snakes by the sound of their flutes, and even enjoy a cup of tea while the snake remains rigid and immobile.

The bite of the Cobra is most deadly, and anyone who is bitten by it out in the fields will rarely reach a hospital alive. Here at Seva Nilayam we keep anti-venom injection but it is seldom used. Those who suffer from the bites of less poisonous snakes usually apply traditional village remedies. These contain a large element of magic, and there are certain herbs, known especially to the tribal people, which may well be effective. But incision, to draw out the venom, and cauterising are also practised.

Out of 200 varieties of snake only a few are a serious threat, and there are only four really common snakes whose bite is death-dealing. Besides the Cobra there is the Krait, a slender black

snake rarely seen during the day, and there are two species of viper. The Russells Viper has very beautiful markings and is called the *kannadi pambu* or looking-glass snake, because of the diamond-shaped patches of colour on its body. The strange looking Sand Boa is popularly believed to have two heads, because it has a blunt tail which may be mistaken for the head. Another species of Sand Boa is firmly believed to cause leprosy, perhaps because of its truncated and patchy appearance. The elegant, slender and bright green Vine Snake is thought to strike at peoples' eyes with its sharp nose. It is actually quite harmless.

So much information is mixed up with superstition and misinformation that it is good to know that something is being done to untangle the subject. In Madras there is a snake park which is a very popular attraction. There, people can see many varieties of snakes, and watch them handled by the keepers; some of the onlookers themselves may be induced to pick them up. Places like this help to reduce the traditional fear of snakes.

Here at Seva Nilayam, if we find a snake when there are few or no people about, and nobody to rush at it with a stick, we take our time and watch it. If we are uncertain of its species we consult a book, and if it is harmless we let it go. Regarding poisonous snakes we feel some responsibility for the patients under our care. As we always try to avoid unnecessary killing. We would prefer to let even these go away in peace.

Now that our workers and patients understand our attitude to snakes, some of them will come and tell us about one before anyone has a chance to kill it so that we can identify it. In a small way we wish to encourage tolerance and respect for all living beings, including the misunderstood and unjustly treated, but wonderful and beautiful creature, the snake.

TO HAVE OR TO BE?

Our friends, who receive these letters know that most of the people among whom we live and work have few material goods. Most people here have no shoes, and walk barefoot over stony roads and stubbly fields. Many children have only one dress or one shirt, and sleep on a platform in the yard, near the goats and calves. Even those who are comparatively better off, in money, or land, do not have much in their houses; they may have a string cot, an armchair made by the village carpenter, and a radio on which to hear the ever-popular cinema songs, but no one has a telephone, and it is rare to see a car on our roads. It is just not the style of life to be cluttered up with goods.

We do not idealise the village. We have been here too long for that. Human beings everywhere can be acquisitive, jealous, quarrelsome and violent; the theft of few bundles of straw or a goat can arouse feelings as bitter as those between rival business houses or claimants to an estate. The villages need sanitation, better building, and adequate water supplies. Efforts are being made in these directions, some effective and some useless, but I will not go into that now, it is off my main theme.

People in affluent countries find it hard to imagine life without easy communications, innumerable gadgets, packaged food, ample furniture, and a vast choice of cosmetics. They feel sorry for those who have so few possessions, and think life would be better for them if they had more. Yet, if they see a piece of fine needle-work done in our grandmothers' day, or if they watch

a village woman sifting grain, they say: “No one has time for such things nowadays,” yet they have so many time-saving devices.

The American writer, Henry David Thoreau, who was born in 1817, spent two years of his life at Walden, in a house he built with his own hands subsisting only on local produce. He wrote a book about it. His writings were a complete failure in his lifetime, but they have provided a steady stream of inspiration to countless people since, and he had a deep influence on Gandhi. He saw that beings can be slaves to possessions and to false ideas, as much as to slave owners. You may say, remarked Thoreau, that you have got a fine house. You have not; the house has got you. Possessions, other than the simplest, can eat up your life and deprive you of freedom.

Thoreau, if his writings are taken as a whole, may seem to go to impossible extremes. Yet his outlook is so fresh, so direct and reasonable, that his writing is compelling. When it was proposed to link two American cities by Telegraph (a new thing in those days) he enquired whether they would have anything to communicate to one another which would be worth the work and expenditure required. Now we have computerised printing, but no one has suggested that what we print will have a smaller percentage of rubbish than heretofore. Thoreau looked always at the quality of life, and when he met he thought only of what that person was, not of what he possessed. In spite of the tremendous pressure of modern technology, and the enticement of consumer goods, there are many today who would like to get back to that fresh vision and uncluttered life.

The West, with all its good and all its power, exerts a tremendous pull on India. Imported goods, western clothes, games and luxuries are status symbols among the upper and middle classes in the cities. Countless students long to study abroad, just because it is “abroad”, irrespective of whether this would be either necessary or useful to their future. But the impact of all this on villages is slight.

More than seventy percent of Indians live in villages. They have not chosen to live in the ancient village cultures; to them it is normal life, the only life they have experienced. Nor do they consider the village particularly poor. There are very poor people in it, of course, but so there are everywhere, perhaps many more in Bombay or Calcutta. It is only when villagers start to rise into the middle class that they begin to look down on the village as something squalid and mean.

How far apart differing points of view can be! There are those who come to rural India seeking escape from the pressures of life in their affluent and technologically developed countries. They are not hippies or dropouts. Many are serious thinkers who are capable of holding technically advanced jobs, but fail to find satisfaction in them. To such people the villages offers a great opportunity; if they really wish to be free from the domination of possessions, they can find this life easy, pleasant and natural.

When we started Seva Nilayam we knew that if we were to succeed in serving the poor we must live very close to the people. Otherwise we should not reach those we wanted to reach: they would not come to us. But the village, in its turn, has offered us a life of real freedom.

The philosopher, Erich Fromm, has written a book entitled *To Have or To Be?* in which he maintains that two modes of existence are today struggling for the spirit of humanity, the “having” mode, which equates success with material goods, and the “being” mode, which recognises that the only value is what a person is. This teaching is as old as the Buddha, and it is

the very heart of the Christian Gospel. The struggle has gone on for many centuries, but it becomes sharper with man's increasing domination of nature. This is why we refuse to count success in terms of increase in material goods, in buildings, transport or equipment, knowing that Seva Nilayam has given us the opportunity to be, rather than to have.

TAMIL NADU

Tamil Nadu - The Country of the Tamils - is the most southerly State in India, and its southern point is Cape Cormorin. The British called it "Cormorin" when they ruled India, but its real name is Kanya Kumari, and that has now been restored.

If I stand at Kanya Kumari looking south, there is nothing but ocean between me and the Antarctic ice. Behind me is the great land mass of India, Tibet, Central Asia and Siberia right up to the Arctic Ocean, full of the most diverse peoples, cities, languages, religions and cultures.

At Kanya Kumari the Indian Ocean on the west meets the Bay of Bengal on the east, and on full moon night you can see the sun set and the moon rise at the same, time with nothing but ocean between them.

From this point the State of Tamil Nadu stretches northwards to its capital, the port of Madras, seven hundred kilometres away. Its area is about one hundred and twenty eight thousand square kilometres, and its population about forty two million.

Tamil Nadu occupies the whole southern tip of India except for the western coastal State of Kerala, from which it is divided by the Western Ghats, grand and rugged mountains, crossed by very few roads, and the home of wild animals and jungle tribes living by hunting.

Apart from such aboriginal tribes, the Tamils are the oldest of the many peoples inhabiting India. In prehistoric times they were probably spread over a much larger area, but successive waves of conquest and colonisation came from the north, driving them ever southward. The Tamils today have intense local patriotism and love of their language. Some years ago an attempt by the Central Government to impose more Hindi on them ended in riots and total non-co-operation. They are a lively and resourceful people, difficult to manage or regiment, but ready to be friendly and very hospitable, and with a seldom-failing sense of humour.

The eastern part of Tamil Nadu is a flat plain, tending to be arid, and sometimes suffering from disastrous droughts. Many of the villagers are poor. However, in some of the poorest-looking parts there are two sources of riches – fish, and the palmyra palm. The empty golden sands of the east coast are broken by large fishing villages, where the wooden boats known as catamarans put out to sea, where naked children dive and swim and play in the water as their natural element, and the nets are hung on lines across the beach to dry.

A newcomer to India, travelling through country that looks, in some parts, nearly desert, may wonder how people can live there at all. The sandy fields and dunes are dotted with palmyra palms, rigid, ungraceful trees, with charcoal-coloured trunks and a brush of stiff fan-shaped leaves at the top. This is the wealth of many coastal areas. Every part of the tree is used. The sap is tapped for a drink, which may be fermented or unfermented; in the former case it is toddy, but

this brings us to subject of prohibition, which I should not go into here. The sap is also boiled to produce the dark brown, rich-tasting palm sugar. The village houses are thatched with the leaves, and may be built on a framework of the trunks. The hollowed trunks make water conduits for irrigation. The jelly-like kernel of the unripe fruit is eaten.

A traveller going north will see much richer agriculture. The great delta of the Cauvery river is a continuous stretch of green paddy fields, from horizon to horizon, crossed by hundreds of streams and gushing water channels. Outside this special rice-growing area there are many fields of grain and vegetables, and plantations of coconuts, mangoes and bananas. But there are also low, stony hills, which will grow nothing, and areas where cultivation is made difficult by rock near the surface.

The capital, Madras, was a trading station in the days of the East India Company, and was divided into British, French and Portuguese zones, of which many traces still remain in place names. It is now a busy seaport and modern city, with suburbs spreading far out into the countryside, and taking in many villages, with their ancient tanks and temples.

It is impossible to mention every city of Tamil Nadu, but in the centre and south are two which are noteworthy, Tiruchirapally, and Madurai. The former was called Trichinopoly by the British, but, like Kanya Kumari it has reverted to its Tamil name. It is today a very busy city, and is on the main line of traffic to Madras and the north. Its main landmark is an isolated precipitous rock, on which up many hundreds of steps, are perched a temple and a fort, commanding a view of a wide area of level country.

One hundred and thirty kilometres south of Tiruchirapalli is Madurai, and for us at Seva Nilayam that is “our” city. It has a population of about five hundred and sixty thousand, and is a great centre for cotton spinning and weaving. During the last decade a new university, and many new suburbs have arisen on the outskirts, but its hearts is still the vast temple, round which the streets are planned in concentric squares. The four towers of the temple gateways, carved with myriads of figures of Hindu legend, can be seen from far out in the countryside. The temple is almost a city in itself, with a labyrinth of corridors, courts and shrines, every pillar and corbel differently carved. It is no dead show place, but is frequented during all the daylight hours by the people of Madurai, and by parties of pilgrims coming even from the far north of India. If you sit at seven in the morning, in some dim corner, under the continually echoing roof, you can see a constant stream of people; schoolboys, housewives, and shopkeepers, coming before their day’s work begins; street traders and barrow boys from nearby, business men showing their visitors round, wandering sadhus bearing their offerings.

Outside the temple, the narrow streets are crowed with cyclists, rickshaws, pedestrians, bullock carts and barrows, among which cars can only move at a snail’s pace. There are flower stalls, coffee shops, cloth shops with brilliant saris hung outside, and the shops of merchants dealing in spices, tamarind, cashew nuts, ropes and mats. The centre of Madurai changes very little, as the old square plan is established and sacrosanct. You have to go out to the new suburbs to see tree-lined avenues, wide roads and new bridges.

Seva Nilayam lies due west of Madurai, seventy kilometres out on a road that ultimately crosses the Western Ghats into Kerala. If you leave the city in the evening, for the homeward journey, you travel into the rich light of the setting sun. The familiar hills are like friends waiting to meet you. They are the spurs and the farthest outposts of the Western Ghats. Every day and in

every light they are different; sometimes, they are faint and blue, sometimes roofed by brooding clouds, sometimes, after a storm, shining out so clearly that distant forest trees glisten like wet moss. To the north the Palani Hills rise two thousand five hundred metres, and to the south and west the Cardamom Hills only a little less. They hold many tea and coffee plantations, deep forests, bare grassy uplands, lakes and waterfalls.

Seva Nilayam lies on the plain, in view of these hills. The land surrounding us is very fertile, and given sufficient water, will grow a great variety of crops. But water is the limiting factor, and in the dry season water in the wells can sink very low. More well-digging and more electrification would result in further falling of the water level. But now, in October, the monsoon has started; rice is planted, and many fallow fields are ploughed up. The brilliant green of the seedling contrasts with the wet red earth. The day may be sunny, but each evening the clouds pile up for a storm. Beyond the real hills there rises a vast cloud-scape sometimes these are grimly threatening; sometimes they burn with the fire of the setting sun. The changing colours are an unending delight.

HOMES AND THE HOMELESS

As I write, the rain is pouring down, finding every possible leak in the tiled roofs. The path in front of our house is a running brook, and the watercourse half a mile away, which is usually an expanse of sand, is a roaring torrent. Seen through the veil of rain, the paddy fields are growing green, and the bananas almost visibly unfurling their great, majestic leaves.

But today's newspaper reports that five thousand people have been rendered homeless in Madurai, and knowing Madras, I should say that the number there is far greater. The main trouble is the collapsing of mud walls and the washing away of their foundations. A mud-built house will last for many years if the walls are kept dry, but if the thatch has rotted or the tiles are broken, it will dissolve in a heavy downpour.

I am, of course, writing about the poor people, the villagers, washer men, tinsmiths, carters and shoemakers, the people without whom the daily life of the world could not be carried on. Much of Madurai consists of ancient, solidly built houses, or clean new settlements, but, like all Indian cities, it has areas of mud huts.

I will describe here how you build a mud house. We have done it ourselves, so we know. Our main building, the first to be put up when we came here, is of mud, but the walls are three feet thick at the base and we have managed to keep the tiled roof in moderately good repair.

You dig a hole in a place where the right kind of clay is found. You make a heap of this clay kneaded with water. You dig a trench for your foundations and fill it up with stones. You start to raise the walls by slapping on layers of mud, and if you can, you get an expert wall builder who brings a large sword-like knife to shear off the surface of the wall true and straight.

The door frame has been prepared previously, and the great moment is when it is raised into position. At this point you have to do some ceremonies. Flowers and fruit are offered on the threshold, the wood of the frame is decorated with spots of threshold, the wood of the frame is decorated with spots of coloured powder, and a camphor light is kindled. This is the dedication of

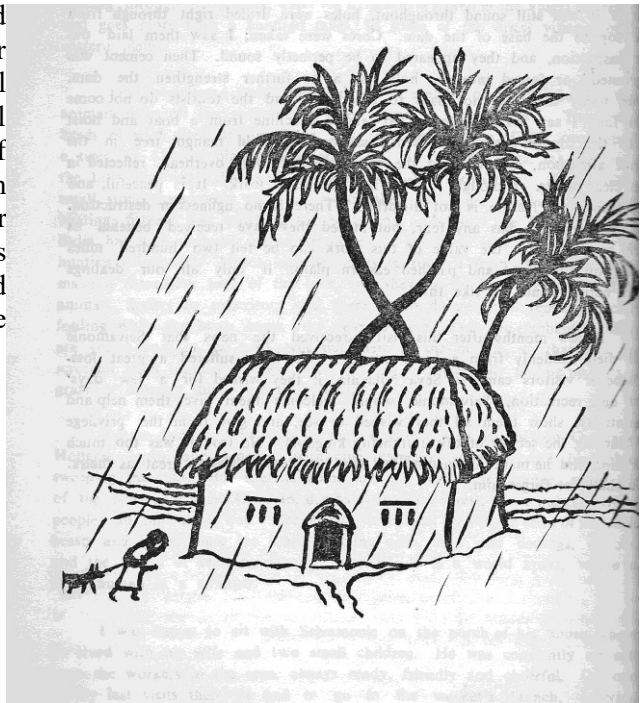
the house. But I have seen many houses which have no door frame, only an opening closed by a plaited coconut leaf.

Mixing the mud is quite hard work, so you will call in as many members of your family as you can, including women and older children. Some will mix and some will hand it up in baskets or metal pans and some will slap it on. When the walls are high enough you make a support for the roof probably of bamboos lashed together. You cover this with plaited coconut leaves and a fifth layer of straw or a kind of tough grass which grows in the hills. Finally you make a paste of cow-dung and sand, with which the walls are smoothly plastered. Such a house, if made with skill and care, can be very attractive and homely.

There are other variants which are not so pleasing, such as roofs of iron sheeting held in place by large stones. At the lowest level, especially in big cities and ports, there are small lean-to structures built against walls, and made of such materials as flattened tins, plastic sheeting or even cardboard boxes. These are not houses but places in which to keep clothes, cooking pots and other belongings. Life is out of doors. There are always verandahs, porches and trees to sit under, and in South India it is never really cold.

It would not be right to imagine that all street dwellers, those in 'home-made' house or without houses at all would be glad to be offered well built houses. Some have come from the country on temporary work and would not waste money on rent. Some might like a house in the centre of the city, near their work, but refuse to take a small concrete box out in some new colony from which they would have to pay bus fares to get to work. Some especially the gypsies, have always lived that way. At a gypsy encampment which I often pass there are fully twenty people living by rubbish picking. Some are sorting the sacks, some gossiping and listening to the radio (they have transistors these days) children are playing, they have kittens, puppies, even a monkey. Imagine transporting all the lot to a fifth floor flat in a housing block.

I am not saying that floods do not bring tragedy. This year as in most other years, people have been drowned in floods. Bus loads of passengers have been lost in sudden flash floods when crossing rivers. Precious possessions, goats, calves, chickens, on which people depended for extra food as well as clothing, tools, mats, and bedding have been lost. It is a fearsome thing to see a great river in flood, bearing bushes, or even tress torn up by the roots, wreckage of huts, drowned animals and all sorts of flotsam. But what I am celebrating is the resilience of the Indian poor. The Government is giving out food to the homeless, but as soon as the rains are over the huts will rise again, built with a good heart, hard work and cheerful faces. Down by the river in Madurai the tinsmiths and ironsmiths will hammer away, the tea-stalls will open, the carpenters will put up a coconut leaf awning to shade them while at work, and in our villages new mud walls will be built and ceremonies will again be done at the doorway.



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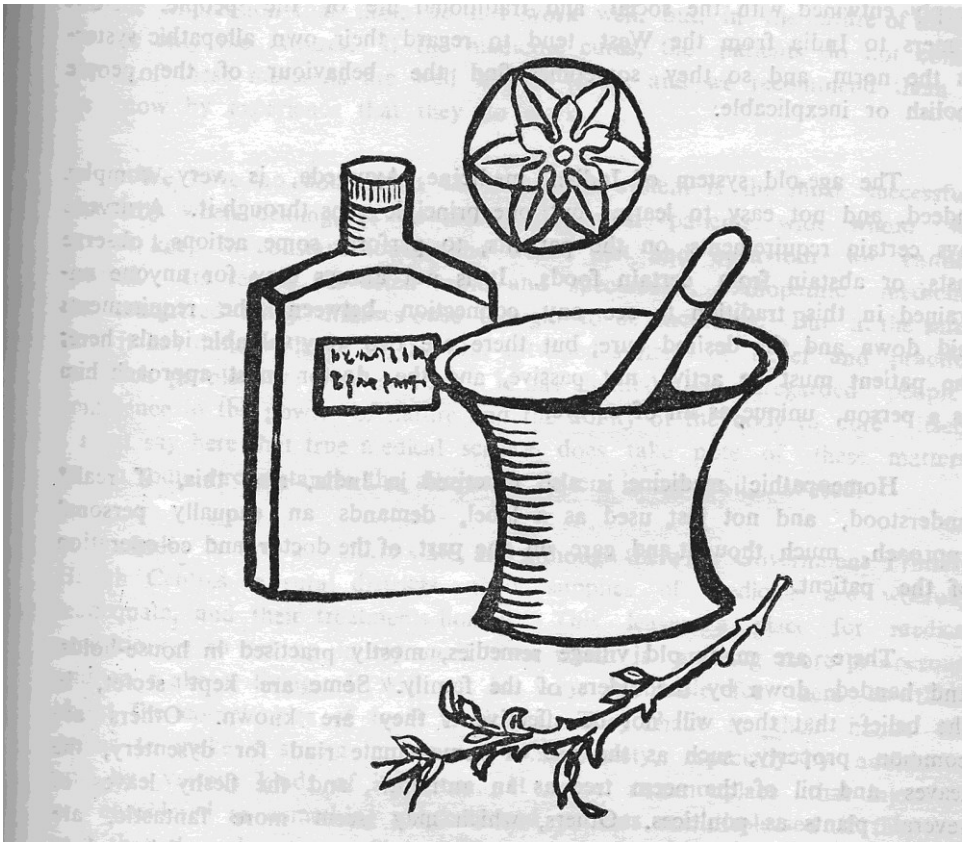
MORE ABOUT MEDICINE



You are living among people who need medicine, in an area where medical services are inadequate, and you have medicine to give. Surely, then, there should be no difficulty.

It is not quite as simple as that. “Medicine” does not mean just one system of knowledge and practice, of measurable drugs given in prescribed doses. In any ancient civilisation, or strong tribal culture, it is deeply entwined with the social and traditional life of the people. Newcomers to India from the West tend to regard their own allopathic system as the norm, and so they sometimes find the behaviour of the people foolish or inexplicable.

The age old system of Indian medicine, Ayurveda, is very complex indeed, and not easy to learn, but one principle runs through it. Ayurveda lays certain requirements on the patients, to perform some actions, observe fasts, or abstain from certain foods. It is not always easy for anyone untrained in this tradition to see any connection between the requirements laid down and the desired cure, but there are two very valuable ideals here; the patient must be active, not passive, and the doctor must approach him as a person, unique as all of us are.

Homeopathic medicine is also practised in India, and this, if really understood, and not just used as a label, demands an equally personal approach, much thought and care on the part of the doctor, and co-operation of the patient.

There are many old village remedies, mostly practised in households, and handed down by the elders of the family. Some are kept secret, in the belief that they will not be effective if they are known. Others are common property, such as the use of pomegranate rind for dysentery, the leaves and oil of the neem tree as an antiseptic, and the fleshy leaves of several plants as poultices. Others, which may seem more fantastic, are based on preparations made from scorpions, crabs, turtle or tortoise shell. There are countless examples of such treatments, most of them using materials easily found in the fields or by the roadside, but others may require something to the fetched from the distant sea, or the mountain forests, and the effort entailed is a test of the seriousness of the patient's desire for a cure.

We constantly find, in our clinic, that people have tried the native medicine before coming to us. If a mother brings a child who has had a month's dysentery we may ask, "Why did you not come earlier?". The reason is almost certainly that she had been trying local remedies. We may get the impression that these do not work well, but, in the nature of things we see only the failures. If the medicine cures, the patients do not come. Some of these materials are well known to us, and we recommend them if we know by experience that they do work.

We have no doubt that the allopathic system is the most successful, especially when dealing, as we mostly do, with patients with whom we cannot keep in constant touch, and whose diet and behaviour we cannot control. Its results are often rapid and spectacular. Allopathic medicine has conquered many diseases once thought to be incurable. But at the same time it has done violence to the old, entwined systems of belief and practice in which people have lived so long. It has slighted and disregarded people's confidence in the powers of nature and the ability of the body to cure itself. I must say here that true medical science does take not of these matters, but in some circumstances the allopathic system is too easily abused.

India is not a welfare state, and although there are Government Primary Health Centres in rural districts, their supplies of medicine are woefully inadequate, and their treatments limited. This leaves a place for medical practitioners to set up in any small town which is growing more prosperous, and to make a living. It will not be very profitable for them to think about the complexities of local traditions. They have in their hands the means to make a strong impact on local society, especially by antibiotics and by various kind of injections. It is a commonplace that injections are considered as something magical, and patients are displeased if they are told that they do not need an injection and we will not give one. Patients are also more pleased if they get a lot of tablets, irrespective of whether they really need them.

In our clinic we see the whole spectrum, from patient who have always relied on village medicine, and only in great need come for allopathic treatment, to those who are willing to try both, and still others for whom nothing but "foreign" medicine is good enough. Because this type of commercialised allopathic medicine makes no demands on the patient except to take tablets and injections the belief spreads that every symptom must be so treated. We get many patients whose troubles arise only from vitamin deficiency, caused, in some cases by sheer poverty, but in others by neglecting to obtain a balanced diet, with sufficient vegetables. We often tell patients that the money they have spent on bus fares to come to us would do more good if used to buy vegetables. We find that some of the better off people bring children suffering from skin or eye

troubles due to vitamin deficiency. They have been induced to buy expensive “vitamin tonics”, but have not been told to provide the good diet they could well afford. It is our daily battle in the clinic to talk and explain, and not to rely only on medicines.

Among the more seriously ill, we find many with suspected tuberculosis, who have gravely damaged their prospects of a cure by going from one doctor to another, taking a few injections, stopping treatment when they can no longer afford to pay, and resuming it when they become worse again. So we have to start all over again with them, possibly confirming the tuberculosis by our laboratory tests, and referring them to a Government clinic where they can get free treatment, and can be cured if only they will persevere. This is especially tragic in the case of children, whose parents think they are doing their best for the child by going to a clinic where they have to pay.

We live in the middle of a clash of cultures, and this is deeply interesting, generally frustrating, but often rewarding and enlightening. We respect all honest medicine. We do not go along with those who reject allopathic medicine because it can be misused; we do not ridicule as superstition any traditional remedies even if the reason behind them is not easily understood. Such is the power of the mind over the body that walking round a sacred tree, or receiving something from the hand of a devotee may not be without effect.

SUN AND SHADOW

On February 16th there was an eclipse of the sun, visible in South India. At Hyderabad, in Central India, it was a total eclipse and astronomers cam from all over the world to observe it. In our part of Tamil Nadu the disc of the sun was about eighty percent covered by the shadow of the moon.

We know that from the beginning of recorded time man has had a deep-rooted fear of an eclipse. Primitive man knew that the sun is our life, the provider of all we have, and our hope of survival, and he was apprehensive of anything that might seem to harm it. Today, when we know that in an eclipse the sun is millions of miles out and beyond the dark shadow that we see, the old dread lingers on. There is not much scientific teaching in Indian village schools. The young lads who look after our bullocks and buffaloes put them all in the sheds during the time of the eclipse in case they should suffer some ill effect from it.

However, we had made some preparations for viewing the eclipse. We had obtained some pieces of developed photographic negative, so that anyone could look at the sun through them. We covered a mirror with black paper, cutting a round hole in the centre, and with this we projected the image of the sun on a white wall in a darkened room. The image was very clear. Slowly, as the minutes passed, the dark disc crept across the bright one. The patients and children came to see it, but it was rather slower than a cinema, so for variation they went outside and looked through the photographic film. This gave us an opportunity to tell the children what actually happened in an eclipse.

The sunlight was dimmed, and a grey tinge like dawn overspread the clear blue sky: the air grew cooler, and a wind sprang up. Then the shadow passed, and the day grew bright again.

It is well sometimes to think what the sun means to us. Photosynthesis, the process by which green plants utilise the sun's rays to make the nutrients by which they grow, is the most important single fact in the whole world. Without green plants neither animals nor human beings could live. Today we hear very much about the "energy requirements" of the technologically developed countries, as though these were something special, separate from the rest of nature. But the India villager has his energy requirements, and over the whole vast country no one can compute how great they are. When the farmer drives his cart to market, the bullocks use energy they have derived from green plants; the housewife boils her pot with dry sticks that were once living and grew by virtue of the sun's rays. When our neighbours make a fire of waste straw before dawn on a chilly morning, and gather round to warm themselves, they are also using energy.

The coal deposits of the earth were laid down about six hundred million years ago, when the sun shone on vast swampy forests, where giant ferns and other plants grew, collapsed and died, and later hardened under pressure as succeeding layers of rock were laid down. Petroleum was formed in the same way, but mainly by floating marine organisms. All grew and lived in the sunlight. Water power, used to generate electricity, is possible only because the sun raises water vapour from the seas, and the clouds thus formed deposit their rain on the mountains, so that streams rushing downwards can work turbines. Among all the great sources of energy used by modern technology, only nuclear power seems independent of the sun. But that also has to have sun-derived energy to obtain the necessary conditions to start the reaction. Nuclear fuel alone would be useless.

Small sources of energy, the waterfall, the housewife's fire or the potter's kiln, cannot do much individually, but equally, they cannot do great harm. But today international politics have become dominated by the great sources of energy. Rapid transport, huge industrial complexes, and mighty armies depend, above all, on petroleum. No country that has gone far along the road of high technological development can pull back without causing tremendous dislocation of the economy and resulting misery. Nations let it be known that they would go to war if the energy base of their economy were threatened. Politicians do not seem to realise how ugly their speeches sound – ugly because they assume that greed and selfishness are essential to mankind.

The Indian villager knows little about advanced technology. His fear is that something may harm the sun, by which, as he understand very well, he lives. But now there are many in the technologically developed countries who fear that if man cannot find a way out of the labyrinth of greed, violence, and misuse of power, the result will be catastrophe. Man is dependent on a ball of fire ninety million miles away. He did not make it, and he does not remember often enough all it means to him. If he does not learn to use its benefits rightly, it is human life which may be eclipsed – for ever.

LOOKING AT PEOPLE

I was very much struck by a remark made by a doctor of wide experience. He said: "For one mistake made by not knowing, ten mistakes made by not seeing."

No doubt he was speaking of medical mistakes, such as misinterpreting symptoms, or treating some minor ailment while overlooking a serious condition. This is quite possible when a

doctor is tired or overworked, and it is made more likely by the fact that few people know what is the matter with them. Many will describe a host of symptoms, feelings, pains and disabilities without any inkling of the underlying cause. This is especially the case with village people, who try to find some fanciful cause, such as the new moon, or a snake bite ten years ago. Only close attention to the patient, a penetrating and meticulous glance, can find out the connection between all the various troubles.

But in a village clinic, and in an extremely complex society like that of India, there are other considerations too. It is necessary to know how people think, their religion, their caste (or at least their approximate position in the social hierarchy), the traditions of their community, and their family ties. We at Seva Nilayam, treat every patient as equal, and if we give any preference it is to the poorest and most distressed. But these traditions are objective facts. It is no use to ask a patient to do something which you know he will not or cannot do, and you will not gain his confidence by showing lack of understanding.

But you do not put a patient through an examination to find out all these matters. You know by a hundred signs which all blend into one picture, so that recognition of them becomes almost instinctive. You know by the walk and general approach, by the style of wearing the sari and the workmanship of the jewels (or lack of jewels); you know Muslim from Hindu, landowner from coolie. You see old ragged shirts falling to pieces, and others which have been clumsily mended and washed, without soap and without ironing. The patient's approach may be respectful, or demanding, or diffident or shy, and this will depend quite as much on social position as on personal character.

The hands always tell their story. There is a widespread belief that illness can be diagnosed by looking at the hands, and patients will very often spread out their palms without being asked. As we live among working people, we see many work-worn hands, especially those of people over middle age. Looking at them we see days of toil, of grasping tools, hauling on ropes, binding sheaves, pulling weeds, cutting firewood. There will be old scars and crooked joints.

Then you may see a quiet, elderly lady, in very traditional dress. She will have a darkish-coloured sari with a hand-woven border – nothing like the brilliant factory-printed ones which attract the younger generation; she will have a very plain white blouse, and unobtrusive but fine gold ornaments. She will be the wife of a well-established farmer or shopkeeper. She has never done field work, but her hands are worn because she has cooked for the family for, perhaps, forty years. I can see the solid but simply furnished house, the cool interior courtyard, the old fashioned stove, the polished brass cooking vessels, perhaps a young girl to help and learn, and a woman to bring firewood and water.

Patients coming to us, who have had previous treatment elsewhere are often reluctant to tell us this. If they have some papers from a hospital, they very frequently leave them at home. They reason that the treatment has failed; they want a fresh start, and they are afraid that we might only carry on with the same if we see the papers. But it is important that we should know, and should be able to make use of any hospital investigations they have had. In the case of tuberculosis it is especially important, because the treatment is long, and starting and stopping it many times causes resistance to the medicines, and makes the hope of a cure remote. So the first question is: "Have you taken any treatment?", and they say: "No." But the expression of the eyes is not satisfying; there is a slight shifting of the glance. So we say: "Which hospital or doctor did

you go to, and how many injections have you taken?" Then, seeing that we know already, they tell the truth.

For their sakes we have to enquire sharply – they do not know that it is a matter of life and death.

Many mothers bring very sick babies, and it is easy to see, by every shade of expression on the mother's face, by the way she sits, and holds the baby, whether her anxiety is really deep, or whether she is one of those too poor, or tired, or slatternly mothers who hope the baby will live, but are not prepared to exert themselves too much, and want some sort of magic medicine which will cure it.

Other mothers bring babies who seem to have very little the matter with them, perhaps only a tiny sore. The baby is fat and jolly, and the mother bright and bold. The mother will bring out all kinds of complaints; the baby is not growing well, vomits the milk, has diarrhoea, is restless at nights. Yet it looks the picture of health. You don't believe her, and she knows that you don't. But she likes to have the baby looked at: it is pleasant and reassuring, she is getting a second opinion and she has the satisfaction of showing off the baby. If we went by her words alone, the baby might be dosed with all sorts of unnecessary medicines. A little conversation and fun, to which Tamil people always respond, fit the case better.

But we can also see tormenting fear in the eyes of some mothers. Perhaps it is a first baby, perhaps an only baby because the husband is dead, and it is all she has in the world. She has worried herself sick, imagining that it is not growing, that its breathing is not normal, or there is something wrong with its eyes. It would be so easy just to give a few vitamin tablets and tell her not to worry. But if we want to allay these fears we must spend some time with her. We can weigh the baby and tell the mother to come back in a week's time and see that it has put on weight. We must look at it very carefully, without any suggestion of haste or inattention; we may sound the heart and lungs with the stethoscope and assure her that all is well within. We must examine the mother also, and if she is anaemic or debilitated we must give her appropriate medicine, and explain that only if she looks after her own health will her milk be good for the baby.

Every day, and in every hour of the clinic work, we can see that even the best medicines will not have their value unless we know much about the patient, and can establish a relationship. Such a relationship is achieved by speaking, but also, in a very important way, by looking.

THE HOT WEATHER

I am frequently asked: "Do you have very hot weather?" Our hot weather is now over for this year, but I will try to describe it.

We are at the a latitude of only ten degrees north of the equator, so we can expect the climate to be hot but there are certain factors which temper the heat. The southern tip of India is surrounded on three sides by ocean, so the temperature never rises as high as it dies in some of the inland parts of north India. Madurai's hot weather temperature is usually ninety-eight to a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, but it can rise to one hundred and four degrees. Madurai is at an

elevation of three hundred and thirty feet above sea level. In the forty-five miles between Madurai and Seva Nilayam the level rises about seven hundred feet, so that we are at more then a thousand feet above sea level. The difference is noticeable in the climate. Our hottest temperatures are always a few degrees below those of Madurai, and in December and January the nights are quite chilly.

We always enjoy January weather, when it is cool and calm, and everywhere it is green after the rain. But by February the heat begins to creep back again. Roads are dusty, and fields where the paddy has been harvested are dry and brown. Only where there is constant irrigation, the land remains green.

March is hot, and April is hotter. In the last days of April the sun is directly overhead at noon. A stick placed upright in the ground will cast no shadow at mid-day. But thunderstorms come to temper the heat. First, distant lightning is seen playing round the horizon. Then, each evening, clouds pile up, rain sweeps across the valleys, and thunder rolls in the mountains. This year we have had more rain than usual; it was almost like a little monsoon. This has kept up the level of water in the wells.

About the middle of May a change comes. One day there will be a fresh, cool breeze from the south west. This is the first stirring of the south-west monsoon, which will bring rain to the whole of west and north India, travelling right up to the Himalayas by August. It does not bring rain to us, because we are in the shadow of the Western Ghats, the high mountains, which divide Kerala from Tamil Nadu. The rain falls on the mountains, and at the height of the monsoon we can see it, in the form of a great turbulent cloud bank in the west. The wind rises in intensity, some times brining dust storms, till it decreases after the end of July. The south west monsoon signals the end of our hot weather.

The hot weather is the time of flowering trees and ripening fruits. It is then we gather the mangoes. The mango may be called the national fruit of India. It is indigenous to the country, and most highly esteemed. In all the towns there are cartloads and lorry loads of mangoes, in every market there are great piles of them, and street traders sit on all the pavements and outside school gates with them. There is no fruit more delicious.

Guavas, papayas and the huge jack fruit ripen in the heat. The latter is a great green object with a leathery skin covered with close-packed horny points, hanging on a short stalk from a branch, or even from the trunk, of this peculiar tree. When cut open it reveals white pith in which are embedded numerous pear-shaped fruits, of a rich yellow colour and strong flavour. Each of these encloses a large seed which has a mealy consistency, and can be cooked in savoury dishes. This year our jack fruit tree, grown from a seed, has nine fruits, the largest of which may weigh about sixteen pounds. I have not mentioned bananas or coconuts, because they are not especially hot weather fruits, but can be picked at any season.

In April and May the *Gul Mohur* tree, or Flame of the Forest, is in flower. It sheds its leaves at the onset of the hot weather, especially if growing in a very dry situation, and the brilliant red flowers cover the In a damper spot, the new feathery green leaves will come at the same time as the flowers.

Another tree of the same habit of growth is the Indian Laburnum (*Amaltas*). This also sheds its leaves, and then clothes itself in glorious gold, the long, graceful chains of flowers

contrasting with the strong, whitish – grey trunk. As the setting sun touches it, it look like a fountain of fire.

In the hot weather vegetables become scarcer. The egg-plant (brinjal) grows in our fields at any season, but, except in December and January, beans, beetroots, carrots and cabbage, come only from the hills. In the hot weather villagers can no longer grow the gourds which climb over thatched roofs in the rainy season, or the beans which cover trellises over cottage doors. Abundance of fruits is balances by scarcity of vegetables.

So, our cycle of weather for the year is: rain in October and November; cool weather in December and January; increasing heat from February to May; wind in June and July, shrivelling up leaves and bringing dust storms; some heat again in August and September, with pre-monsoon showers leading up to the rains again. Each season has its beauties as well as its discomforts. If we do not have "seasonable" weather, there will be monsoon failures and droughts. We must learn to live with each season as it comes.

WHAT IS TIME?

Really, time is nothing at all. We know it only by the movements of the sun and stars and planets, and the sequence of earthly events. Without these movements and events, it would be totally devoid of meaning, mere nothingness. I have asked people who have studied these matters whether time is anything real in itself, apart from happenings, and the answer seems to be that it is not.

Yet we clamour for more of it. The poet, Andrew Marvell, wrote:

"Had we but world enough and time,"

and complained:

"Always at my back I hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near."

The poet wanted time for his own purpose, which was to court his lady love. We, at Seva Nilayam, want it for other reasons; there is never enough for the day's work. Very many people who come here, volunteers or visitors, say that they have never been in a place where time goes so fast. The days and weeks seem to pass in a flash, and, looking back over the years, it seems they are as brief as a dream.

Day after day, there is so much to do. By seven in the morning we have had our breakfast, and are out in the clinic. Just lately, we have been getting an increase in the number of patients – well over three hundred on many days. This is partly because now, in the dry season, there is not much agricultural work, and partly because new bus routes have been opened, making it easier for some of the people in more isolated villages to each us.

We sit at tables under the trees, taking patient's names, and writing and date-stamping cards. We interview the patients, and send them to the appropriate room, to the doctor, to the

dressing room, or for laboratory tests. The dressing room keeps three or four people occupied, attending to chronic ulcers, neglected wounds, skin infections, sore, cracked and calloused feet, abscesses, cuts and burns. Sometimes there is an emergency – someone has fallen down a well, or been gored by a bull. The dispensary is kept equally busy, and if the line of patients waiting for medicines lengthens too much there will be quarrels about precedence.

When all this is over, and there are no longer babies crying, patients chattering, people coming and going, the place relapses into quietness. But then the next stage has to begin. Floors must be swept, medicines put away, soiled towels removed, used bandages taken to the incinerator. The verandah and waiting place must be cleared of mud, sand, bus tickets, bits of rag, and all the debris left by a crowd. The microscope slides must be washed, the treatment cards filed, the latrines cleaned, and any broken glass buried. All this, on a busy day, is scarcely over when it is time for the evening clinic for the in-patients, many of whom need daily dressings.

At the same time, field workers are ploughing or irrigating; there is weeding to be done, hedges to be maintained, bushes and creepers to be trimmed, buffaloes and chickens to be fed, and compost to be made and turned. Two kitchens feed altogether more than forty people, as in-patients are provided with free food. There are often carpentry jobs to be done, and there are many small maintenance works to be attended to. Except for a few skilled farm workers and a cook for the patients, we have no paid servants. We are a community, and all members take their share of the work, according to their ability. Those patients who are well enough sweep the paths, roll bandages, and cut vegetables.

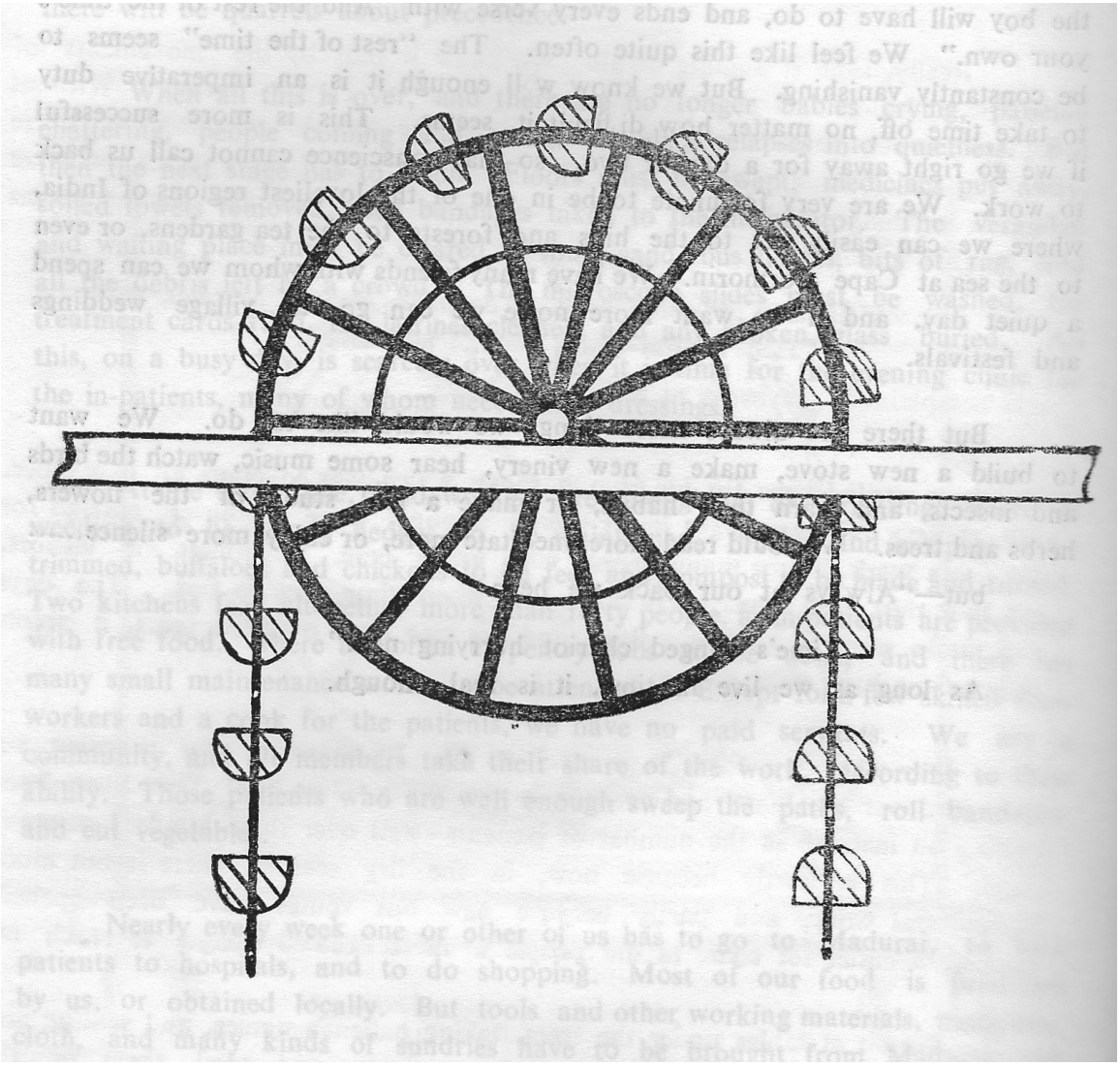
Nearly every week one or other of us has to go to Madurai, to take patients to hospitals, and to do shopping. Most of our food is produced by us, or obtained locally. But tools and other working materials, medicines, cloth, and many kinds of sundries have to be brought from Madurai, and this entails a whole day out, with a forty-mile bus journey each way. At times we have to interview officials in Government departments, and I must confess that we are unusually unwilling to do this, as we rate the practical work much higher than the demands of bureaucracy. Letters like this one have to be composed and sent out, letters received have to be answered, and accounts kept.

There is an old song about a lad applying for a job as farmer's boy. Through a number of verses the farmer reels off and interminable list of jobs which the boy will have to do, and ends every verse with, "And the rest of the time's your own." We feel like this quite often. The "rest of the time" seems to be constantly vanishing. But we know well enough it is an imperative duty to take time off, no matter how difficult it seems. This is more successful if we go right away for a day or two, so that conscience cannot call us back to work. We are very fortunate to be in one of the loveliest regions of India, where we can easily get to the hills and forests, to the tea gardens, or even to the sea at Cape Cormorin. We have many friends with whom we can spend a quiet day, and if we want more noise we can go to village weddings and festivals.

But there are always more things we would like to do. We want to build a new stove, make a new vinery, hear some music, watch the birds and insects, and learn their habits, or make a real study of the flowers, herbs and trees We could read more, meditate more, or enjoy more silence ...

But, "Always at our back we hear, Time's winged chariot hurrying near."

As long as we live in time, it is real enough.



THE STORY OF A PERSIAN WHEEL

A friend of ours, a scientist, was asked to give a talk on "non-conventional sources of energy in India". I think the audience expected an enumeration of sources such as solar energy or nuclear energy. But our friend chose to stand the whole argument on its head by enquiring what is meant by conventional and non-conventional. The result was a great gain in clear thinking.

When man first discovered fire and cooked his food by it, that was non conventional. The conventional thing was to gnaw on uncooked bones. But the non-conventional is constantly becoming the conventional and wood fires must soon have become general. The use of bullocks in agriculture was for thousands of years, conventional, but in a highly mechanised country, like the United States of America today, petroleum and electricity are conventional sources of energy, and bullocks are non-conventional.

It is clear, then, that these terms have no fixed meaning. The important thing is to use the source of energy most suited to the conditions. This is not as easy as it might seem. The new always pushes out the old, people want to be “up to date”, and they find older and discarded methods troublesome to use. Those who want to revive old methods are charged with just liking to be “primitive”.

In some parts of India there has been what may be described as over-electrification. This may sound strange, because large areas are still without electricity outside the cities. But this uneven development depends on the availability of energy sources, including water power in mountain areas. Decisions not to grant more electric connections have been reversed, under pressure from the farmers. The water levels have sunk, and there is more demand than the system will bear. This results in continuous daily power cuts, low voltage, and frequent power failures. The farmer irrigating with an electric pump is totally at the mercy of a system over which he has no control. Two or three days without current may lead to the spoiling of a whole crop. The alternative, diesel oil, is at the mercy of international politics, over which the farmer has, if possible, even less control.

Some people are now thinking that it would be good to have some guarantee of independence. One need not abandon modern methods, but it is interesting to look at certain areas which have used the same traditional method of water raising for centuries. The Persian wheel is found all over northern India and the middle east. It consists of a wheel placed vertically above the well, carrying a flexible chain with small buckets at intervals. The chain, which may have few buckets, or even seventy or a hundred descends into the depths of the well, full buckets rising, and empty buckets going down as the wheel rotates. As each bucket reaches the top of the wheel, it discharges is water into a shallow tank, from which it flows into the irrigation channel. The wheel is set in motion by a pair of bullocks, or buffaloes, or even a camel, walking in a circle, harnessed to a horizontal beam. The horizontal rotation is converted into vertical rotation by means of two simple gear wheels such as were seen in the windmills and water mills upon which Europe depended in the past for grinding its wheat, and which are found, in much more sophisticated form, connected with the back axle of a car today.

For some reason, about which I am not clear, this contrivance has never spread to South India. Here, the traditional method has been for bullocks to raise water by running down an incline, pulling a rope, which passes over a wooden wheel, and has a large bucket attached to it. With increased cultivation and lowered water levels this method is now considered in inadequate.

There has been very little change in the construction of the Persian wheel during the whole of recorded time. Conquerors have come and gone, palaces have been built and crumbled, but still the well wheels of India keep turning and the water gushes through the channels, while the buffaloes follow their patient round.

One place where this tradition is deeply entrenched is Dingari, in southern Rajasthan. It is not remarkable place, neither very fertile nor very barren; the village is of grey-brown, flat roofed mud houses. The dress and manners of the people are old-fashioned by city standards. Sitting there in the blacksmith’s shop we talked to the smith, Narain Lal. He is a thin man, about forty, with noticeable delicate hands. He has none of the burliness associated with the popular idea of a blacksmith, but iron and iron-work are his life. He can answer any question about smithying, and can very quickly evaluate a new idea. Eating roasted corn cobs and drinking many glasses of tea, we worked out the plan that Narain Lal, with two assistants, should come to Seva Nilayam to

make a Persian wheel on the spot. It was an audacious plan. The distance is around a thousand miles, and the journey, from start to finish, takes three nights and two days. The people of Rajasthan do not speak Tamil, and few people in the south speak Hindi. The men's wives raised objections, asking why they needed to go so far away, but I am sure that when they returned, three weeks later, in time to spend Deepavali festival with their families, and laden with presents, all was harmony.

The three men worked as a close team, using only the simplest tools. They seemed to follow each other's movements and requirements instinctively. They had an improvised forge, and they needed outside help only for drilling holes and a welding job. It was like magic to see the perfect wheel take shape, to see strongly riveted gear wheels, and the long chain of buckets, all made without a hitch, and without clutter or commotion. I do not know where you could find more perfect blacksmith's work.

Before they returned to their homes the three men took a trip to the great temple of Rameswaram, which lies at the crossing to Ceylon, and they visited Cape Cormorin, the southernmost point of India.

The wheel is in working order, but it awaits its own pair of buffaloes. The old cart bullocks find it too strange, and shy off it. The young buffaloes just coming up to the right size have not worked yet, and have to be trained. During the coming year we shall see an interesting mixture of conventional and non-conventional sources of energy. Who can say which is which?

1981

A TASK FOR 1981

Some time ago I wrote one of these letters on the subject of leprosy. It was number three of 1977, and was entitled "The Worst Misfortune". It is true that for thousands of years leprosy has been regarded with special horror, as a disease apart from all others, and indeed it has some very repulsive features. But there is another illness, which kills far more people than leprosy; I mean tuberculosis.

A hundred years ago, in Europe, pulmonary tuberculosis was regarded as an incurable disease. The only treatment was to have rest and very good food in a sanatorium, preferably in the mountains of Switzerland. For the poor, living in overcrowded conditions, no help was possible. Today, with the discovery of streptomycin and other antibiotics, with mass X-ray, and greater public education, this disease is almost non-existent in the West.

It is still rampant in India. Antibiotics are available, and there is a public health service; there are X-rays in all the large hospitals, and with many private doctors. Why is it so difficult to cure?

Firstly, there has not been enough public education on this matter. In a country where many people are illiterate, and where there is little scientific education, it is difficult to provide the required knowledge. People do not distinguish between different kinds of cough; asthma, which can make life difficult, but does not kill; a simple respiratory infection resulting from catching a cold; chronic bronchitis, or tuberculosis. The name "TB" is only just coming into use among our patients, and it still seems that they are very far from understanding the implications of the word.

For a patient with tuberculosis to start treatment and to break it or take it irregularly is very dangerous indeed. The bacilli become resistant to antibiotics, and if this patient infects another, that one will also be resistant to the treatment. How can this be explained to someone who has practically no idea of the workings of the body? If we insist strongly on daily injections, the patient will think it is our whim. If there is a marriage in the family, or if he is offered work in some distant place, he will think it no harm to take some time off, especially if he is already feeling better. Some patients go to private doctors, and are told they need injections, which they have to buy. They will buy ten or so, and then not be able to afford more. A few months later, feeling much worse, they go to a hospital, or to another doctor, and resume treatment. When such patients come to us we always enquire very carefully into the past history. If we have reason to believe that they have become resistant to streptomycin we have to treat them with ethambutol, which is a very expensive medicine.

Another reason is sheer inability to get to the place where treatment is given. There are Primary Health Centres set up by the Government at various points in the countryside, and treatment is free. But the patient may have to take a bus journey of several miles, and perhaps a walk as well, and to do this daily will make it impossible to get work; this in turn may make it impossible to get the food he needs to keep up his strength. Added to all this, streptomycin is sometimes in short supply, and the treatment cannot be given. Patients usually need ninety or

more injections of streptomycin, with INH and extra vitamins, followed by a year on tablets. Conscientious doctors find it difficult to feel enthusiasm for the treatment, knowing the wastage of medicine and high failure rate due to irregular attendance. There is a Government survey for detecting cases of leprosy; there is none for tuberculosis. There is now a move to combine the two surveys, but this is mainly advocated by some doctors in privately run institutions.

These problems have been with us for many years at Seva Nilayam. We have cured some individual patients, especially those living nearby, but we cannot say we have done anything to lessen the incidence of tuberculosis in the area. We now feel that we are in a position to do much better. We have a microscope and workers trained to use it. Our procedure is that in all cases where there are symptoms of tuberculosis we do a microscope test on the sputum, several times if necessary. If we detect the tubercle bacilli we send the patient to the Government hospital in Madurai for confirmation and prescription. After than, if the patient does not live within easy reach of our clinic, we have to refer him to the nearest Primary Health Centre. There is no alternative. But we see to it that he has some teaching about the prime importance of regularity, and the fact that the cure is in his own hands. If the patient lives within a radius of two miles from our clinic, or can reach it by a cheap bus journey, we take him on for treatment. For this we cannot grudge the cost. We have to bear the expense of whatever is necessary, but we insist that the patient does not break treatment.

We are now planning to survey this immediate area, and examine all members of families where one is a tuberculosis suspect. We shall be able to find it in the early stages, especially in children, and we can find and treat tuberculosis of glands as well as of lungs. We feel that the only solution is to have many small centres where patients can be considered individually, given instruction and continuous treatment. But how can these be set up in a country as vast as India? Our only answer is that we do what we can.

THE CITY

Madras is our centre, our seaport, our capital city. It is three hundred miles north of Madurai, an overnight journey by train. It has a population of two and a half million, compared with provincial Madurai's five hundred thousand. It has grown up from British, French and Portuguese trading stations, and the two latter have left their names on the areas of Vepery, Luz and San Thome while the centre of British power, Fort St. George, still stands as the office of the State Government. Madras has engulfed many old villages, which still show their traditional plan, centred on the temple. One of these, Mylapore, is said to be the original nucleus of the city.

Mount Road is described in guide books as the main artery of Madras. It runs from Central Station out to what was once open country. It runs past newspaper offices, Government buildings the most elegant handicraft and dress shops, the bustling "Thousand Lights" bazaar, and the monumental St. George's Cathedral. Twenty years ago there were no traffic lights in Mount Road, and none were needed. There was plenty of space for the pedestrian to cross between the infrequent cars and buses, and the lines of slow ox carts. Now Mount Road roars with traffic and subways have been made at the busiest points, as even with the lights crossing is hazardous. Great concrete blocks are rising to house banks and commercial corporations, and to serve as tourist hotels. In some places between them, stand old brick buildings from the days of the British Raj; they have tiled roofs and gabled windows, and ornamental porches. Some are still in use, but

many are ready for the bulldozer. Sometimes I feel that there will be nothing to choose between Baghdad, Madras and Bangkok, our modern cities are so much alike.

Still, there is much more to Madras than this. There are tree-shaded streets, where each house has its garden, with coconut trees, creepers and bougainvilleas, and maybe its own well. Down a grass-grown cul-de-sac a woman will be grazing a cow. Housewives will answer the calls of fire wood sellers, vegetable and flower sellers. The flowers will be placed in the prayer room, where the lamps are kindled at morning and evening. There are also areas of thatched huts, either submerged villages or real slums, and these not seem to decrease in spite of all the new building.

To anyone who knows Madras well there are always quite places to be found, even in the heart of the commercial districts. There is the enclosure of the old Armenian church, which belonged to the once prosperous, now vanished, community of Armenian merchants. The church still stands in a walled space, rich with white frangipani blossoms and full of carefully tended pot plants. The open loggia is lined with old treasured religious pictures.

Madras is a city of the sea. The buffaloes wallow in the tidal Coum river. The white surf pounds endlessly on the long beach. Far out, the sea darkens to indigo where it meets the horizon; away to the north the cranes of the port spidery against the sky. The fishing boats go out all night, and land their catch early in the morning.

One of my first experiences in Madras was the finding of a dead body on the beach. I was walking along the sand, somewhere between the University and the Fort, when some boys called to me and pointed. They were afraid to go near. I went up, and saw that body was that of a woman, young and apparently poor; it had been washed up by the tide for the hair and dress were matted into the sand. I reported to the Police Station in the Fort, rousing a constable off duty, from a nap, in his underwear, on a string cot. I signed a statement, but I never heard any more of the matter. I could not forget her, and to me she is a symbol of the countless poor lives on which the brash and confident modern India is built.

E. F. Schumacher has pointed out that in the immense mass of statistics published on urbanisation in different countries of the world little attention is paid to the pattern of human settlement. Before the advent of modern technology and oil-based transport, there was a limit to the size to which cities could grow. Generally this would be a few hundred thousand. The city needed a hinterland from which to draw its food and raw materials, and with ancient means of transport this could not be more than a certain size. So the city drew its life from the countryside, and in its turn in enriched the country. Human life, says Schumacher, to be fully human, needs both the city and the country.

Modern transport has broken down these limits and there is no bar to urbanisation on a gigantic scale. You can see this happening in all the big cities of India; they feel the irresistible assault of new wealth and technology, the clash of cultures, and the drive to unrestricted growth. Madras is still a small city by world standards but you can see the pattern plainly.

Madurai has five hundred thousand people. You can stand on any small hill and see the open country on all sides of it. When I return from Madras I feel that Madurai is a kindlier, more reasonable and acceptable place.

EARLY IN THE MORNING

The cock crows at three in the morning. Few people take any notice of him then, but if you are awake and listening you will hear the cock in the next village answer him, then another, then one so far away that you hear only a thin thread of sound. They have never seen one another, and they never will, but they have this in fellowship, that they know with certainty when the deepest hours of middle night have passed, and the turning world has come into measurable distance of the dawn. How do they know? The sky is black, and the stars shine undimmed; only perhaps there is a coolness creeping into the air. I think shepherds and night watchmen know this too.

The cocks will crow again at five, and it is about then that things begin to happen. Here, in South India, only ten degrees north of the equator there is not much seasonal variation in the length of day and night, so at five o'clock it may be dark, or just beginning to be light. The flock of mynah birds in the tall trees sets up a loud twittering.

Lights spring up in dim cottage window; the village tea shop opens its door and send a beam of light into the gloom. An old man who has slept too lightly, and has been waiting for morning, wanders across and sits on the bench by the door, watching the charcoal stove glow red, and the kettle begin to steam, while he waits for his first cup of tea.

Well-ropes begin to creak, and women bearing water pots come and go. Yard doors open, and goats come bounding out on their hard, neat feet; they form a flock which sets off for distant grazing grounds, followed by a boy with a stick and a can of food. The sky has become grey, and the stems and fronds of the coconut trees show black against it. The greyness passes imperceptibly into green, then to lime yellow, then into a burst of light, as the sun appears over the hills. The rays sparkle on the brass pots of the women at the well, and scatter new-minted gold on fields and dusty highways. Parties of field workers, twenty or thirty together, set out, chattering, laughing, bantering, and calling to each other.

There is a freshness about South Indian mornings which is a delight. Very few days break rainy or dull. Even in the monsoon time, when it may rain in torrents during the evening and night, most often the dawn is clear, all the clearer for the air being washed by rain. There is a feeling of the world being made anew, which lessens the squalour of even the poorest village. Life begins early in the day; lying in bed in the morning is not an Indian vice. If people want more sleep they usually take it in some shady spot during the heat of noonday.

When did mornings first begin? Can we say that there was ever a first morning on earth? In all the ages since the world began, there has been only a minute fraction of time in which human beings were there to salute the morning. And for only a very small part of the time during which there have been human beings on the earth, say, two percent, have they been civilised and literate, and able to greet the morning with conscious joy, expressed in poetry and music. For countless ages the morning hymn of the earth was instinctive and non-rational, arising spontaneously from forest, mountain and sea shore; from unfolding leaves, awakening beasts, birds taking wing, and creatures creeping on sun-warmed rocks. But now man can use the hour of dawn consciously, for his own good.

In his book *Walden*, which describes his life in the woods, the American writer, Henry David Thoreau, has a beautiful passage in praise of the morning hours. He writes: "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with nature herself … they say that characters were engraved on the bathing tub of King Tching-thang to this effect: Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, forever again."

Thoreau says that moral reform is the effort to awake from sleep. To be awake is to be alive. "I have never met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him the face? We must learn to reawaken and to keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us even in our soundest sleep."

There is a temple in India, near the coast, dedicated to the sun. Upon it stands a band of musicians, carved in stone. They are not playing on their instruments, but gazing out to sea to the point where the first rays of the sun will appear above the horizon. They stand always ready, and it is easy to imagine that at that glorious moment they will sound a glad welcome.

I do not know when King Tching-thang lived, or if he lived, but I think he had the right idea.

WHAT IS POVERTY?

One thing to say about poverty is that it is relative. It is not simple; it has many varying causes, degrees and conditions. When primitive man first learned to grow and harvest grain he felt he had earned a great benefit from the daily necessity of hunting or gathering food, with the ever-present risk of starvation. His life was still miserably poor, but he could not have thought of himself as poor, because there were no richer people, or any other people, to compare himself with. In the historical past there were many kings and leaders of people who would be reckoned poor by modern standards; they had palaces which did not afford the most elementary comforts which even a working man expects today.

Someone has said that poverty is a state of mind rather than a physical condition. To this, it might seem justifiable to answer "Only try living on an Indian coolie's wages for a few months and then say if poverty is a state of mind". But there is some truth in this. In every Indian village there are rich and poor, but the average villager does not think of himself as poor; his life seems to him quite normal. It is only those who have seen the advances of technology and luxury in cities like Bombay, or have visited Europe or America, who regard the Indian village as a hopelessly poor and backward place. To those used to the village it offers a richly varied life, full of activity, pleasures and festivities, as well as the sorrows attendant on human life everywhere.

Then who are the really poor? Newcomers to India are often surrounded by crowds of beggars, generally in railway stations and bus stands. Most of them make an adequate living. You have only to watch them for a while to know that. But it has been said, it is not those you see, but those you don't see, who are really poor. There is a truth in this, but it needs finding. There are people who are very sick, and unable to work, and are forced to beg even though unused to it. An experienced eye can pick them out. The Government supplies free medical attention, but admission in overcrowded hospitals or for chronic illnesses, is not easy. As Indian religion and philosophy lay stress on almsgiving, this is their only hope.

There are vast numbers who come to the cities seeking work and fail to find it; they are left without means of subsistence. There are also better educated people suffering in penury. They need to educate their children. They wish to keep their children at school, but though tuition may be free, there are many incidental expenses, and owing to some misfortune, such as the death of a parent or a failure in business, they have to face poverty or send their children out to unskilled jobs. These are the unfortunate ones in the teeming mixed population of the cities.

In the village it is quite different. The village has hierarchical structure which still exists but has largely broken down under the impact of modern technology and the commercialization of farming. It would seem a great advantage when a new road is made to a village, and lorry services use it. It does bring benefits to rich and middle farmers. They can market their produce wherever the price is favourable, whether it is Madras or Bangalore, instead of taking small cartloads to the local market. But one result is an increase in the growing of cash crops, which are cleared away, and a decrease in mixed or subsistence farming. My memory goes back twenty years, but I have talked to others whose childhood was passed in villages twice as long ago, and I believe that more good things stayed in the villages, vegetables, fruits, varieties of grain, milk and butter. More money comes into the village through commercial farming, and this is evident in better dress. There are more good shirts and nylon saris. In any bus load of passengers there are fewer men without shirts. But there are less good foods to buy with the money.

The milk marketing unions are a great benefit to small farmers, or to people with only one cow or buffalo. They will take even a small quantity of milk – but that milk goes to the towns, and is largely bought by the rich and middle class. Even the poor of the towns cannot afford it. There are now many milk bars in the cities and at the one in Madurai bus stand you can see well dressed people drinking whole bottles of milk. But no milk goes back to the villages, and it is impossible to get it there at a price the inhabitants can pay. In olden days the bigger farmers used to make butter for their own use and sell the buttermilk, which was a cheap and nourishing drink for the poor. Today, you have to go to some village far from the road to find milk or buttermilk on sale.

Commercialism has also meant that the village takes less responsibility for its members. Some of the responsibility still remains. There are old or disabled people who are collectively supported by the village, and there are many householders who give meals to a needy person at their doors. This sense of responsibility is, I feel, something that should be built on not allowed to be eroded by commercial competition.

But this applies to people who, by reason of age or disability are unable to work. There are able-bodied poor who have nothing but a hut and few goats, and the labour of their hands. It has sometimes been remarked that in any society only the very rich and the very poor are free. Very often those who have nothing, and therefore no responsibilities do not want to enter into any scheme for their betterment. A group of social workers known to us started a project for increasing vegetable growing. It failed, because they found that those who wanted to grow vegetables were already doing so, but others, who were accustomed to eating the wild greens they could gather at the field sides, did not want the extra outlay on a vegetable garden which they did not think would bring any proportionate return.

It might be said, if they are happy as they are why not leave them alone? But in case of illness or accident such people have no reserve and are easily reduced to destitution.

India is very far from being a welfare state, and with its vast population and high rate of illiteracy, that goal seems impossible, at least for many generations. Even in the West, people are beginning to find out that the welfare state has disadvantages as well as advantages, and situations can arise in which it becomes impossible to maintain its benefits.

I believe that the trend of development, under pressure from western technology and industrial capitalism, has a violent and often destructive effect on older societies. I do not think the answer is to preserve old institutions like fossils, however good they may have been. The answer would be – if it were remotely possible – to get an economic policy based on understanding and on the good of all people, not only the rich and powerful.

I do not belittle what has been done for the poor by the Indian Government. So many slums have been cleared, so many houses have been built, in town and country, wells dug, and employment schemes started. But I feel that these are like the eddies in a stream, which reverse the general direction in small areas only.

Before we think of the Indian people as a mass of undifferentiated poor, let us try to understand their situation, the structure of the society in which they live. Only by understanding can our help be well directed.

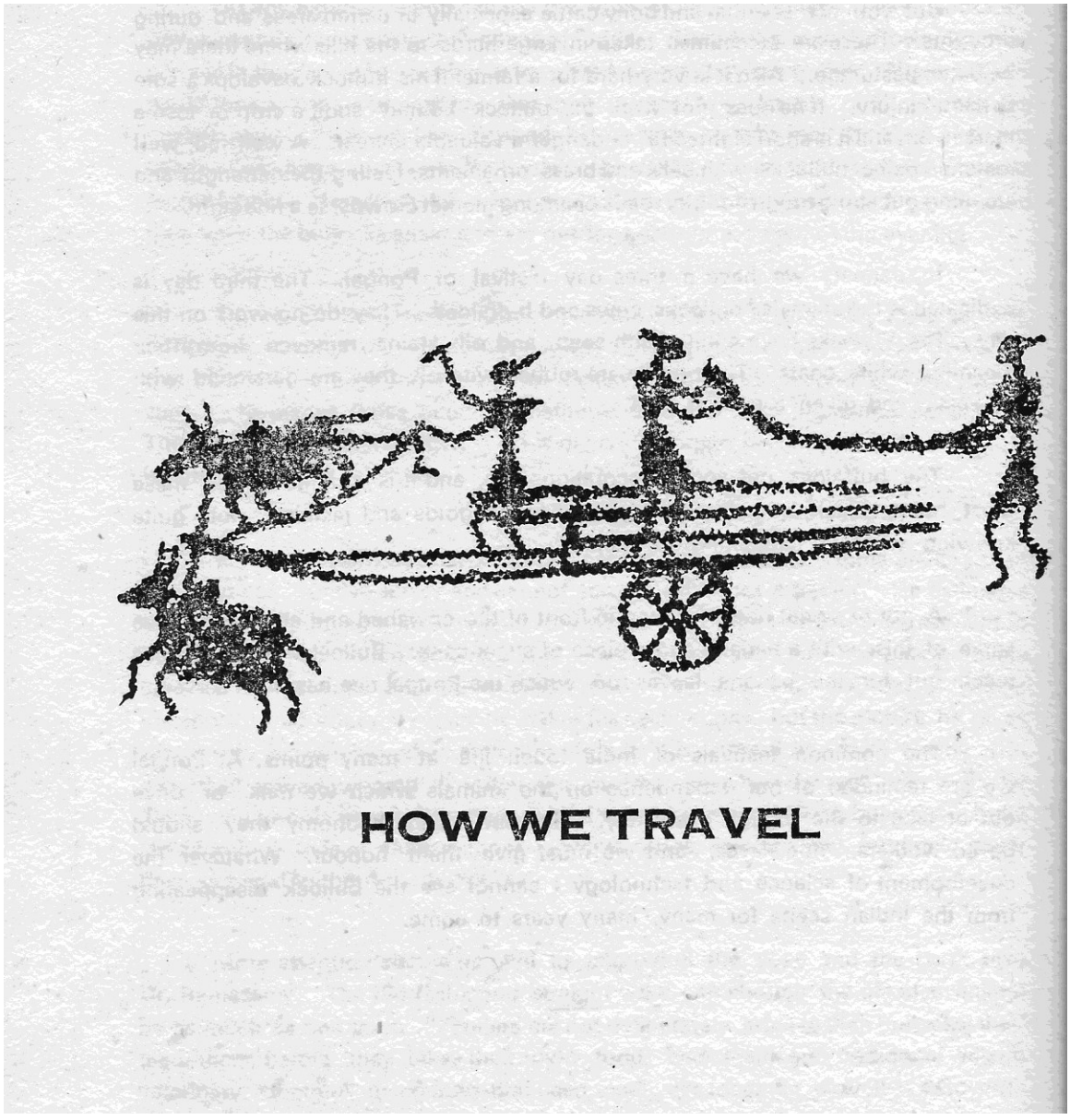
HOW WE TRAVEL

I was sitting in a lurching overcrowded bus, when my companion said to me, "I wonder where all these people go". I replied, "Well, we are two of them and are adding to the number".

When we first came here there were no buses on our road – I mean the road from Aundipatty to Seva Nilayam – a six mile journey. You either had to go by bullock cart, or walk, or perhaps you managed to get into a small broken down van, (unlicensed) which might or might not get up enough strength to start. This was a hardship, but there were always friendly feelings among road users. I seldom had to walk the whole way without being offered a lift on a bullock cart. Failing that, a group walking in my direction would be sure to offer to carry my shopping bags.

Now, in spite of our having a number of buses every day, Aundipatty bus stand is crowded. As the single decker bus appears a wave of movement begins among the crowd and it seems that a seething mass surges towards the bus from all directions. The lucky forty-nine able to mount first get seats, enviable places, even though it may mean a cramped journey. The forty-four standing places are soon taken up, then more gain a handhold on the hand rails and a foot hold on a couple of inches of step – and push – until those blocking the front and rear entrances of the bus are forced to move into the interior. And all this time the small panel at the front of the bus proclaims "49 sitting and 44 standing passengers allowed". The conductor wedges himself against an upright and manages to extract fares from all passengers within his reach, while a fierce wind can be blowing through the window frames. There is no glass of course, except at the front and rear; ventilation is a necessity.

Our poor little road, with all its pot-holes and crumbling edges, leads nowhere but up to the last village at the base of the mountain, so it is not surprising that the Highways Department feels we are a low priority in the allocation of steam rollers. Although the bus fares have risen, travel is still cheap and I think would be hard to find a more economical use of petrol than on the Aundipatty – Seva Nilayam road.



On the main roads things are usually better organised and standing passengers generally not allowed, but on the by-roads buses are a law unto themselves.

However, the bullock cart is the indispensable means for transporting farm produce, straw, manure and implements. They are heavy without springs, but are cherished and cared for. The pair of bullocks should be evenly matched in height, colour and build. Badly matched bullocks indicate an owner who is not rich enough to pick and choose.

Most bullocks are well fed, but foreigners often accuse the Indian farmer of working underfed and unfit animals. Of course they have never been in the position of having a crop which must be marketed to avoid loss. If such a loss is incurred an owner will be even less able to feed his bullocks and his family too but at the feast of Pongal, after rice harvest, farmers paint their carts and even the bullocks' horns bright colours, and go proudly, with bells jingling. The bullock cart is also the means for attending marriages and other festivals at villages which are away from the bus routes. Then, if it is hot weather, poles will be set up along the sides of the cart and an awning stretched over them. The cart will be filled like an overflowing pot, with gaily dressed women and excited boys and girls.

But all these are short journeys. As far more people are travelling than ever before the trains are generally full. There are peak periods and slack ones – the beginning and end of school holidays are the top, while monsoon weather, if there are no special festivals, is low. It is sometimes very difficult to book a sleeping berth even at several days' notice. As India is a vast country you may need to spend two or three nights in the train. Numbers are strictly limited in the reserved compartments but the unreserved compartments are often as crowded as the Aundipatty bus, and it takes great courage to face more than a short journey in them.

Today there are many long distance 'luxury' buses on the roads. They are well padded but can give a sense of claustrophobia. I vastly prefer train travel. In these luxury buses you look at the back of peoples' heads. In a train you face your fellow passengers and during the long day you make acquaintance with people of many races and creeds. Some share food with you, or do acts of kindness, like fetching water at stations. You learn much of the families, businesses and the purpose of their travel. Even if the language is different from yours you can find some meeting ground and the faces, dress and behaviour reveal much about them.

A long distance train is a little community in itself.

They way we travel may not be the most comfortable in the world, but it is certainly not the least interesting.

ANBU ILLAM

The centre of Madurai city is the great Meenakshi Temple. Its four towers, covered with hundreds of sculptured figures, are visible for miles around. The ancient streets press closely upon it, like those of old English cathedral towns, and are busy with the trades of cloth merchants,

jewellers, fruit sellers, dealers in oil and spices. Every day hundreds of pilgrims pass through these streets to enter the dim resounding halls, and to offer their worship.

Across the river, to the north of the city, is another centre of pilgrimage. It is the Government Hospital, and the pilgrimage is one of pain and suffering anxiety or despair.

The hospital, constantly extended by new blocks, is always full. Thousands of people pass through it every day and the lines of waiting patients are formed by 6.30 in the morning. New patients may have to wait for several hours before reaching the doctor. Then, they get a preliminary examination, and perhaps a prescription to be taken to the dispensary, but they may be told to go to another room for further examination or for tests, or told to come to a special clinic on another day. Only the severest cases can be admitted at once. The wards are always overcrowded with patients lying on mats between the beds or in the corridors.

The hospital serves a vast area of country, in Madurai and Ramnad Districts. True, there are many smaller rural hospitals, both government and private, and in many of these the facilities for treatment have been much extended in recent years. But we in our clinic know very well that the only place for many of the cases we wish to refer is Madurai Government Hospital.

The doctors who conduct the preliminary examinations will not be aware, unless specially told, that a certain patient has come forty or fifty miles by bus, and will need somewhere to stay for these few days until the examination has been completed.

To the patient from a remote village, the hospital is another world. He has not the temerity to say that he cannot wait three days and has not enough money to go home and come back again.

People in the villages live largely on local produce. They are not used to buying food at city prices. And where can they stay? They are not used to hotels and lodging houses. Often they sleep on the sand outside the hospital. Perhaps on a hot night looking up at the stars, and needing no bed cover, this is not worse than their experience at home. But there can be lashing rain or searching wind, the roads may run like rivers and there may not be a dry spot to lie down in. They may meet the morning wet and shivering.

In this same area busy and crowded, there is a house in a small street, Its named is *Anbu Illam.* That means the Place of Kindness. *Anbu* may be translated "love" but it means respectful affection. A child writing to his mother will begin *Anbu Amma – "*Dear Mother". I think in this case, kindness is the right word. Any patient who is sent by us, or by another institution, with a letter, and is genuinely waiting for hospital treatment, is given food and a place to sleep free of charge. This means that they can face the prospect of a few days waiting until they are either admitted or sent back to us with their prescription, and they do not wander off looking for shelter.

I have often written on the theme "Small is Beautiful" and I think *Anbu Illam* is a very good example. It was started in response to a felt need. A friend of ours who had spent many years in India found needy patients coming to her door for help. So she took a small room in the same area, where she could meet them, then later she took this house and named it *Anbu Illam*. She is no longer in India, but *Anbu Illam* is run by an Indian Committee, and receiving donations to keep its work going.

It is humble and unpretentious; it is not part of any large scheme. It does not think it is called upon to develop into something else, to be some sort of medical or educational institution. It is content with offering kindness where it is needed.

There are many such small needs which are overlooked because people think that they must always be planning and developing for the future and their minds are not on the here and now.

Humility is a much neglected virtue today.

1982

MANY PATHS

Jodhpur station is a very busy place. It is in Rajasthan, at the end of the green cultivated land, and the beginning of the desert which stretches away to the Pakistan border. Many races and tribes meet there, camel breeders from Jaisalmer, Marwari cloth merchants, business men representing companies exploiting the mineral wealth of Rajasthan, villagers going to a famous fair. When I was last there, this fair was in progress, and the station platform was dazzling with the costumes of Rajasthani and Bihari peasant women in holiday dress – yellow, orange, crimson and purple, with tinseled borders and filmy veils.

At the same time a pilgrim train had halted just outside the station. This train tours many of the sacred places of India stopping for a few days at each. It offers no amenities besides hard wooden seats and berths, but it tours for three months, and the fare is amazingly low – one hundred and fifty Rupees (about 9 pounds, sterling, at the current rate of exchange). The pilgrims wash their clothes and bathe at the station fountains, and the open space outside may be glowing with cooking fires as they bake their wheaten cakes on the side of mounds of hot ashes, and the sauce pot bubbles on top. The pilgrims will make their devotions at the temple, see all the sights, compare the local agriculture and the price of grains, oil and vegetables with their own, and have a good rest and sleep. As in medieval Europe, piety can be combined with a good deal of jollity and the desire to travel can be provided with an acceptable aim.

On the crowded station platform, where groups of fairgoers sat gossiping and business men in neat cool shorts, carrying brief cases, stood drinking tea at the refreshment stall, an old woman with a white sari drawn over her grey hair, sat cross-legged, with erect back and bent head, rhythmically clapping together a pair of tiny brass cymbals, only two or three inches across, which are often carried by traveling holy men. She was doing her '*bhajan*', worship with music, even though her music was only the clapping together of two small discs of brass. I could not hear, in the hubbub, whether she was singing softly, or just repeating holy names. No-one thought her at all strange, no one knocked against her in that swirling mass, all treated her with respect. This was her chosen way and who could question it?

To the Hindu, religion is not a set of dogmas to be asserted but a path to be followed. Every soul is known to the eternal and must pass from time to eternity. The path may be wild and rugged, or direct and peaceful. It may be full of deceptions and illusions, it may lead, as many think through many incarnations, but the picture of the devout Hindu is always that of the seeker, the pilgrim from time to eternity.

Perhaps this may not seem to square with what one sees in the city streets every day. 'Religion' can turn into conjuring tricks, self advertisement or sheer begging, arousing either the credulous interest or the annoyance of tourists. Also there is a multiplicity of gods and a seemingly endless supply of legends about them. There is rivalry between the devotees of one god and another. There are local gods in the villages who are unknown to orthodox Hinduism.

But God can be worshipped under many names and forms, each embodying some aspect of the one. Man is body and spirit, not pure spirit only, and needs some material image as the

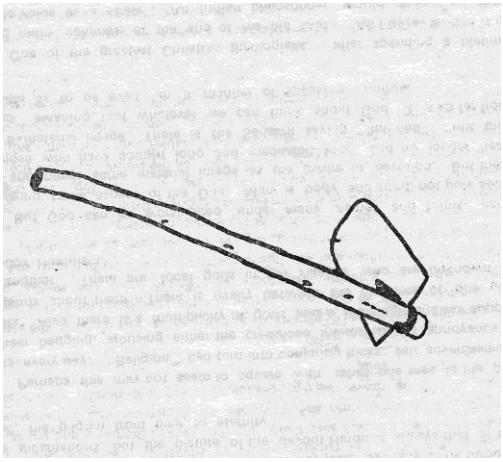
centre of devotion. But there are those who have sought long and meditated long, and no longer need such a material image. There is the Sanskrit saying "*neti neti*" "not this, not this," meaning that whatever we can think about God it is so far from adequate as to be even, in a manner of speaking, untrue.

One of the greatest Christian theologians, after spending a lifetimes writing many volumes, at the end of his life said "All I have written is of as little value as a straw". An Indian philosopher would understand that. A very ancient Sanskrit prayer says,

Lead me from the unreal to the real

Lead me from darkness to light

Lead me from death to immortality.



DOWN TO EARTH

The sketch shows the "*mun vetti*" or, colloquially "*mumti*" which is the main tool, almost the only hand tool, used in gardening.

Every garden has to be levelled, to allow for cutting irrigation channels and getting an even flow of water. Without irrigation you can only get a crop during the monsoon. To boys and young men brought up to handle the mumti it is all that is needed. They appear to have an inborn skill at levelling the surface: the bunds are shaped, the soil is broken to a fine tilth, the drills are drawn straight and at even depth for seed sowing. I have often marvelled at this skill. Foreign visitors who may be very good gardeners require a rake, a hoe and a measuring line, and at home they would probably have several other types of tool. I myself require some of these aids but if offered to the local farm boys they are disregarded.

The staple food of South India is rice and vegetables; butter milk or curd may also be included. For rice, may be substituted other grains, which are varieties of millet. There are many

light dishes both sweet and savoury, but these are considered as extras, especially among the poorer people in the villages. Mutton or chicken may also be considered among the extras. There are few absolute vegetarians in our particular area but many who taste meat seldom, mainly at marriages and festivals.

In the past, India has suffered from disastrous famines but today, with greatly increased grain production, and prompt Government action in case of monsoon failures, floods or cyclones, there is little chance of anyone dying of starvation because of shortages of food.

In the nineteen years our clinic has been running at Seva Nilayam, we have met with very few people who have actually not had enough to eat. But we find many who are suffering from vitamin and protein deficiency due to their eating large quantities of milled rice and little else.

It is very easy to stand up and lecture on balanced died. In a clinic you have a captive audience. But it is another matter to live in village conditions and to try to produce your own food in sufficient variety all the year round. There are vegetable markets in all the small country towns, but these are often poorly supplied in the dry season. There are a number of wild plants which can be eaten as greens, but while these are luxuriant in the monsoon time, they become scarce in the heat of April and May.

In the surrounding hills, which rise to a height of seven thousand feet above sea level, all the vegetables of the temperate zone can be grown. That is, of course, where are soil and the lie of the land are suitable. There are many towering barren rocks, and at a lower level are rich plantations of coffee, bananas and oranges. But the market of the hill station Kodaikanal is always well stocked with cabbage and cauliflower, carrots, beetroots, French beans, potatoes and sweet corn. The more perishable ones, like cauliflower and sweet corn, find their way to the big market in Madurai, but some of the carrots and potatoes can be found in the small shops in Aundipatty. But prices are high compared with those of the indigenous vegetables.

Many of the latter belong to the gourd family. There are “bottle gourds” (which were originally used as bottles before factory made glass became common) ridge gourds, pumpkins and cucumbers. Many cottagers who have no land at all beyond the patch their little hut stands on, will grow a gourd plant on the thatch during the rainy season. The rapidly growing shoots soon cover the roof spreading out broad velvety leaves, with the white glowing gourds in between. Ridge gourd, and various kinds of beans, are often on a temporary arbour, or *pandal,* in front of the house.

In the fields, tomatoes, *brinjals* (egg plants), small cluster beans and the long pods known as “Ladies’ fingers” can be grown. These fill the local markets as well as being sent to the towns. If there is sufficient sunshine between the monsoon storms, they may do well, but sometimes they are lashed by rain day after day and the fields become rushing streams.

Newly sown small seeds are in danger of being washed out of the ground. I have at times covered them with old sacks to prevent this, only removing the sacks when the seeds have germinated.

After the rains there are mild days in December when all is green and flourishing, but this gentle time is over all too soon and the heat creeps back. The feast of Pongal, in mid-January, a happy celebration like a harvest festival, always seems to me to mark the end of this period.

French beans and spinach, which grow luxuriantly in the rain, dry up and turn yellow very quickly. Only by copious irrigation can the garden be kept productive and flourishing.

It is perhaps because vegetables are so seasonal that people in the villages have not regarded them as an essential part of diet. The worst time of all is July, when harsh, dusty winds sweep down the valley, and all growing things seem to shrink back into themselves.

This is what makes talk about diet sometimes seem futile (although it is necessary to go on talking). Imagine an old woman who has come to our clinic, with many aches and pains which we can easily ascribe to vitamin deficiency. She needs to eat fresh vegetables very day, but to return home she may walk along sandy tracks where only the cactus and the thorn bush stand against the wind. If she could find the money to buy vegetables, she might have to take a half hour bus journey to town market. More would be spent on the bus fare than on the vegetables. Or the mother of a family, who has been out all day weeding or pulling ground nuts, could perhaps pick a few wild greens on the way home. Many do, but it is getting dark (in these latitudes darkness comes early all the year round) and she has to light the fire and boil the rice. It is easier to take a few dried chillies or a pickle as a relish, than to bother cooking greens.

If you live with the people you know them, and perhaps you can help them, but we try never to ask the impossible.

THE RIVER

Less than two miles to the south of Seva Nilayam there is a mountain which is a local landmark. Its outline descends in a series of humps from its highest point. Its lower slopes are covered with scrub jungle, but its summit is bare rock.

If you climb for some way up this mountain you look down on a river with many tributaries. The converging streams make a pattern like the branches of a tree. Its main stream arises among high rocky hills; it skirts our mountain and wanders off though level farmland. But it is a “river” in the South Indian sense. It is pure sand and flows with water only when there is a thunderstorm in the mountains, and that is chiefly in the monsoon. The great rivers of North India, the Ganges and Yamuna, flow constantly because they are fed by the snows of the Himalayas. Our river is dry for about three hundred days in the year, but when it carries down the storm waters it is a devastating torrent. It changes course, branches, and joins up again.

The roots of trees and bushes undermined by it hang like matted hair till the whole plant falls and is carried away. I have seen a massive peepul tree and half a palmyra palm grove fall like this. Once a whole village had to be evacuated for fear of the flood. At night the thunder rolls and crashes among the high rocks and you listen for the waters roaring down, but after a few hours it subsides, and with the first light woman and children are out gathering broken branches and torn up bushes for firewood.

Then it dries up again and becomes an expanse of sand, burning to the feet, and dazzling with quartz gravel.

If you look down from the mountain you can also see a very small green patch which appears to be covered with little round bushes. The bushes are in fact well-grown mango trees

planted by us in five acres of land which was given to Seva Nilayam for food production. The space between the mangoes is planted with ground nuts and beans, and there is a large round irrigation well with bricked sides. There is a hedge of lush green bushes which serve both as wind break (for the wind can be fierce at times) and a source of green manure. It is delightful to walk the half mile up the road in the evening, and to spend time in the mango garden where the trees, now beginning to bear fruit, stand in their ordered lines, touched by the sunset light.

This was not achieved without a hard struggle. During the well digging one side of the excavation collapsed, owing to the looseness of the soil – and three of the mason's young assistants were momentarily buried. They were immediately rescued, but it was a terrifying experience. At the south corner of the field we had to erect a wall of large flat stones to stop erosion by the river. After the first planting of young mangoes a number of them died, owing to the heat and lack of shelter. The sandy soil is "hungry" and can absorb great quantities of manure and compost.

Outside, the land devastated by the river is a flat expanse, where only harsh weeds and cacti survive and the only movement is that of the changing shadows of the clouds and the passing herds of goats.

Looking at this, I wonder how far it would be possible to reclaim the land. To control the river would be a major task for the Public Works Department, even if it were possible at all, which I doubt. Our little corner among the hills is of slight importance. The road leads nowhere but to scattered villages and if it is washed away it can be, rather perfunctorily, repaired. But I think also of what Schumacher said: "Man is a child of nature, and not its Master". To some extent man can dictate to nature, but there comes a point when nature brings him to a halt. The sandy waste and barren rock have their own wild beauty and will not be tamed. We should be humble before it.

BADRINATH

For more than a thousand years pilgrims have traveled the road from Hardwar, where the Ganges enters the plains of North India, to Badrinath, far up in the Himalayas, in the area in which many streams coverage to form the mighty river. Badrinath is one of the holiest remotest and least accessible of the shrines of India.

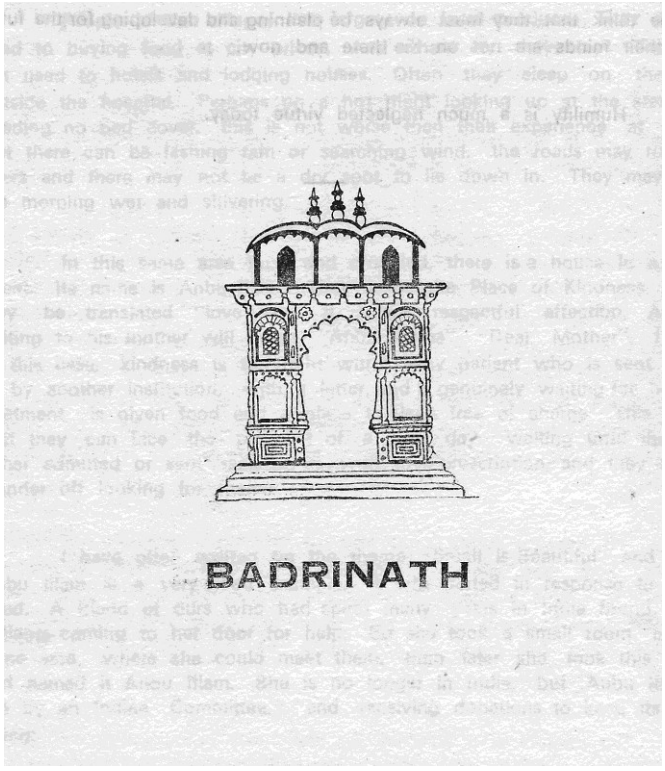
For more than a thousand years pilgrims went on foot. Directions given earlier in this century say that the traveler must take a waterproof groundsheet, a sleeping bag, woollen clothes, leather boots and socks; he must have an injection against cholera and should take a kerosene stove. Potatoes could be bought on the way, but he must not expect fresh fruit or vegetables. But for centuries the pilgrim went with only a woollen shawl and leather sandals, a staff and a bowl.

Now there is a bus route all the way and peaches, plums and small apples can be bought at roadside stalls and good food in village shops. Between September and May the road is closed, being blocked by snow, but from May to September it is possible to reach Badrinath within two days, with a night's rest half way. It has always seemed to me that a pilgrimage should entail some special effort or hardship, but I must confess that without the bus I should never have been able to go there.

It was late July, and that is the rainy season, On the lower slopes the forest was green and dripping wet. Waterfalls splashed on to the bus and small landslips blocked the road with shale and gravel, which was hastily being cleared. After the first hundred miles we stayed for the night at a travellers' lodge, and set out the next morning in rain. But as the weather cleared, valley after valley opened up, each deeper and grander than the last. Far above, the heights were swathed and banded with mist; far below the streams roared through vertically cut gorges. We could look down on a tiny suspension bridge appearing no bigger than a toy, and realize with a thrill of fear that we had to cross that ... down, down, by fantastic bends and turns, and at last, after clattering across the bridge, up, up, by a similar number of bends.

Above Jothimath there are no more trees. The heights rise bare and stark. A bitter wind is blowing as the bus turns into a broad valley, between jagged black peaks, snow crowned. The little town consists only of travellers' lodges and a few shops, which will all be closed and abandoned when the snow descends. We are at a height of ten and a half thousand feet, and very near the Tibetan border.

As dusk descends the bell chimes from the temple across the river; and worshippers flock there. Within the sanctuary a fire is kindled and brought out to be carried through the throng. It is light, pure light, symbol of the Eternal. The temple is dedicated to Vishnu, the Creator. The endearing legends of the Hindu gods, and heroes, half human, are left behind, in the face of One Reality.



Shells embedded in the rocks of the highest Himalayas prove that the whole vast mountain range was once at the bottom of the sea. The limestone rocks were laid down through many millennia from the bodies of minute sea creatures. Then the whole mass was lifted by movements of the earth's crust, so powerful that the strata which were once horizontal may even be vertical.

Indian philosophy sees the whole process as one of creation and destruction; and here it is happening before our eyes. Great slabs of rock split off and fall into the abyss. The streams are turbid with sand and silt, which is carried down to form the fertile soil of the Gangetic plain The pebbles are rolled in the torrents till they are polished and round. Every day thousands of tons of debris must be carried down. The day we descend from the Himalayas they are already less than the day we ascended.

Such is the grandeur that perhaps a thousand years will pass before there is any perceptible change in the outline. But the process is inevitable. At the height of Badrinath we feel like the tiniest ants on the earth's surface, but in the light of eternity the mountains themselves are ephemeral.

Perhaps in some remote age they will again be under the sea. Perhaps new ranges will arise in other regions. The mightiest mountains are ever-changing.

"Like clouds they shape themselves and go."

HELPING THE HANDICAPPED

The cottage door is shut all day, the earth floors are bare and there is no fire or food. Only at evening will members of the family return, and then a fire will be kindled and food prepared. The mother may have been out harvesting onions or ground nuts, the children may have gone to work at some distant plantation of tea or spices, where wages are higher than in the village.

Suppose a defective child is born into such a family, a child that cannot talk or walk, or even feed itself. This can only be seen as a terrible burden. For thousands of years the human race has been practicing infanticide for various reasons – too many children, unwanted girls or hopeless mental or physical disability. Surely, of these reasons, the last is the most understandable and forgivable. The child may be given traditional medicines, or taken to some famous temple, without result. So it may be that parents will decide quietly that the child should not live, or the elders, the uncles, will advise that it should be done away with. But modern humanism and the advances of science now give us more hope that the retarded and disabled may be helped to some kind of life that is worth living, even if restricted.

There is another side to the picture. The Indian village is a tolerant place with regard to physical abnormalities. In a small community a dwarf or cripple is easily accepted and does not feel the harshness of the competitive world. In a village near to us a very small dwarf has been most popular since his early childhood, and I have seen seriously retarded twins of the type

known as mongols, nursed and petted and carried about by the village girls as if they were dolls, and this is best thing for them as they need constant stimulation to bring out what powers they have.

There is very little knowledge as to what deformities or disabilities are curable. Babies with hare lip and cleft palate have been brought to us only because they were suffering from colds or bronchitis, and we have taken the initiative in getting them to the plastic surgeon in Madurai Government Hospital. But one successful case soon encourages others to believe in the possibility of a cure.

But there are many difficulties in applying the benefits of medical technology in the villages. People who have to go on rocky roads or to step in mud and water find it impossible to use special shoes or calipers. They would rather go barefoot even if they limp badly. Wheel chairs are not practicable in narrow cobbled streets or sandy lanes. Institutions where special help can be given are far apart and a suitable one may be in another state where a different language is spoken. Mothers of small children suffering from blindness or the effects of polio are not willing to let them out of their care at an early age, when they could benefit most from skilled teaching.

Access to ordinary medicine is now much easier than it was when we first came here. There are more doctors and hospitals and bus transport reaches to surprisingly remote places. But it is still not much easier to surmount the difficulties connected with the care of the handicapped. Vellore Hospital, about 300 miles from Madurai, is famous for physiotherapy and rehabilitation of the disabled. So it was to Vellore that we sent one of our patients, Alagar, a young man who had his spine broken in a bus accident. He was unable to stand or walk a step. He had bedsores and needed long treatment before he was even able to go to hospital. When we sent him to Vellore, his mother and brother went, and took a room nearby so that they could take turns to wait on him by day and night. But Alagar responded so well to treatment and showed such courage and perseverance that during his last month in hospital the doctor asked his relatives to leave, so that he could become quite self-reliant. He can now walk with crutches and calipers and is learning to become a tailor. He went through a tailoring course in the hospital and now he has an electric sewing machine which he can use at home.

We are trying to care for a girl of ten who has a very rare condition of loss of sensation in the feet. It was thought at first that she had leprosy, as this disease causes loss of sensation, but tests proved that she has not. But the slightest injury to the feet causes deep ulcers and she has already lost some of her toes and must always wear special shoes. As she must have some indoor occupation we have sent her to a hospital where she has stayed for some months and besides having treatment for her ulcers, has been taught to read and write. We are hoping to find a place where she can continue her education and also learn some useful trade or handicraft. She belongs to a family of the dhobi (washerman) caste but she can never follow that occupation which entails standing in stony streams and river beds to beat out the clothes. We have not yet found a place for her but are making enquiries.

Another patient is a little boy who was horribly burned when a kerosene lamp fell on him from a shelf. His scars are healed, but he needs long and difficult plastic surgery. In the intervals between operations he stays with us and has an active merry life with the other child patients, so he is overcoming what must have been a shockingly traumatic experience. We hope that in time his features will be made sufficiently normal so that he will not suffer from a life long handicap.

There are means available in India for the treatment of many such handicapped young people. It is an important part of the work to let them and their families know what can be done, and help them to make use of the means offered.

KHOLAM

Indian women rise early. No good housewife will be in bed after the sun is up. The cottage dweller will sweep the floors with a broom made from leaf stalks of coconut trees or from the leaves of palmyra palms. She will go to the village well for the morning's water supply.

In country towns many houses have a well in the garden, and some have a laid-on water supply. The floor may be of tile or a kind of small mosaic which builders use today. Rooms are built with a small outlet for water so that floors can be swilled easily, and the water is brushed out with the same coconut brooms. The town housewife will have a servant, a women who comes in daily to kindle the fire, sweep the floors and help with kitchen tasks such as grinding spices on the heavy granite grindstone.

But a very important part of the morning's proceedings is the drawing of a *kholam* design on the ground outside the door.

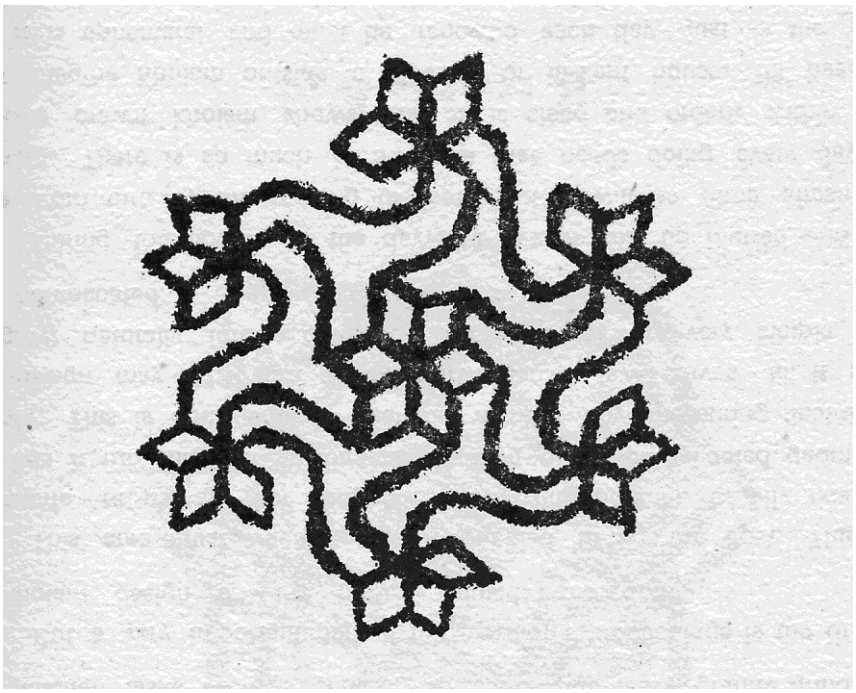
This area must be swept and sprinkled to lay the dust. Then the housewife – or perhaps her daughter – takes white powder, usually rice flour, and lets it run through her fingers, drawing out a complicated geometrical design. This is done entirely freehand without any measuring instrument. The design may start with a few dots, then a few curves, till it seems to grow naturally into a complete whole. Some are very simple, some very complicated.

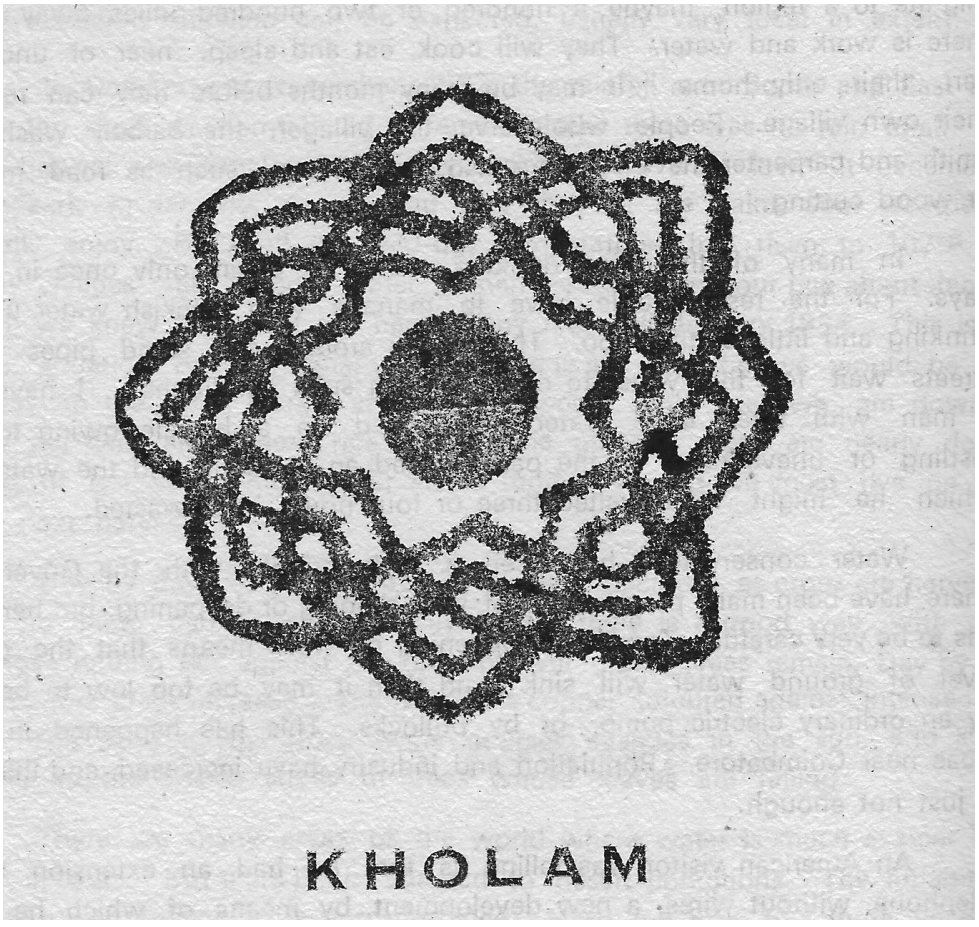
During the course of the day the design will be blurred and then quite worn out, by the passing of feet. But it will be done afresh next morning. There is so much in a house that needs doing every day and a nicely drawn *kholam* shows that all is clean and orderly within. You can't imagine *kholam* outside a slovenly or ill-kept house. Its beauty is that it is ephemeral, and must be renewed each day, just as the house must be swept and the meal prepared each day.

Young girls like to collect and practise kholam designs. Most are traditional and were probably made by their grandmothers and great-grand-mothers.

At Seva Nilayam we have our simple *kholam* designs for everyday but on special festival days we have kholam to match the occasion. The whole kitchen floor is covered with designs. The top of the stove is decorated. The door sills and verandahs may have long borders. As we take our shoes off before entering a room, it is trodden on only barefoot, so it lasts well.

There is much latent artistic sense in many people who could not draw or paint, nor perhaps even write their names. So we have printed some very simple but typical *kholam* designs on our greeting cards.





KHOLAM

1983

BULLOCKS

At any big market you can see the rows of carts standing. The bullocks are unyoked and sit munching their heaps of fodder. They have travelled by night; they can see in the dark and they know very well where they are going. Night travel is partly for coolness and partly so that their owner can get his produce into the market early. After he has finished his selling he will buy the kind of goods needs by farmers, such as tools, implements, sacks, ropes, and perhaps presents for the family. He will snatch a few hours sleep under the cart or under a tree, and then yoke the bullocks again and set out for home in the cool of the evening.

Dr. N. S. Ramasamy, Director of the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, has said that we do not pay enough attention to our bullocks, believing that their day is over and the age of the lorry and tractor is coming. By "we" I suppose he means those people in institutes charged with improving agriculture. The small farmer knows better. He is dependent upon his bullocks and their loss is one of the worst calamities.

Dr. Ramasamy says over fifty per cent of farm holdings in India are less than two hectares (or five acres) and cannot economically use a tractor. He estimates that there are thirteen million animal-drawn carts in India and the investment in them equals five billion dollars. This he compares with the five billion dollars invested in railways and three billion dollars expended on the rest of public transport. I do not know how he makes his calculations, but the picture he gives seems very reasonable when I look at India as it is, around us. If an enemy with diabolical powers wanted to inflict the greatest possible damage on India by destroying one element in the economy, he should eliminate all the bullocks. India lived for thousands of years without railways, buses, or electricity, but could never have survived without the bullocks.

More attention should be paid to improving the yoke and the cart, says Dr. Ramasamy. The old fashioned straight yoke can shorten the life of an animal by as one tenth. Farmers are not deliberately cruel to their bullocks; they feed them before they take their own food, and there are traditional village veterinary "doctors" using long-practised medicines for cattle, as well as a Government veterinary service covering most of the country and giving free treatment.

But you can see thin and bony cattle especially in barren areas and during droughts. These are sometimes taken in large herds to the hills where there may be better pasturage. Also it is very hard for a farmer if his bullock develops a sore or has an injury. If he does not work the bullock he may spoil a crop or lose a market; but still it is short sighted to endanger a valuable animal. A well-fed, well-matched pair of bullocks, with bells and brass ornaments, feeling their strength and stepping out along rough country roads or among market crowds, is a fine sight.

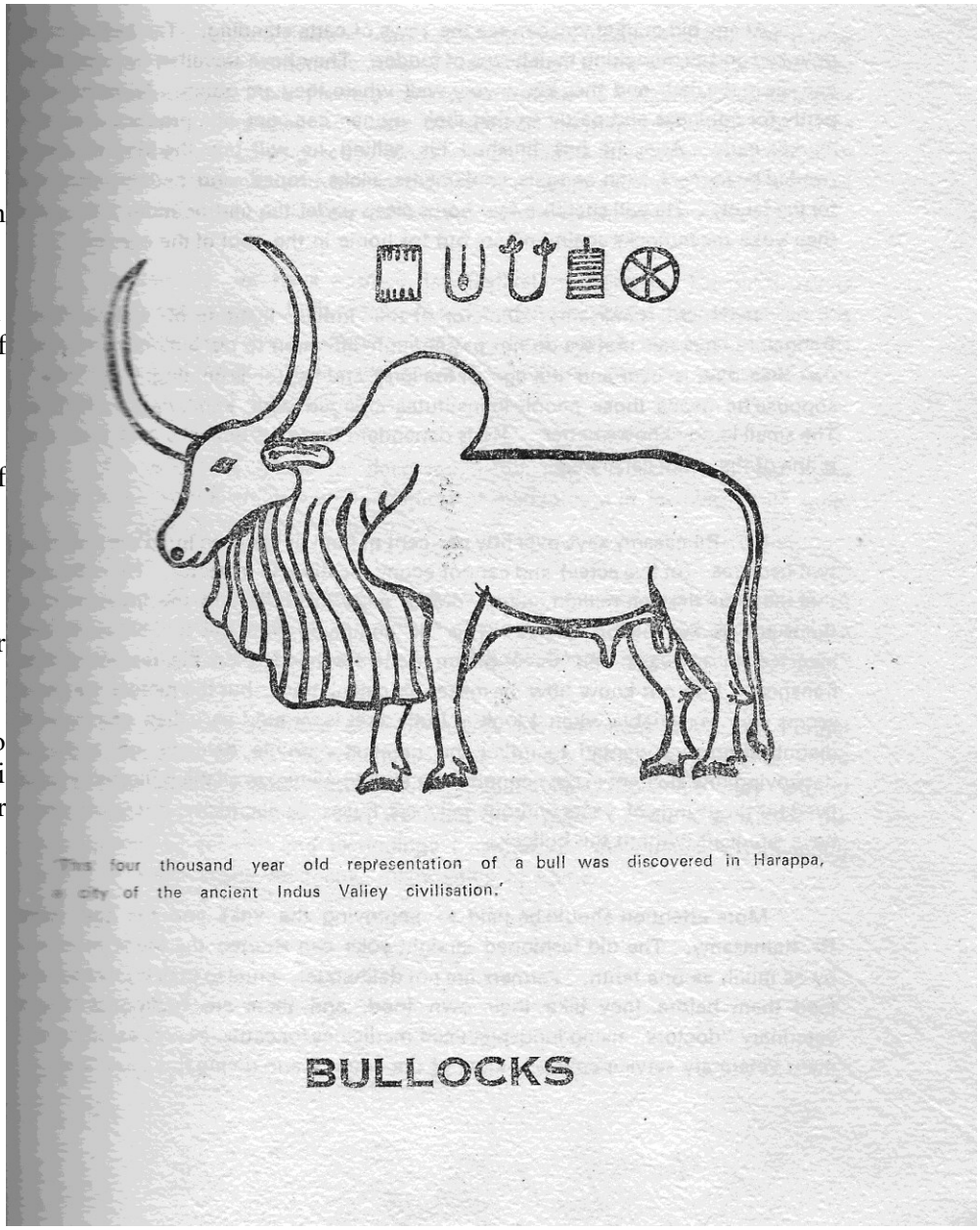
In January we have a three day festival of Pongal. The third day is dedicated to the animals, bullocks, cows and buffaloes. They do no work on this day. The bullocks have a bath with soap, and oil stains removed from their gleaming white coats. Their horns are rubbed with oil, they are garlanded with flowers, and given a special feed.

The buffaloes get some decorations too, and it is strange to see these great heavy black animals with a garland of marigolds and jasmine not quite knowing what is happening to them.

A pot of sweet rice is cooked in front of the cowshed and all present have some of this, with a banana and a piece of sugar cane. Bullocks and buffaloes reach out for the banana leaves on which the Pongal rice has been served.

The common festivals of India touch life at many points. At Pongal we are reminded of our dependence on the animals which we milk or drive out or take to the plough every day. In our village economy they should be co-workers, not slaves, and we must give them honour. Whatever the development of science and technology I cannot see the bullock disappearing from the Indian scene for many, many years to come.

FUEL



This four thousand year old representation of a bull was discovered in Harappa, a city of the ancient Indus Valley civilisation.

BULLOCKS

he train was passing through one of those vast stretches of central India where cities are far apart; there were no mountains or forests, not even thorn scrub. For mile after mile there were

fields of wheat, barley, beans or pulse, here and there were villages with dark tiled roofs huddled together, and shaded by a few great and majestic trees which probably drew their moisture from the village tank.

Outside each village were large bee-hive shaped stacks of brown plate-like objects. These were cow dung cakes, the fuel supply of the community. They are made by kneading cow dung with straw, and shaping it into flat rounds. These are slapped on to a wall, a rock, a tree trunk, or any surface on which they can be dried. Each, therefore, bears the impress of a hand, usually a small female hand. When day, they are stacked for use.

I thought about a remark I had heard more than once from visitors to India – "It makes me angry to see all this cow dung used for fuel. It ought to be used to manure the land". But if you lived in such a village, just where would you get any other fuel? Apart from cow dung cakes there are only the stalks of maize and pulses, which simply flare up and fall to ashes. There is no coal, no gas, and kerosene is expensive and in short supply. Until something is done to provide alternative fuel the villagers will use their cow dung cakes.

Here, in South Tamil Nadu, the situation is different. There are mountains and forests, and large areas of thorny scrub. There are also many coconut trees, which grow only within the tropics, and they supply leaf stalks and fibrous shells rich in oil, which make excellent fuel. Charcoal is obtainable, made from the surplus wood of trees which are felled for timber. Yet the fuel problems are no less pressing than those of central India. With the growth of population and increase in building, too much timber is being cut. The Government is deeply concerned about the destruction of the forests.

Accounts of ancient India show that the land was far more widely forested than it is today. The destructive process has gone on for centuries, but has now become a major threat. Trees, with their spreading roots and carpet of fallen leaves, retain the soil on hill slopes, and rain water percolates slowly. If the trees are removed the soil is eroded, and in times of heavy rainfall the water down violently and causes disastrous floods.

The Forestry Department is very well aware of the situation and is very active in tree planting. New areas are being afforested. But the Department is working against great odds. The price of building timber has soared so high that illegal tree felling is a very tempting adventure. There are Forest Officers in every region, and forest guards to prevent illegal practices. But the guards can be bribed, and carts can go by night to bring down stolen timber. The logs cannot speak.

There is also legal wood-cutting activity. Every day, groups of wood-cutters, often women or growing girls and boys come down our road from the hills, carrying heavy head-loads of firewood. There are many woody-stemmed creepers and large bushes which can be cut without damaging the forest. The wood-cutters follow this occupation when other work is scarce. It is very arduous, as the cutters have to walk far, and can only get one load in a day. But their prices have gone up too; a load used to be sold in the village for four rupees, but now it will fetch twelve rupees.

There is another form of fuel which the Government is trying to popularize. This is the Gobar Gas, or Bio-gas Plant. It is, in essence, a small gasometer drum, with channels for inflow and outflow of slurry made from cow dung. It gives methane gas, which can be piped to the house

for cooking, and which burns cleanly and without smell. This system has a great advantage over the cow dung cakes, in that the slurry, after the gas has been extracted, is just as valuable as fresh dung for manure. The gas is only a by-product. But it has the disadvantage that it needs space, which may not be available, and it also requires a certain number of cattle – bullocks, cows, or buffaloes to provide the dung. It is now being used by many large farms, institutions and religious communities, but it has its limitations on use for private houses.

We ourselves have no need to buy firewood as we have enough fuel from our coconut trees and other vegetation, but we have been asked to install one as an example. It will certainly be a convenience, and may enable us to sell some of our firewood to others who have no supplies. But it will take many many years before the fuel problem is solved.

A THIRSTY LAND

There is some regularity about Indian weather because it is linked with two monsoons, the South West monsoon passing up the West coast monsoon crossing the bay of Bengal in October and November, bringing rain to Madras and all the Eastern Coastal regions. It is known exactly when the monsoons starts blowing, although they may be increase or decrease in intensity, or fade out altogether. In addition to these great sweeps of rain only scattered showers can be expected, usually very local in extent.

In October and November, 1982, the rainfall over South and East India was far short of normal, and in some places there was no rain at all. The rice harvest was poor and the wells and reservoirs were low. It became hot very early in January, so we had very little of the calm, cool weather we usually enjoy. By April our mid-day temperatures had risen to 107°F and many villages were without water. When we harvested our rice about January 20th, we knew we could not harvest any more till January 1984. This is the usual situation, but in normal years if there is any shortfall we would be able to buy on the open market at reasonable price. This year we are down by forty percent and where rice is available prices are nearly double those of last year. Rice is our staple food and what we must live on until that next harvest.

Day by day the green areas of the land decrease, as crops are harvested and no more can be sown. Only where there is a good well, with deep springs holding out against the drought will green areas remain. Day by day the barren areas increase. The red soil is copper-coloured against intense blue sky. The sand of the dried water courses sparkles in the sun, and sheep huddle in the sparse shade of trees whose leaves are falling.

There are many areas of the world water is much scarcer than it is in ours. But there life is adapted to desert conditions. The inhabitants are few and cultivation is not attempted. Here, we have had three years of plentiful rain and the land was becoming more and more productive, so it is sad to see the regression into semi-desert.

The Government or foreign relief agencies, may send in food, but they cannot send in water. If the village wells dry up, the people must move out. If they move in time they can save their animals, otherwise they will have to sell them. Hindus have religious scruples about slaughtering cattle, so they have to be sold to dealers, and they will be slaughtered anyway by

Muslim or Christian butchers, who have not the same objections. As with all forced sales the prices will be low, far less than the value of the working or milk-producing life of the animal.

Sometimes a whole family pile their belongings on a cart, and migrate to a region, maybe a hundred or two hundred miles away, where there is work and water. They will cook, eat and sleep, near or under the cart, their only home. It may be many months before they can return to their own village. People who serve the villager, the barber, washer man, smith and carpenter, have to leave also, or find work such as road mending or wood cutting.

In many of the cities drinking water is given only once in several days. For the rest, people have to manage brackish water unfit for drinking and little of that, too. They crowd around the stand pipes in the streets and wait for the water to come on. In such conditions I have seen a man with three large water pots roped on a bicycle, owing to some jostling or unevenness in the path he had an accident and the water, for which he might have waited three or four hours, was wasted.

Water conservation has been a high priority with the Government. There have been many programmes of well digging or deepening, but here, one has to be very careful. Too much deepening of wells means that the general level of the ground water will sink and then it may be too low to be lifted by an ordinary electric pump, or by bullocks. This has happened in some areas near Coimbatore. Population and industry have increased, and the water is just not enough.

An American visitor was telling us that he had an extension to his telephone, without wires, a new development, by means of which he could sit on his sun deck and talk to his friend without getting up from his chair. Well, there is no harm in this, but what a trivial use of science! And I have seen women walk two miles with heavy water pots in the hot sun, to save their families, or searching for green stuff to keep the buffalo which is the only source of milk for their children. One thing this world needs is a sense of proportion.

THE BANANA LEAF

In South India you cannot travel very far or eat many meals without encountering the banana leaf. It is spread before you as a plate and used to wrap food you buy to carry away. On the trains you buy curd rice, lemon rice, or tamarind rice made into a packet with a banana leaf. At weddings the guests seated in rows on mats are each furnished with a banana leaf from which to feast.

At a small country restaurant I finished my meal, and according to custom, picked up my leaf and carried it to the hand washing place. As I put the leaf down the small chute I saw two big eyes, a sniffing muzzle and a questing tongue. The proprietor's cow was waiting for the leaves to come through, and finding them very succulent in spite of the remains of chutney or pickles adhering to them.

In every city, in the lanes and markets, there are cows, buffaloes and donkeys to eat the leaves. In the vegetable markets leaves and straw and other refuse, trodden underfoot, form a rich compost which is carted off to manure heaps.

No figures can show the value of this 'banana leaf economy' to South India. It is not described in books or pamphlets or held up as a model of ecological conservation or re-cycling, but thousands of leaves must go to enrich the soil every day. The banana grows very quickly, and the young leaf, when unrolled, is a beautiful clear pale green. The used leaves disintegrate quickly also and form a rich black nitrogenous fertilizer. North India is less fortunate than the South as bananas are scarcer outside the tropics and no other leaf has its advantages of size and ready availability; the plant grows at all seasons and produces fruit – as well as leaves. It is interesting to note that Muslim restaurants in the South generally use china plates, because the Muslims brought their own culture from the North.

The South Indian village may be ramshackle and deep in mud, but it has no serious litter problem. Such paper as it has, used to wrap small articles brought in the shops, is usually of the flimsiest kind and quickly disintegrates. But in the big cities the modern problem is appearing. There are more and more plastic articles, more tinned food and fancy packaging. There are some fine residential areas in Madras, where big houses stand in tree-lined avenues. The gardens are trimmed and swept, but outside, on the grass verge, may be a huge concrete litter bin, overflowing and uncleared. The city has not caught up with its litter problem.

However, a striking example of the use of the mixed bag from city rubbish dumps was the Madras Corporation's project to extend the sea front drive which runs north and south for all central area of the city. When this was being lengthened over rough and poor soil, hundreds of cartloads of the rich black muck were brought and the tins, bottles, rubber, and plastic were sifted out. The resulting fertile soil now nourishes beds of scarlet cannas and fragrant-flowered frangipani trees.

Efforts are made in the right direction, but it is a pity that a country with such a beautifully simple domestic economy should have to go through the cycle of ever-increasing, ever more wasteful and less destructible litter, from which the West is now struggling to emerge.

No one thought up the banana leaf economy as a solution for any problem, people just lived as they had done for centuries, using the materials which were to hand. So, when there is talk of raising productivity or increasing consumer goods, no one notices that India is being drawn into the vicious circle of waste and pollution.

But I can say that in Tamil Nadu at least the banana leaf economy is still firmly established and people are satisfied with it. They just take it for granted, and foreign visitors often think of it only as an interesting and agreeable custom. We do not notice the real value of what is right before our eyes.

A COUNTRY WEDDING

One morning five of us climbed on the small spring cart which we use for light work and social occasions. Two new brass vessels were also put on the cart. One was a large straight-sided *anda* which can be used for holding water or, on festival days for cooking large amounts of rice. The other was a traditionally shaped pot used for bringing water from the well. These were our presents. Such brass pots are valuable property and last more than a lifetime, often being handed down for generations.

The bridegroom had been a field worker for us for several years, so our presents were substantial as well as useful.

The village to which we were going was only about a mile away. The bullocks, generally used to the much heavier farm cart, trotted briskly. We overtook many acquaintances going in the same direction. We made our way through a flock of sheep and a herd of buffaloes and exchanged many greetings on the road. The young man, Paraman, is very popular, but there was a special reason for interest in this wedding.

It had been arranged to be held six months earlier, but two days before the appointed date the young man had been bitten by a poisonous snake. There was tremendous consternation throughout the neighbouring villages. He had to go for treatment to a local snake expert and to live in that man's house for several weeks, taking some secret medicine. It is commonly believed that if the nature of these medicines is disclosed they will not work. The young man had to subsist on a very meagre diet and have *mantras* (sacred words) recited over him. The swelling of his leg, which was considerable, subsided, but even when he was quite well again the marriage had to be delayed for six months, as it was considered inauspicious to marry within that period. But now the waiting was over and the marriage was to be celebrated with joy and relief.

Our cart turned off the road and entered Rajathani village. We came to a halt under a wide spreading tree in front of the temple. The bullocks were unyoked, and we made our way on foot through the narrow lanes.

Marriage halls, which can be hired, are only for the rich in the cities. Village houses are not large enough to hold a wedding party, so a *pandal*, a temporary roof, has to be made outside. This is made with poles and plaited coconut leaves, or sometimes with saris lent for the occasion. They are semi-transparent, and the light below the pandal is tinted with rose or green or violet. In this case, the whole lane had been roofed over, and a few benches and string cots put out for the guests to sit on.

The lane was crowded. There were many children carrying babies, little brothers or sisters, as in India they love to do. The children were dressed in their best, but even ragged and dirty children were not kept out. The bride went in procession through the village, with a retinue of women carrying baskets and dishes of fruit, grain and new clothes as presents. Then bride and groom sat together on a bench with downcast eyes and serious faces. The guests may laugh and chatter as they will, but the bride especially, must be serious, or she may be thought to be light-minded. Both bride and groom wore garlands of roses, and the bride's hair was beautifully dressed with jasmine flowers.

Three dishes, of different grains, were placed on the ground before the couple. The local priest led off by sprinkling a little of each grain on the couple. Then the parents and near relatives followed, then neighbours, friends and well-wishers. Each one stretched out hands three times in blessing towards the couple, and many of the hands so extended were rough and wrinkled with toil. Many of the old women who came had not even a new sari for the occasion, but there was a warmth and intensity about the ceremony which was very moving. And, as I noticed, at the end all the grain was carefully swept into a cloth, to be sifted and used.

The actual marriage consists in a threefold exchange of garlands between the bride and groom, and then the tying, by the groom, of the *thali*, a gold or saffron cord bearing an amulet placed round the bride's neck. This she will always wear proudly as the sign of her married state. At the moment of marriage there is a roll of drums and the guests throw jasmine flowers and coloured rice over the couple.

The bride is chosen by the parents. Those who would find this unthinkable for themselves should remember that till recently the whole world married in this way and large parts of it still do so. The bearing and good upbringing of a son or daughter is crowned, for the parents, by the selection of a worthy marriage partner. This is their reward and privilege. Not all the marriages go well, it is true, but the West, with its million of broken homes, cannot claim that free choice ensures happiness.

When the ceremony was over we went, a few at a time, into the dark house to sit on the floor and be served with a meal of rice and vegetables on a banana leaf. Then we walked back down the lanes, the bullocks were yoked, and we set of again on the rough road to Seva Nilayam.

MORE OF INDIA

Someone said to me, looking at the map: "You always write about South India. But that is a very small part of the whole, just the southern tip. Do you travel around and see other places?"

Surely I do, but the other states of India are like other countries, which I may visit with great pleasure but which I am not competent to write about in great depth.

In letter No 4 of 1982 I described journey to Badrinath, the ancient place of pilgrimage far up in the Himalayas and near to the Tibetan border. From there I followed the downward rushing torrent of the Ganges through deep valleys and gorges, until at Hardwar the mighty river finally leaves the mountains and emerges onto the plains. People have known for thousands of years that the river was their source of life. "*Hari-Dwar*" means "the door of god". At evening pilgrims set afloat hundreds of little boats made of leaves and filled with flowers and a light burning in the centre. As I watch the brave little boats bobbing on the chill dark current, I think of all the human hopes and fears that have gone that way through the centuries.

The vast Ganges plain was made by the silt brought down by the river. Thousands of pumps and water wheels, channels flowing between the standing crops, ploughs turning up the fertile soil, populous cities and great monuments, all owe their existence to the Ganges water. Midway in its course is the holy city of Benares where devout Hindus desire to be cremated at their death, and to have their ashes immersed in the water. Benares is probably the oldest continually inhabited place on earth and its traditions are lost in antiquity. Another five hundred miles lie between Benares and the Ganges delta. In the 17th Century there was a fishing village on the delta – one of many. It was named Kalighat from a black stone which was venerated as an image of the goddess Kali. The British East India Company set up a trading station there. Ultimately, after many battles, the British took over the whole of Bengal and the trading station grew into a city, still named after Kali.

It is a city of crowded slums, homeless people, dirt, beggary and destitution, but a city of power and magnificence. The British impress on Calcutta is deep and the splendid buildings shine out far across the great open spaces of the Maidan. The white marble Victoria Memorial is not only a relic of the Queen-Empress, but a magnificent museum of Indian history, from the first days of the Company till the achievement of Indian independence. I stood there in the room full of the portraits of those who had worked and fought for freedom, Nehru and his father, Mothilal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore and Devendranath Tagore, Gandhi and Patel. I felt the impact of a great presence: India produced giants in those days.

I remember, in Calcutta, the old Zoological Gardens, with Victorian iron work, and especially the bird house, so lofty that full sized trees could grow in it. The house was full of cooing and twittering, of birds courting, nesting and splashing in the stream that ran through it. I do not usually like zoos but this I can remember with pleasure.

The great cantilever bridge spans the arm of the delta known as the Hoogli, between Howrah and Calcutta. Each morning and evening a solid mass of traffic moves across it, slowly, because there is one pace for all and the lorry must adjust its speed to that of the ragged rickshaw man. In the damp winter morning the mist curls on the surface of the oily and polluted Hoogli. At its source the river was turquoise blue. Here it is yellowish grey.

At Sarnath, near Benares, and at Bodh Gaya near Patna, I visited the scenes of the life of the Buddha. At Sarnath he preached his first sermon in the deer park and at Bodh Gaya he attained enlightenment, after his vigil under the sacred peepul tree, following an intense inward struggle to understand the meaning of life. Whether we accept his conclusions or not, there seem to be peace around us as we walk on the very pavements trodden by his feet two thousand six hundred years ago, or stand in the shade of the ever-tremulous leaves of those trees, said to be descended from the original peepul tree.

Delhi, now restored as the capital of free India, is full of the Mogul splendour, but one thing left a deeper impression on me than even Akbar's Marble Court and his throne of justice. In old Delhi is a Sikh temple built on the spot where a great hero and defender of the Sikhs was martyred. At every hour of the day a vast crowd gazes reverently at the Granth, the Sikh bible, displayed with great honour. You leave your shoes outside the temple, as is customary, but they are taken in charge, not by a paid boy, but by a young Sikh of good family, taking his turn of voluntary service. It is part of the Sikh religion to show hospitality to travellers, so, in a huge kitchen adjoining the temple you may eat freshly cooked chappatties and dahl, and no question asked, while the same young men carry the sacks of wheat flour on their backs. The sense of a strong community is overwhelming.

At the Taj Mahal, only a few hours journey outside Delhi, you can watch the tourists who come from every country in the world. There are Americans and Japanese, Germans and Danes, mostly with odd-looking clothes and cameras and binoculars slung around them. There are conventional middle class Indian families, the mothers in silk saris and the children in shoes and socks. Occasionally there is an Indian farmer with his family, quiet and overawed. The endless day a long stream of tourists flows up the central path of the beautiful formal garden, mounts the platform in front of the Mausoleum, and then appears to be sucked down into the vault, to emerge a few minutes later. The tourists haggle with the shoe-minders and wrestle with the straps and buckles, then back down the central path. Just one last snap, "Us in front of the Taj," and they are gone. Meanwhile you can sit in peace by the old sandstone buildings that flank the court, under

the great trees, with only the darting squirrels for company, and watch the fun, while the presence of the queenly Taj shines over all.

Then there is Jaipur with its Rajput palaces, so rich in architectural beauty that only a fragment of it can be kept in order. I have seen magnificent carved gateways leading onto ironsmiths' yards, and I have found an old house enshrining a marble temple used only as a shelter for goats and a nesting place for flocks of doves.

Then there is Udaipur with its five calm lakes among low hills, and far, far, out, beyond the desert, is the strange city of Jaisalmer with a vast fortress, and the most richly carved house frontages I have seen in India. For what does it exist, apart from the fame of ancient conquest? It lies in a vast tract of country where it rains once a year and sometimes not even that, and where only the grey *erikkalai* will grow, and the only occupation seems to be camel breeding.

I could go on writing for days and weeks always finding something new. But we are on the tourist route. If we leave that, we can see the daily work of India, as it really is. We can see hundreds of miles of cultivated land without anything larger than a village; we can see the plough and the ox cart, the bent backs of toilers, the quarry men and wood-cutters, the shabby buses and the cyclists and rickshaws waiting at a hundred level crossings. The tourist route with all its glories, is only a thin line across the vastness of India. And that vastness is not one world or one society, there are thousands of castes, tribes and communities, myriads of interlocking traditions and customs, superstitions and philosophies. There are saints and prostitutes, swindlers great and small, corrupt officials and faithful servants, seekers of truth and dealers in lies.

The Government itself remains on the fringe; the mainspring of life is from within.

Life is an ever-growing tree with countless branches.

Kings and statesmen die, but life continually renews itself.

1984

UNVALUED ASSETS

In my room I have two pots of baked red clay. They are urn-shaped with lids, and are very beautiful, as I think. They were not designed by any artist but were made by an ordinary potter in Madurai and sold for a trifling price.

Here, in India, there are many skills that go unregarded and unvalued. They are mostly concerned with domestic life and farming. In quite well-to-do Indian houses, and their gardens, you find equipment of a very traditional type. Baskets are made of finely split bamboo, and brooms are made from the central rib of the individual leaflets on the front of the coconut tree. Another type of basket, very strong and with a shiny surface, is made from the skin of the leaf stalk of the palmyra palm. In the garden you can see baskets for carrying dead leaves or manure, made from a kind of woody creeper which grows in the hills. Then there are light, fan-shaped rakes, made from slender bamboo canes. All these things are extremely cheap, and are generally bought from itinerant vendors. We ourselves use coconut brooms which are made here, often by patients, from our own coconut trees, and for baskets we may send to the nearest market.

The basket-makers sit just in the street, or under an improvised awning if the weather is hot. No one pauses to admire the skill and dexterity or the sure and rapid movements of their fingers. These are just basket-makers, a familiar sight in any market town. They may string a load of baskets together and walk for miles selling them off, bargaining over the price with village housewives. There is no need to say that the price will be very low.

The shoe-mender sits on the pavement. He has a very small area to accommodate his tools and materials, himself, and possibly a child, as his wife may be selling vegetables in the market. He will mend your sandals on the spot, even putting a new sole or new straps on. You may have your sandals mended so many times that you are like the man who said, “I love this old cricket bat. It has had three new blades and two new handles.”

There is another variation of the basket work, the *marram*. A triangular tray peculiarly shaped, deeper at the broad end and with an opening at the narrow end. It is made of split bamboo and is used for winnowing grain or cleaning it. With a movement that combines tossing and shaking, a woman can separate broken rice from whole grains, or separate two kinds of grain which have become accidentally mixed or extract unwanted grains and weed seeds. Let anyone not accustomed to such work try this, and they will admit it requires a very high degree of skill. Yet any village woman seems to do it automatically.

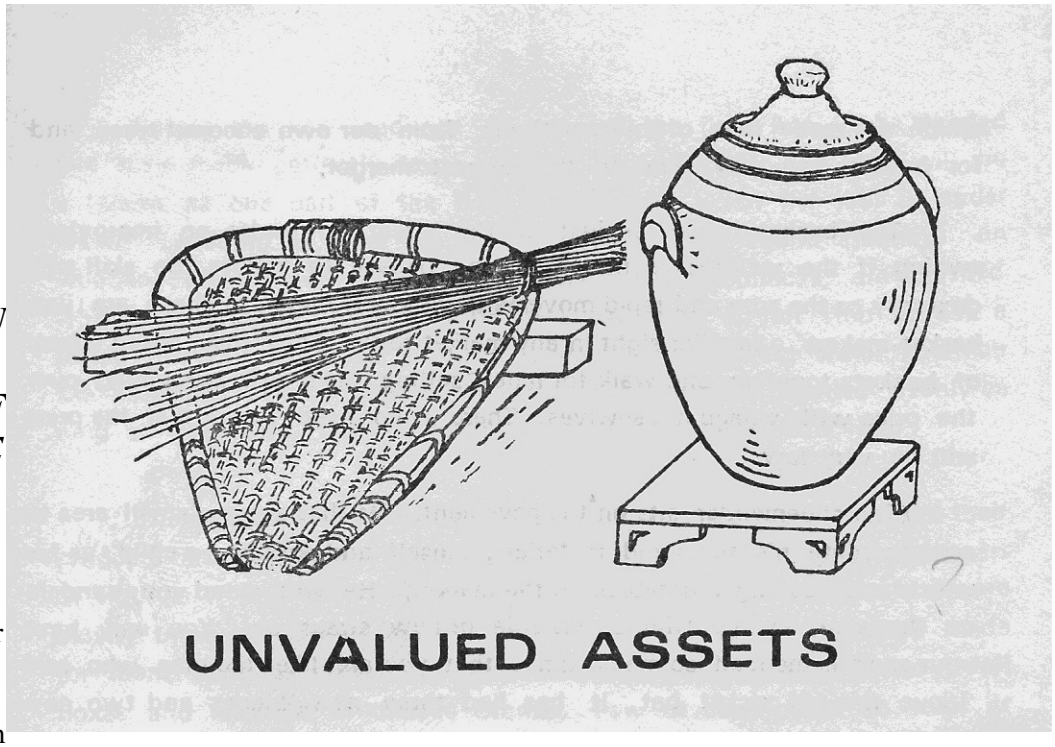
When I needed the vegetable garden to be dug and the seed sown, it was done by two lads, with the short spades called ‘mumtis’. They had no measuring line, no hoe or rake, or dibber, and scarcely seemed to look around them. But with this one tool they made perfect rectangles for carrots, turnips, beans and beetroots, with irrigation channels between.

Before the rice seedlings are planted the field has to be flooded and then made perfectly level. If this is not exact the crop will be a failure, as one part of the field will be dry when the rest is under water. Levelling is done by boys and men riding round standing on wooden planks

drawn by bullocks. They, and the bullocks, are splashed with mud all over. They take no measurements, do not stop to use a plumb line but the result leaves a sheet of shimmering water in which the seedlings can be planted at even depth and be flooded evenly as long as necessary, that is, until the grain is formed and ripe.

The people who exercise these skills are not well paid, and their products are not highly valued. To Indians these things are just part of life, as it has been for hundreds of years. To tourists they are mostly unobserved and unknown. Tourists buy things specially made for them, such as ivory carvings, Kashmir carpets, sandalwood jewel boxes and hookahs of chased bronze. Few of them pause to look at the potters, basket-makers or harvesters. Their coaches do not stop long enough, but rush from one famous temple or palace to another.

You have to live quietly with people to understand and value their common skills which are among India's greatest assets!



A GOOD CUP OF TEA

In every shopping street in the city there are several tea shops, and also in some streets that could not be called shopping streets. There are tea stalls in the markets and bus stands, and in all sorts of odd corners, in fact, almost anywhere where a cup of tea can be made and served.

They are mostly open-fronted shops. Some have no counter, and the customers just stand on the pavement, while some have a small place inside with a bench or two. Their most important feature is the copper tea urn, merrily steaming, and glowing from the charcoal fire within. The fire forms a column through the center of the urn, surrounded by the water, which is kept boiling very economically. The second essential feature is the stove for boiling milk, and this can be kept simmering for hours without boiling over.

The leaf used is not of the best quality (in spite of what it may say on the packets). Tea is grown on the mountain slopes round about – but everyone knows that the best is exported. However what it lacks in quality is made up for by lavishness in the use of sugar and hot milk, and a rich, fresh brew. Every serving of tea is made separately whether it is for one or more persons; the used leaves are tipped out and fresh ones put into a bag through which the boiling water flows from the tap of the urn. There is no such thing as a stewed or lukewarm cup of tea. And a good cup is heartening after a long journey or a busy day in town.

Some stalls serve nothing but tea; some sell biscuits, bananas, buns, sweets, and the small cheroots known as "beedies".

The tea and sugar are not mixed with a spoon but by being poured a number of times back and forth from one glass to another. The expert tea maker will raise his arm high over his head, and direct the stream of tea from a height of four feet into the second glass, held at hip level, without spilling a drop. This fine flourish ensures perfect mixing, and a slight cooling of the boiling tea. A real artist may follow it up by skimming a spoonful of the creamy froth from the milk, dropping it on top of the tea, and lightly dusting it with sugar. Such finesse is not possible if the tea shop is very busy.

It is most interesting to watch the appearance of new tea shops in areas where the city is expanding. There are colonies of new houses, and then new bus routes are started. Colleges, factories and institutes of various kinds are built outside the cities. In one of these spots, seemingly remote, but soon to be populous, a few poles will one day be fixed. Then a thatched roof will appear above them. Next a rough wooden counter will be placed to carry the most valuable items, the copper urn, the milk pan and charcoal stove. Then a tray of glasses and the tea and sugar tins, and the tea stall is ready for business. As business grows, the tea shop will grow with it. Some carloads of clay will be bought and the proprietor, with his family and friends, will raise a mud wall to replace the flimsy shelter of plaited coconut leaves. Benches will be placed inside, a bunch of bananas will by hung up, and the stock of sweets and beans will be augmented. The shop will now have its regular customers, and the proprietor will be consulted as to the times of buses and will retail the local gossip or the news in the daily paper. A boy – possibly a son or grandson, or a hired boy – will appear to wash the glasses and sweep the floor. The general term for a young lad in Tamil is *thambi*, which means "little brother" and any cycle shop or tea shop will have its *thambi*.

After a few years of hard work, good service and perseverance, the tea shop may develop into a brick building, with a tiled roof. It will serve the breakfast of rice cakes known as *Iddlies* and possibly the noon-day meal of rice and vegetables. It will have grown into a 'hotel' and will have a signboard and name.

Few of these ventures ever seem to fail. Whatever the future may hold, today the outskirts of a growing city are a land of opportunity. Long may the art of tea pouring flourish!

HARVEST

The moon was at the full. Under it the newly reaped stubble field shone white, and the trees surrounding it looked black. The white oxen moved round and round in a circle, trampling out the grain.

The grain is rice, the staple food of South India, known as *paddy* when it is on the stem or still in the husk, and as *arisi* when it has been milled. For the farmer, paddy harvest is the high point of the year, the time when his living is secured till the cycle of growth and ripening comes round again. To everyone it is a matter of great importance. A good harvest means relaxation of controls, reasonable prices and no need for one state of the Union to go begging to another or to the Central Government.

So the oxen go round and round, and we watch in satisfaction under the high moon.

We thresh at night to avoid the heat of the day, when the rising dust might affect the oxen. But night threshing should also find some justification, I think, in the beauty of the scene.

When paddy is cut, by sickles, it is bound into sheaves. These are beaten once or twice on a bench or board to dislodge those grains which are ready to fall. If we did not do this there would be much loss. Then the sheaves are stacked and left for two or three days. The dislodged grain is swept into a heap and carried to the store house.

In a very short time the rest of the grains are ready to fall and the main threshing begins. As the oxen go steadily round, the workers, young men and women of the villages, pull the sheaves from the stack and throw them down to be trampled. There is not a moment's break in the supply of sheaves, as the workers leap nimbly to the stack and back to the oxen. It is like a dance. There is plenty of merriment and banter between the threshers and the watchers – those who are too old or too young or not nimble enough to join the dance. If Ceres watched the threshing of wheat in ancient Greece, surely she would rejoice to see the threshing of this strange and different grain. But here it is the goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, to whom the paddy is sacred.

As we stood on the bank watching, a friend said to me, "There is nothing in this scene which has changed in three thousand years." It was true. The same moon must have shone upon the scene when the Aryans first brought the white bulls into India; it looked down on every year's harvest, in times of plenty and scarcity, on the Ganges plain or the Cauvery delta, and in every place where the soil could yield good grain.

In the world today, change is considered to be a good thing. People are reproached for doing just what their forebears did. Everything must be subject to innovation, whether the result is better or no. But there can be a revulsion, a longing for stability amidst the restlessness and dangers of a world where inventions are made too rapidly and without responsibility for the result. More and more people see that we are very near the edge of a precipice. They stretch out their hands to regain ancient truths, to feel the joy that their ancestors felt in the labour of harvest and the full moon.

I do not think that these thoughts entered the heads of the young men and girls who laughed as they seized the sheaves and threw them before the feet of the oxen. It was just a normal part of life. To some of us, who come from the West and have known the pollution, the ever-growing fear of destruction, the callousness and inhumanity of those who crave for

innovation, the moonlit night, the dancing figures and the plodding oxen were like a breath of a saner world. Oh, if we could capture and preserve the peace of this night. Peace, let us have peace.

THE LETTER WRITER

This is a letter about letters. The sketch on the front page shows an Indian bazaar letter writer, once a very important figure in daily life but one now fast disappearing. In times past many quite rich and influential people could not read and write, so they had to avail themselves of the services of a public letter writer, who would write from their dictation. Now, great number of boys and girls have been to school and college so it is easy, in all middle and upper class families, to find someone who can write a letter. Even the poor village people can usually find someone in the community to write for them.

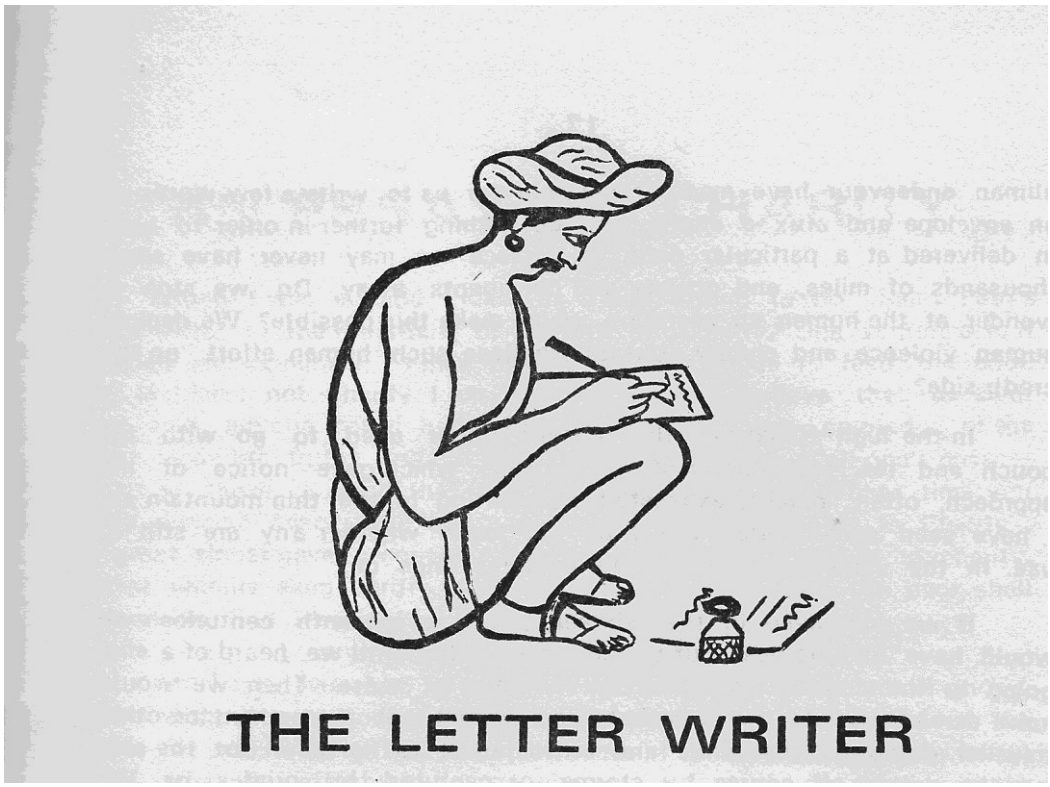
Possibly because letter writing is a young art in India, the letters of many students and young people tend to be formal exercises. They start out with "We are well, and wish the same to you", and fill the whole sheet with greetings to various people before they get down to the substance of the letter, which may be only a sentence or two, then they conclude by asking after the health of every person mentioned. No one must be left out. However it is the thought one values.

We grumble at the post, if it takes a few days longer than we expect, but do we consider how lucky we are, and what centuries of human endeavour have made it possible for us to write a few words on an envelope and affix a stamp, and do nothing further in order to have in delivered at a particular door, in a place we may never have seen, thousands of miles, and oceans and continents away. Do we stop to wonder at the human co-operation which make this possible? We deplore human violence and enmity, but do we place such human effort on the credit side?

In the high Himalayas the postal runner used to go with his pouch and his staff adorned with bells, which gave notice of his approach, often, maybe, exhausted and panting in the thin mountain air. I have seen such a staff but I do not know whether any are still in use. In the vastness of India old customs linger on.

If we had lived in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries we would have had no post, but would have waited until we heard of a ship going to the country to which we wanted to write. Then we would have carefully made up a packet, and sought out a merchant or other traveller going by that ship, and entrusted it to his care. But the ship may be driven off course by storms, or captured by pirates or the messenger be unfaithful to his promise and we should never know.

Today I look at the mail bag lying on a station platform, and see only the dark dirty canvas. But inside there is a summary of the world and its activities. There are the commercial advertisements, many of which will go into the waste paper basket, and the tender and longed-for letters that will be loved and cherished, there are business appointments and broken promises, boring rigmaroles and electric shocks, warmth and friendliness and cruel disappointment. All are picked up together and flung into the mail van.



Eight years ago I started writing “Letters from Seva Nilayam” and sending them out six times a year. The response amazed me. It is often said that people today cannot be bothered to write letters. But there are many who want to write and are delighted to receive a reply. I have learned so much about my correspondents, their lives, their families and their countries. It has been a great experience. So, in this letter, I want to thank you all for your letters, and to let you know that I value the friendship and helpfulness you have shown to me and Seva Nilayam.

THE SEVA NILAYAM CAMPUS

We have many friends and supporters far off in Australia, America and Europe who have never visited Seva Nilayam. We greatly appreciate their generosity and their confidence in us. I wish we could give them a clearer idea of the place which is kept up by their contributions and this letter is an attempt to do so.

Across the fields Seva Nilayam appears as a cluster of red-tiled roofs, not much different from those of any South Indian villages. These are sheltered by larger and more beautiful trees than are usually found in the rather congested villages around here, for we believe that trees, by their use and beauty, are very precious to human life. The whole area of three and a half acres is surrounded on three sides by a line of coconut trees and the entrance is by an avenue of coconuts. There are the Indian Laburnums, a shower of gold in May, and the glowing Gul Mohur, “Flame of the Forest”. There are the silk cotton trees, the tall stately Ashoka Pillars, and many bushes of Bougainvillea and Hibiscus. In the nesting season the place is alive with bird voices.

The first building is the clinic, which has a spacious verandah for waiting patients, and is the only one with a flat roof. This roof is very useful for drying grains and various vegetable products and is often used for sitting out on moonlit nights or sleeping in the hot weather.

The main building, the central kitchen and store room, is built of clay in local style, and has walls three feet thick. When we put up this building we had very little money and could not afford bricks. But it has stood up well to more than twenty years' use. Clay buildings can be very long lasting provided the roof is kept in good repair against the monsoon rains. The kitchen has a wood-burning stove and also uses the gas from our Gobar Gas Plant (methane gas produced from cow dung). There is also a bread oven which it is sometimes a pleasure to use.

Our grain stores are housed in a round or rather hexagonal house designed by a volunteer worker here. The local carpenter had to think hard about the design of the roof, something he had not had to tackle before. We are very pleased with the design, which leaves no dark corners, and in which the stores can easily be inspected for damage by rats. The cats (we have six) are fed in the store house and are often found sitting on the sacks. So rats are not able to do much harm.

There are two rooms to accommodate in-patients, of whom we can take abut twenty (maximum). One is chiefly for women and children, the other for men. We do not provide beds for the patients, as very few of them have beds in their own homes, and are quite at ease on mats on tiled floors. Most of the buildings are whitewashed or colour washed at Pongal, the festival in January which is like a combination of harvest and New Year.

There is a yard for the buffaloes, calves and bullocks, where they are grouped under a spreading tree, and there is a paved shed in which they can be tethered. The large compost pit is a very important factor in our economy, as all waste vegetable matter goes into it, and so is returned to the land.

Our well, the source of all life and prosperity, has never run dry even in seasons of severe drought. It is worked by an electric pump and by a Persian wheel, which can be very useful, and save the situation when electricity fails.

There are nine rooms to accommodate staff and visitors. These are all very simple, with Indian style furniture. Behind the main building there is a small poultry house built seventeen years ago by an Australian volunteer. This has helped us to keep a supply of eggs ever since.

The rest of the land is open, and cultivated with rice in the wet season, maize, onions, chilies, beans and various vegetables in the rest of the year.

All this has grown and been added to over the years. There has been no big expansion or drastic change, so that it has the settled feeling of home.

Key to the plan

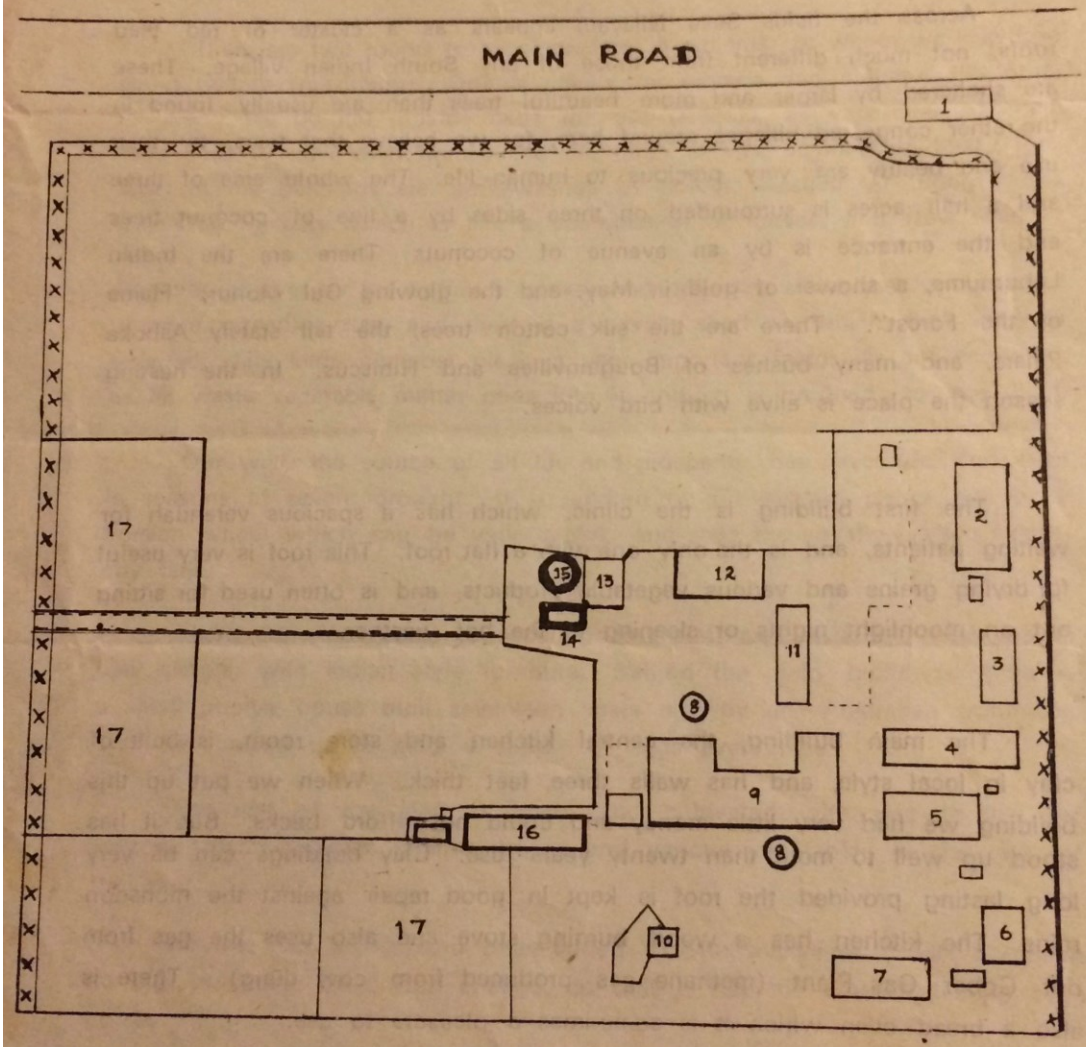
1 Hut
2 Clinic
3 Sewing and staff's rooms
4 In-patients' kitchen and room

5	Office	
6	Grain store	
7	Staff quarters	
8	Gobar gas plant	
9	Main kitchen store	
10	Chicken house	
11	Cattle shed	
12	Compost pits	
13	Well	
14	Pump set	
15	Persian wheel	
16	In-patients' room	
17	Vegetable garden	
x	Coconut	trees

Number Four of 1984

A Letter from

Seva Nilayam



THE ELEPHANT

At the end of our garden path, standing among ferns and shaded by a jackfruit tree, there is a stone elephant. It is the work of a local craftsman, now perhaps to old to carve any more but remembered by us. As the elephant holds special place in our garden, so elephants in general hold a special place in the affection of Indians. The ground before our elephant is swept and marked with *kholam* designs. His trunk is painted and the children bring Hibiscus flowers to decorate him.

The elephant is the symbol of wisdom, and in Hindu mythology the elephant-headed god Ganesh is seen as lovable, even amusing, but very sagacious. He is the one to be consulted before setting out on any undertaking, in order to start the right way, and I think that wisdom is something the world desperately needs.

We have not far to go to see elephants. At Thenkasi, at the beginning of the ascent to the Western Ghats, I have seen elephants hauling logs in the timber yards. At the Periyar Lake in the Wild Life Sanctuary are many herds of wild elephants. There are other animals too – otters, wild boar, many rare species of deer and the Langurs, black monkeys. The are also many strange and gorgeously coloured birds. But the day is not ‘made ‘ for the visitors until they have seen the elephants.

As visitors are not allowed to land from the motor launches which take them up and down the many arms of the lake, the wild animals are quite unconcerned and allow the boats to approach very close to them. Only if there are baby elephants in the herd, the older ones keep them in the middle of the group for protection. They go on placidly rooting up tufts of grass, or blowing trunkfuls of dust over their bodies to get rid of insects.

Elephants, like other wild animals, tend to keep to themselves, and are not dangerous unless molested by men. But occasionally a rogue elephant will terrrorise a district. This is a male elephant which has been cast out of the herd, perhaps defeated by a stronger one. He has a grudge against the world and is dangerous to meet. Firewood gatherers in the hills and sometimes even tea pluckers have to be aware of rogues. I have heard a village drumming all night to keep off elephants. And if their numbers multiply they can do a lot of damage, rooting up vegetables and trampling down fences.

But tame elephants are the most pacific of animals, and the huge bulk combined with docility make a fascinating spectacle. The elephant who lives in the Meenakshi temple in Madurai is of great size and strength, but answers every direction of his *mahout* very placidly. He will pass along a row of open fronted shops, stopping to indicate to the shopkeeper what his wishes are – here a handful of nuts, there a banana or a bun – and he will take a long drink at a street fountain. His wise little eyes seem to take in the whole scene. He knows when he is well off.

Although we are quite familiar with the elephant in the streets of Madurai we feel a thrill of excitement when we hear the clinging of his bell as he approaches. Familiarity cannot breed contempt. He is very special; he is privileged; he is royal.

Last March there were disastrous storms and floods in this part of Tamil Nadu. Houses collapsed, crops were dashed into the mud, and there was much distress and loss of life. A baby elephant was washed down from the mountains and found by a bridge not far from here. He was

alive and rescued by the Forest Department. In the midst of all the concern about human suffering, people found time to enquire after the baby elephant and rejoice that he was saved. So when we look at our stone elephant we think of all these things – of the free herds in the wild, of the friend of the children and the Madurai shopkeepers, and of the placidity, wisdom and benevolence of Ganesh.

1985

TOURISTS

When my mother was not long married my father obtained a teaching post in Liverpool. My grandmother and all the family lived in Southwest London, all of two hundred miles from Liverpool. My grandmother said to my mother, “But, my dear, you will never go so far from your home!” But the great transition was made, and during my childhood our annual holiday was to go by train from Liverpool to London, to spend three weeks with various aunts and uncles. There was never any thought of going outside England. Continental tours were only for the rich, and African or Asian travel only for the wildly adventurous.

This illustrates the change that has taken place in less than a hundred years. Now the door is open, and you may spend your holiday flying to Delhi, Calcutta, Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan.

Tourists, in my definition, are those who wish to see and experience something, without any ulterior motive. They have no wish to change what they see or to be involved in it at all. Like Kipling’s soldier man they go “For to admire and for to see, for to behold this world so wide.” I can see nothing against that. It is a very natural human desire. It is better than thinking that we have a mission to tell others how to run their lives.

At the same time, I believe that the capacity of the human heart for joy is not commensurate with the amount to be seen and known. A flower that opens surprisingly in a dingy city yard may bring more joy, especially to a child or in an invalid, than all the treasures of the orient to one who has become satiated with travel.

Once at Hardwar, where the holy river Ganges leaves the hills and enters the plain, I saw a group of pilgrims as they reached the bank of the mighty stream. They knelt down and pressed their foreheads to the earth and then broke into song. They had travelled for days in hard trains, cooking their food on railway sidings and sleeping on wooden seats. Their cup of joy was full and running over.

Tourists may not want to change what they see, but inevitably they have an effect on it. They give employment to thousands of hotel servants, cooks, gardeners, bell boys, taxi drivers and rickshaw men. They upset the local scale of values by giving too much money, usually quite innocently. They support many handicraft industries, some of them valuable, some valueless fakes, made only for gullible tourists. To those who have lived in India a long time they cause amusement and to traditionally minded Indians many of them (only a minority) give shocks by their dress and behaviour. But many try to be very careful not to offend and do their best according to their lights.

The Taj Mahal is approached by a straight path leading from the high arched gateway between the shallow marble basins and clipped cypresses of a formal garden, up to the platform where visitors remove their shoes and put on canvas bootees before descending into the crypt. At either side of this formal garden are dark old sandstone buildings and great trees. Every hour of the day an endless stream of tourists passes along the path. There are Germans, Dutch, Americans, Japanese, English and Italians, Danes and Swedes. Many have comical hats and ‘fun’ clothes of dazzling brightness. Many are intent and serious. They are slung around with cameras

and binoculars like a Christmas tree with presents. There are prosperous Indian families, very correctly dressed, and a few poorly dressed Indian farmers with their wives, sometimes veiled as Muslims. I have sat for hours at one side, under the ancient trees where the little striped squirrels run and dart about, unafraid. It is a very rare thing to see one person leave the main stream. Half way to the Taj is a raised marble platform, an ideal place for a group photograph. "This is us with the Taj in the background." Then on, to the great building where they seem to be sucked down by dark passages into the crypt and to be disgorged a few minutes later. A bit of shouting to awake the solemn echoes, and a little fingering of the mosaics (this is supposed to be forbidden), then to put on the shoes again and haggle with the shoe-minders (or to give them too large tips), then back into the waiting coach and off to the hotel for lunch.

Is it unkind to laugh? They have seen what is reputed to be the most beautiful building in the world. They had not really seen its beauty. It takes several hours to do that. But they are satisfied.

There is a palace in Rajasthan to which the approach is by long ramps which can be ascended by elephants. There are seats on the elephants' backs, six seats, three a side. The palace is on a hill, and the elephants live at the bottom. If you take a bus early in the morning, you will pass the line of elephants going up to start their days work. They are in 'undress', each carrying his load of fodder. Arrived at the top, they are fed, washed and have designs painted on their trunks. Then a richly coloured cloth is put on their backs.

The first tourists arrive by coach and mount the elephants from a special platform once used for this purpose by Rajput kings. Three a side, with their cameras and binoculars slung around them, they pass up the ramps. Arrived at the palace, they dismount, and the elephants are trained to stand in line while photographs are taken. Then the tourists fall into the hands of a guide who conducts them round the more beautiful parts of the palace (but does not show them everything). They admire the airy chambers, with graceful decoration and the provision for cooling the air by a miniature waterfall, and a perforated copper pipe which used to drip water on to a curtain in front of the pavilion. They learn that all this beauty was created by the Rajputs, the proudest and fiercest of the races of India in their time. But now we must get back to the elephants. One last picture, and the procession sets off down the ramps. The coach is waiting and must get us back for lunch. If you stay behind in the afternoon, you see the elephants, without their rich cloth and decorations, setting off towards the bottom of the hill.

Once I went down on the other side of the hill, and I found a wonderful old village with temples so grey and ancient they seemed to grow out of the earth, and wall paintings freshly done on a new house, but so traditional they might have been done two hundred years ago. I had some friendly conversation with the people there (although not Hindi but Tamil is my language) but, as far as I can see, no tourists ever set foot there.

This palace and the Taj Mahal are extreme cases of this kind of tourism for these are two of the greatest monuments of India. There are other and quieter places where there is time to see more and understand more. But the majority of tourists are getting what they want. If they have their pleasure (which will continue when they get home and show their pictures) why should we not have a bit of good-natured fun out of it?

FIGHTING TUBERCULOSIS

During the last few years we have found a very disturbing increase of tuberculosis among our patients. Every day in our clinic we find 5 to 6 patients with clear signs of pulmonary tuberculosis. Some have had no treatment, others have taken treatment for an ordinary cough but many have started treatment for tuberculosis and have broken it off.

To cure tuberculosis it is absolutely necessary to take the correct treatment for many months and possibly years without a break. Ordinary cough medicines have no effect.

We do not know why there is such a great increase in the number of patients but many doctors attribute this to frequent riding on terribly overcrowded buses and sitting in crowded cinemas. There has been a big change in people's habits since road transport was improved. It is unfortunate that an increase in amenities often brings unforeseen evils. Until lately there has been practically no public education about tuberculosis and few patients understand the necessity of prolonged and correct treatment. Patients who have broken treatment become incurable. In our clinic we spend much time trying to convince the patients of these facts.

The question for us was, what could we do? The modern treatment requires up to ninety daily injections of Streptomycin, together with drugs such as INH, Rifampicin and/or Ethambutol, and these tablets have to be continued for many months after the injections have been completed.

We realised that is was quite useless to take on patients for treatment unless it was possible for them to come daily. It is not practical to ask patients to come more than two miles either walking or by bus. Many of them have to work, although it would be better for them to rest. Others are already too weak to make the journey. Now our procedure is this: we insist that all patients get a proper diagnosis. This can be done at the Government Hospitals. Then, if the patient's home is within two miles of Seva Nilayam, we will begin treatment. We give all the medicines free of charge, although they are costly, because we know that very few patients would continue for the whole course if they had to pay. We give supplementary foods, wheat, milk and oil to regular patients. One of our clinic assistants had the task of going by cycle to find any patients who are absent. Now we have started survey and two of our assistants are taking every village in our area house by house and examining whole families.

Before we started survey we had reduced the number of patients on daily treatment from 140 to 40. Some have been discharged fully cured. Naturally as we make survey the number will go up again.

An unhappy question is, what can we do for patients outside our area? We refuse to give them any treatment, although they often plead for it, because if we give them any medicine they will imagine that they are better and will not go to hospital. We insist as strongly as we can that they must go to their nearest Government Hospital for full examination and we then advise them to take treatment at their nearest Primary Health Centre. Sadly we must record that there are many patients who are too far from any source of treatment to be able to have any help at all. We know of some in mountain areas who are 15 miles away from any place where they could receive treatment from a qualified person. We can do nothing but we explain to them their situation and let them try to find a way to tackle the problem. We ardently wish that others would set up many small centres which would give treatment in these localities.

Many of our friends are sending us old nylon stockings which we use as bandage covers. We thank them all for the useful parcels they have sent. Another way to help would be to send small pieces of new cloth such as dressmaker's cuttings. We make patchwork pillows for sale, using the kapok (silk cotton) from our own trees.

We can also sell used foreign stamps. All this helps our funds.

Thanking you.

DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS

Thomas Cook's man will tell you flatly, "You can't travel between India and England by ship, you must fly." It is his business to know, but, still, I question whether he is right. There are ways, if you are willing to take time and trouble. But who, today, wants to do that?

When I came to India the sea passage was the normal way, and to fly was exceptional. It took fourteen days from Southampton to Colombo on the Dutch liner *Oranje* and I believe that this is undoubtedly the best way to enter a strange country. The life on shipboard gives you a chance to cut off gently from the land you have left, and to turn in thought to the land to which you are going. The voice of India calls: it is one voice made of a multitude of voices, and what they are you do not know. Meanwhile, there are so many experiences; opportunity to make new acquaintances and leisure to be alone; nights when you float between sea and stars, or watch the phosphorescent wake of the ship, a path of golden fire. Days when you look for flying fish, and porpoises gambolling in the clear water. All across the Indian ocean there is no land in sight, until at last you see the Laccadive Islands. They seem to consist only of a white lighthouse and some lines of coconut trees standing apparently in the water. Soon you will see Ceylon, the approach to India.

Voyages have been part of the history of mankind since the Greek sailors first ventured out on to the "wine-dark sea." There are thousands upon thousands of sea stories. There are the marvels told by that old liar (as probably he was) Sinbad the sailor, who came to a magnetic mountain which could draw all the iron nails out of a ship, so that it would fall to pieces, and the sleeping sea monster so huge that the sailors mistook it for an island, and landed and camped on its back. There are the dreams of the Irish saints, who, in the midst of their labours, looked across the illimitable ocean towards the setting sun, and seemed in its golden light to see the Islands of the Blest. The seamen of the seventeenth century landed at Goa, and they found the coconut groves and the spice gardens of Kerala. In the nineteenth century the beautiful tea clippers raced through the oceans.

The coming of steam ships did not destroy the legends of the sea, but they were enhanced by many tales of loyalty, courage and endurance. These range from the works of the greatest poets and story-tellers to the yarns spun by some old salt puffing his pipe on quayside on the English coast.

Why is there no poetry of air travel? It is one of the oldest dreams of mankind come true. We can soar about the clouds, carried by a great bird, mightier than anything imagined in the ancient myths. True, in the early days of aviation there were many heroic episodes. But now that flying has become safer than driving on the roads, it has become prosaic. What we most want from an airport is to get out of it, and we discuss whether the man in the tourist office was helpful

or unhelpful, and whether we can get some items through the customs, or whether we can get our souvenirs home without paying excess luggage.

If I want to recapture the spirit of the sea I can go down to the port of Madras. The old white-pillared Custom House looks much as it did a century ago. The sights and sounds of a seaport have much in common all the world over. Looking through the chasms between the tall buildings I can see the ocean, stretching to the horizon, indigo, with the catamarans, the primitive fishing boats, riding on it like specks, and the ships unload their cargo with the rattle of chains and the creaking of ropes. The narrow streets of the port area are unbelievably congested. The huge bullocks pulling the drays give place to no-one, and make cars and scooters look small and ineffective, while the cycle rickshaws weave carelessly in and out of the mass of traffic. There are ancient solid warehouses which may date from the time of the East India Company, and here and there are mosques, temples and churches hemmed in between them. There are scents of coffee being roasted and spices being ground, there are noisy and crowded restaurants. There is the old Armenian Church, which has long been closed because the once flourishing community of Armenian merchants exists no more, but which still offers a place for reflection and quiet in the midst of all the noise, by its paved enclosure with fragrant white-flowered frangipani trees and well-watered plants.

To be in a seaport stirs the imagination of all who love the sea. In my native city of Liverpool the building of the Docks and Harbour Board has this inscription running round the inside of its dome: “They that go down to the sea in ships and have their business in the great waters”. It is the business of humanity throughout the ages.

WHAT IS THE PRICE OF COCONUTS?

Well it may be between one and two Rupees each in the village and somewhat more in the city. But that gives no idea of the value of the coconut tree to South India. That is inestimable.

Along hundreds of miles of coast the tall stems of coconut trees bend towards the breaking surf. They are reflected in quiet waterways and lagoons. In thousands of plantations the young trees send up their massive fronds, meeting overhead like triumphal arches and creating a world of greenness and shade.

Coconuts are food and drink fuel and shelter. There is not a village in South India without coconut leaf thatched houses. Coconut fibre provides the ropes which bind poles together as a frame work for this thatch and such ropes can be seen everywhere for driving carts, raising water from wells and drawing ploughs. In the whole state of Kerala cooking depends on coconut oil and it is held to be prime necessity of life by the young dandy, with his carefully trimmed locks and his sister with her shining black plait.

It oils thousands of cycles and uncounted sewing machines whirring in the bazaars. If thee is shortage of water or possible pollution you may safely drink the sweet liquid from the interior of the young coconut.

As the tree grows the older leaves drop off and the heavy stems make fuel which burns well, being full of oil. The ribs of the leaves are scraped and tied into brooms which sweep millions of homes every day.

A few years ago there appeared in Kerala a disease of coconut tree which became known as the Kerala Wilt. It devastated thousand of acres. The young trees began to droop, and when they were dug up their roots were found to be soft and watery. There also appeared large number of huge maggots, the larvae of a beetle which invaded the bole of a tree and reduced the fibres of the trunk to chaff.

A high mountain wall divides Kerala from Tamil Nadu and it seemed as if the disease might be held back to the coastal strip. But unfortunately the disease has now been found in Tamil Nadu. We lost 9 trees from our total 860. This is a small number but it signaled the danger of rapid spread of the disease. The infected trees were dug up and burned as quickly as possible.

The directions of the Agricultural Department were to bore at least ten holes round each tree, with an iron bar, and pour in Bordeaux mixture (a combination of lime and copper sulphate which is used in the Vineyards of Europe). Then to bore a hole in the trunk of the tree and inject a pesticide called Nuvacran. The boles of trees which were infected with maggots must be cut away till the weakened tree can barely stand and must be shored up with soil, but it can repair itself and make new growth. Finally fertiliser must be applied according to a specified measure to ensure healthy growth.

The Bordeaux mixture cannot be made in metal containers. So we had to go to Madras to buy barrels of non-corrodable materials used to import Nitric Acid. Apart from the materials, the labour costs were considerable.

In our difficulty a Belgian Association came to the rescue and without delay gave us a grant sufficient for our needs. We completed the first round of treatment six months ago, and are starting on a second round as advised by the Agricultural Department. We are happy to tell our friends in Belgium that the disease has been arrested by their prompt and generous action and no further trees have died. But we shall continue our care of the coconuts without relaxing efforts.

A SMALL HANDICRAFT

There are some areas of South India which are quite unknown to tourists. There are no historic sites and no great monuments, but only miles of flat farm lands. But there are some big villages where there are grand houses built by merchants who traded with Burma during the days of the Empire. After Independence, the trade with Burma was cut off, and never revived, and the families were often reduced to living in a small part of the house, selling off the richly carved doors, the Burmese lacquer bowls and the silver ornaments. Now you can find so many things that tell of the family life of bygone days, wooden toys handed down through generations. Old brass lamps, carved ink wells and embroidered silk squares with counters to use as indoor games. On my wall there is a picture of birds and animals, done in cross stitch and this judging by the deeply tarnished frame may well be a hundred years old. These articles have sold off slowly, and at low prices, because the area was so little known but they are inevitably disappearing, and the memory of the old domesticity with them.

As a contrast you may go to the market in one of the big cities and you find stall after stall of plastic toys, boxes, bags, plates and kitchen utensils. The colours are bright and clear and please the eye, but where can you find any thing that will be loved, cherished and used for years?

Where can you find a toy that will be the object of fantasy and childish dreams? When the plastic is broken it is thrown away without another thought.

In the hill station, Kodaikanal, there is a shop which sells only hand made articles, and these come from charitable institutions which are using various kinds of local produce to give employment and to help to support their work. Some years ago we planted the kapok (silk cotton trees) which now yield a large quantity of fibre. This cannot be woven into cloth but it is ideal for making cushions, mattresses, and soft toys. In March the long dangling fruits split open, and silk cotton is revealed closely curled around the black seeds. To remove the seeds entails considerable work but we have made a machine with revolving spikes which teases out the cotton and allows the seeds to fall through the grid. We can use this for stuffing a variety of toys, chiefly dolls and Teddy bears. There are many bears in India so the Teddy is easily accepted as one of the animals congenial to children and good to play with. So by degrees our little industry has developed. Each year we get a gift of waste cloth from the largest of the local cotton mills and this is strong enough to make good shoulder bags and shopping bags. We ask our friends for small pieces of good cloth, such as dressmaker's cuttings, and we make many colourful cushion and chair seats. We use any woolly cloth or fabric or velvet we can get for the Teddy bears. We also make baby clothes and even children's dresses with larger pieces of cloth. Most of these go up to Kodaikanal where they are bought by residents, as well as tourists and holiday makers. When our clinic work is finished for the day our staff enjoy a spell in the sewing room, working out colours and designs or dressing dolls. Those patients who are able like to join in. We do not claim that our small industry has great artistic merit, but it is giving some useful training to village girls who otherwise would not learn to sew. It is discovering creative abilities. It is giving some support to our funds, and it is providing articles which are useful and attractive.

THE KITCHEN

The kitchen is the heart of the house. When we came to this place, which was an empty field, the first necessity was to dig a well and arrange for a water supply. At that stage water had to be carried in earthen pots, and only after a few years could we arrive at the luxury of pipes and taps. Almost all the water supply of rural India and even much of the town supply is still carried in such pots.

When putting up the first building we could not afford factory made bricks. We used the clay which could be dug out on the spot and we employed village labourers to raise the walls. These walls are three feet thick and they carry a red-tiled roof. Such houses, like the adobe buildings of Central and South America will last indefinitely if the roof is kept in good repair.

This kitchen is 29 feet long and it has an extension on the east side, which was made later, by covering in a verandah with light metal mesh, and digging out two arches to lead to it. This annexe looks on to the garden, which is a mass of colour, with red bougainvillea, blue morning glory and golden leaved crotons. The kitchen wall on the west side has only small windows, because of the fierce wind which blows from June to September bringing frequent dust storms.

There are two stoves in the kitchen. One is the type designed for the Indian Government, under the name "Smokeless chula". It is an advance on the typical village kitchen stove, from which the smoke has to escape through a small aperture, or just seep through the thatch. The smokeless chula, when well made, has a good draught, and a chimney rising above the roof tiles.

This stove has a top tiled with squares of black “Cuddapah” stone, a very durable material which can be easily cleaned, and which provides a heated area on which pots can be kept warm. We burn some wood, but chiefly shells and stems from our coconut trees, which are rich in oil, and make a good blaze. The milk is best boiled on a wood stove as it can be kept simmering for a long time, resulting in a thick layer of cream. The other stove burns gas, which is produced by our Gobar Gas plant in the garden behind the kitchen. Such gas plants are being popularized by the authorities in an attempt to lessen the wood cutting which is denuding many hill slopes, and defeating the Government’s efforts at re-afforestation. The gas plant is fed by fresh cow dung mixed with water, and produces colourless and odourless methane gas, which rises in a metal drum and is piped to two gas burners inside the kitchen. The manure which has been through the gas plant retains its full value as a fertiliser.

You take off your shoes before entering the kitchen, as this is the custom in South India. Even the most squalid village huts enjoy this mark of respect. The kitchen floor is painted red and is very pleasant and cool to the feet. There is a blue painted, cupboard and storage tins also painted blue. The walls are white-washed, and this is done once a year, in preparation for the feast of Pongal in January. There are no chairs, but a number of wooden benches made by a local carpenter. Water comes through two taps supplied from a raised tank into which it has been pumped from our well.

Over the years this kitchen has received many visitors. It has seen the unremitting daily work of the household, varied styles of cooking, but mostly good I hope, and all based on the local products of the earth. It has been the scene of debates and (I must not deny) some quarrels and differences of opinion, but also the bringing of news from afar, the making and strengthening of friendships, and the enjoyment of good food. It is the heart of the house and of Seva Nilayam itself.

1986

A SHADOW SHOW

During the past year we have been making puppets. Puppetry is a very old and highly developed art in India, but, like many such traditional arts, it cannot stand against the cinema, and is falling into disuse.

To use string puppets (marionettes) requires training and skill but any child can use glove puppets and find a lot of fun in them as well as encouragement to the imagination and self expression.

We had no instructor but we started with a gift of four puppets from a school in Switzerland and found out by trial and error how to make them. It was uphill work because no one had experience or confidence and could not well imagine what result was aimed at. But we now have a good set of puppets and we are hoping that we may be able to interest some schools and do a little to revive what is becoming a lost art.

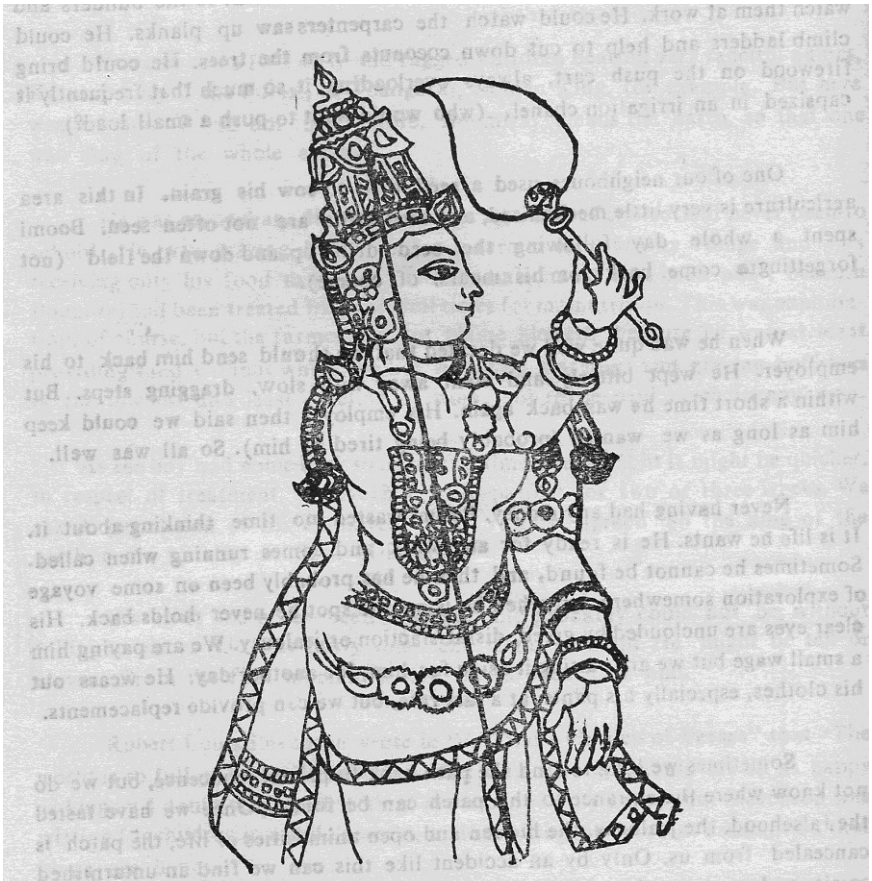
We often enquire about the work done by our out-patients for their living, as this helps us to see their needs and the possibilities of treatment. Most are field labourers, some are small farmers, some are shepherds. Recently one man told us that he was in a group touring the villages and giving performances with puppets.

Of course, we were interested. It turned out that these puppets were not dolls, but transparencies, painted on skin taken from leather, and held by a stick running vertically through the centre. They were shadow puppets, and were to be shown against a light which projected the image on a thin white sheet. The operator would sit on the ground, concealed from the audience and would at the same time move the puppets and imitate the voices. They are, in fact, like the shadow puppets of Java, which are famous and use a very high degree of artistic skill.

The result of this talk was that we invited the puppeteer to give us a show. The group came, after dark and fixed up the light and the screen. Music was provided by three female members of the troupe, who played a pipe and a very simplified kind of harmonium such as is often used with Hindu religious songs. The audience consisted of our in-patients, men, women and children, along with some staff members, the cook and the buffalo herdsman. We sat on the ground under the open sky, with a back cloth of waving coconut trees.

The story was one which has been told many times through human history, in many settings and many cultures. It is as old as the Book of Job. It is the story of a just man tried by adversity and being found faithful.

King Harichandran had a reputation of never, in his life, having told a lie. Nothing could make him swerve from the truth. The god, Shiva, wished to test him, and sent a man in the guise of spiritual teacher or guru. This so-called guru subjected the King to all kinds of abuse and trickery, and made preposterous demands for money. He also sent a dancing girl to seduce the King and get him in her power. Rather than give in to their wiles, Harichandran let himself be robbed of all his wealth and be reduced to servitude. The Queen also had to leave the palace and go into domestic service, taking her young son with her.



A SHADOW SHOW

Harichandran was appointed to look after a toddy shop, but being a king he had no experience of work, and he allowed a large pot of toddy to fall and break, causing a great loss. So he was dismissed, and found a job in a butcher' shop. But here again, without experience, he did not know the proper way to cut the meat. At last he was appointed to look after the burial ground.

Then his son was helping the Queen with preparations for a festival for which bundles of grass had to be brought for a special decoration, and he was bitten by a snake concealed in the grass, and died. The Queen brought the dead boy in her arms, weeping and pleading for his burial. But the minimum requirements for a funeral were some small coins and a handful of rice, and the Queen had nothing to offer. Harichandran had to refuse the burial, but then he saw that the boy was his own son. The God, Shiva, seeing that Harichandran had remained faithful through all trials, appeared, and restored to Harichandran his wealth and his palace, and brought his son back to life, sending the wicked guru away.

This story is known to all the villages, but, like children, they love to hear old stories again and again. There was some comic relief in the acting and this brought frequent ripples of laughter. The show was a great success.

If the play is given in full it lasts four hours. In the villages the troupe set up a small tent and sell tickets for a very inconsiderable sum of 40 paise. The villagers will sit far into the night to follow the performance, as they like value for money and do not get tired of watching the action. Our performance had to be cut short by a little, because the troupe would have missed the last bus to Aundipatty if they had played the final 15 minutes. Much skill and endurance is needed to manipulate these puppets and to make them appear to run and dance, and also to imitate the different voices. But the reward is poor. They cannot charge much for tickets or they will not get the children. The cinema is calling, with its bright lights, strident songs and "love" scenes. But the appreciation of the ancient art is till there, as we proved by the reaction of our audience and puppetry still lives, though threatened and fading and it is there to be revitalised when the time comes.

LOOKING BACK

Twenty-three years. It is just a passing moment on the pages of Indian history but it is a long time to those who live through it, slowly and sometimes painfully learning and experiencing, unlearning and re-learning, rejecting old ideas and accepting new ones. But I may say truthfully that the basic idea remains, service according to the needs of the people and not in accordance with some scientific theory or preconceived pattern. Human nature will always defeat those who try to press it into a ready-made mould.

This is an area of great natural beauty, with steep gray rocks rising above green fields, and many views of distant mountains, in which it is often hard to see where the landscape ends and the cloud land begins. All this has remained unchanged but within this framework there have been many changes. At first there was no road transport for the six miles to Aundipatty except locally owned bullock carts, and a small overloaded van, which might or might not start, and carried passengers sitting on the bonnet or clinging on behind. Now there are many buses in the day, and I may mention that most of them are just as crowded as the old van was.

There are cinemas, more shops and tea stalls, and more schools. The electrification of the countryside by hydro-electric power, has increased each year. Electric pumps have almost entirely superseded the old clumsy pumpkin-shaped bucket raised by bullocks, with the result that land which was almost desert in the dry season has become green, and bears crops of rice, millet, onions, tomatoes, chillies and cotton. The roads, although far from being well surfaced are at least passable for lorries and tractors, so that produce can be sent to distant markets instead of having to be consumed locally.

This is applauded as great progress, but it has also some unfortunate results. Milk can be sent to large dairy concerns in the cities, and made into products which are consumed by the rich and middle classes. There seems to be no greater abundance of milk in the villages and you do not find that it is used habitually and freely for growing children. The possibility of marketing cash crops has meant that few fruits and vegetables are grown for family use and little impact has been made on the age old conservatism of South Indians regarding diet, by which they esteem a full place of rice, or other grains as the most desirable thing, and vegetables as mere accessories, not to be bothered about if money is short or work is pressing. This leads to widespread malnutrition among children who have just passed the weaning age.

The growth of population has lead to deforestation of the hill slopes, for firewood and also for building in the towns. New roads make lorry transport of timber easy, and there is much illegal tree-felling. So this apparent progress has its darker sides.

During these twenty three years the clinic has been the steady centre of our activities and we have been served by a number of foreign volunteers, nurses, also by a retired but active Indian Doctor. But we have also had non medical volunteers who have assisted with their own skills in such matters as repairs and maintenance laying a piped system for water supply, building chicken houses, gardening, and making many kinds of small improvements.

The result is that we now have a well established, tree-shaded enclosure with arable fields and vegetable plots covering 3 ½ acres and supplying food for ourselves and inpatients. We have adequate buildings to accommodate our patients and in-patients, staff workers and guests, all in country style. Our buffalo stand is paved, with sumps and compost pit, to keep down flies and organise the economical use of manure, and our "Gobar" gas plants produce methane gas for kitchen use. It is impossible to say at what point we reached this stage, which we feel adequate to present needs, but it was a story of long and low continuous effort, on our own part and that of the many volunteers who have helped us.

These volunteers came from many countries, England, Australia, Denmark, United States and some fulfilled a contract of two years, learning the language and becoming very familiar with the life of the people. Others were students, among them medical students who could give us useful information on modern medicine. Some were unemployed in their own countries and anxious to use their skills and to find a more satisfactory life. The whole place is full of memories. We often think when turning a water tap that John from Scotland laid this pipe system or Ian from Australia built this chicken house or someone who made this plate rack or used his aptitude for carpentry in putting up shelves or making tables. There were a few disasters of course but we can now laugh at them.

The Indian Government today does not encourage foreign volunteers any more and we accept their decision. There are many reasons for this but one is that they now have a sufficient number of trained and educated young people to do the work which is needed. We now have all Indian staff but we are happy to have had the experience of those formative years, and we are thankful to all those who have helped us.

AS SOFT AS SILK

We often show visitors the trees in our garden, glowing red Gul Mohur sometimes called the Flame of the Forest, the Amaltas, Indian Laburnum with the hanging chains of golden yellow flowers, or the jack with its dark glossy leaves and strange enormous fruits.

Usually, not much attention is paid to the Kapok, or Silk Cotton tree unless we point it out. It seems to have no special beauty. A large tree with a thick trunk covered with bark which is always green, ungainly, straggling branches coming out of the trunk at right angles, and unremarkable greyish white flowers.

But after the flowers come the fruits big green pods becoming light brown as they dry and if not soon gathered, splitting open to cover the garden and the paths with floating white cotton.

If you open the pod carefully before it splits, you see the cotton in tight curls, and if you break this gently you see that each curl surrounds a black seed the size of a peppercorn. The task is to separate the seeds from the silky fibres.

Where the Kapok is grown commercially there are factories with very large machines to do this job. But we have few trees compared with the big estates, we had to invent our own machine. The first and most primitive method, was to split the pods by knocking with a mallet. Then it was subjected to a kind of 'churning' by twirling a stick with a cross of strong wire at the end. In this way you could do a little in a long time and have sore hands as well. Also, there was nowhere for the seeds to go except in the bottom of the basket. The next step was to get an iron drum and fit an upright rod with spikes. There was an attachment to this by which two people could move the rod back and forth by pulling alternately on a rope. There was a wire mesh at the bottom of the drum which allowed the seeds to fall through. It was quite hard work but it cleaned the cotton successfully.

The next model was horizontal and the rod with spikes also horizontal. There is a hatch at the top through which the cleaned cotton is extracted, and an opening at the bottom for the seeds to fall through. It can be turned easily by a handle and revolves without the back and forth motion. It stands on iron legs and is very firm and steady. This was made by a local lathe man in Aundipatty but it took sometime and several long sessions of explanation, as he had not seen any such machine before. It is very important to clean the cotton quickly after its gathered. In 1985 we had continuous drizzling rain in March, when the cotton was ready, and some of it got damp in storage. Also, the seeds attract rats so they are best extracted as soon as possible. The ease and quickness of the new machine allow us to get on with the work without delay.

From the beginning we made all our own pillows and mattress with Kapok. The texture is extremely beautiful, soft, and silky. It cannot be spun or woven because the fibres are too short but is ideal for cushions and pillows, and also soft toys. This is now an essential part of our handicrafts. We buy suitable cloth for covering the pillows but we are also helped greatly by friends who send us parcels of cloth pieces such as dressmaker's cuttings. Brightly coloured cotton prints are ideal for making patchwork covers.

Now our trees are stripped of all their fruits and the bins are full of fleecy cotton, which we are making up and shall use over the next two or three months.

WHAT IS HOLISTIC MEDICINE?

You may think it is a new discovery in medicine, or a new fad, or a revolt against modern medical practice, or some kind of nature cure. In one sense it may be said to be a nature cure, as it regards the patient not in isolation, but as a part of nature, only able to be understood and fully influenced as such.

It has been said that the greatest discovery of modern times is not the power to use nuclear energy or to travel to the moon, but the recognition of the unity of nature and the interdependence of all its living forms, plant and animal ourselves included. This has led to the study of what we call "ecology", the formation of communities in which plant and animal life and inanimate forces of nature, wind, rain, sunlight and cloud, and the soil of the earth's surface built up from the disintegration of rocks and the activities of immeasurably vast numbers of micro-

organisms all form a closely interlocked community whose members can only exist by action and interaction with each other. Is this a discovery? It was there all the time, but we are at last beginning to act on it. We were like children playing on the shore of a mighty sea, picking up coloured pebbles, hoarding them in our pockets or quarrelling over them but never raising our eyes to see the ocean from which they were cast up.

If we practice holistic medicine we treat the patient as a person, and a person is something more than the sum of the bones and muscles and all the organs that constitute his body. He is the representative of a civilization and a certain tradition of religion, habits, aspirations and prejudices. No matter how poor or mean or stupid he is he has something that is not measurable in terms of blood pressure or respiration or pulse rate.

But how can a busy doctor think about all this? The answer it that we all do think about it, and the need is to recognise it in medical practice.

When my brother and I were children we had our share of accidents and minor ailments, coughs and colds, cuts and bruises, measles and whooping cough. My mother looked after our comfort and fed us with what she knew would tempt the appetite. She rubbed our chests and saw to it that we took any medicine that was prescribed by the doctor. If the local doctor called, he knew a great deal about us, even before he stepped inside the house. He knew my father's profession, and what kind of education we were getting. He knew what we had for dinner and where we would go for holidays. He did not need to study all this, he belonged to the same area of the city and the same stratum of society.

If my mother or the doctor had been told that they were practising holistic medicine they would have been very surprised and puzzled. But it is only the old fashioned common sense, the light which has guided countless mothers and grandmothers and family doctors down the generations. Of course, superstitions got mixed up in it, and there were many illnesses for which no cure had been found, and many of these, but very far from all of them, are curable today. But whether we can cure diabetes or tuberculosis, or not, it is all a gain to be able to see the patient as a person, part of a society and a culture. Then we do not ask the patient to do anything which is against his beliefs but we try to build on whatever in his culture is helpful to his cure. We do not rely on a quick injection, given scarcely looking at the patient. We believe that time must be allowed for questioning, assessing and observing. We must understand poverty and hardship, social pressures and the restrictions of custom.

We are not refusing any type of medicine, allopathic, homeopathic, ayurvedic (that is the ancient system of India) herbal, or nature cure, as long as they are applied with understanding of the patient as a person in his own right. We have come to see that psychological factors play a very large part in any illness, not only those which are considered as mental illnesses. Unless we treat a patient holistically we cannot even begin to recognise these factors, still less approach them closely enough to offer some help. And if medicine does not offer some help to the sufferer, what is it for?

KING OF THE EARTH

You can often find dirty and ragged children bearing very fanciful names: Katuraj, king of the Forest, or Thangaraj, Golden King, for example. But here was a name I had not met before: Boomi means the earth, so that Boomiraj was king of the whole earth.

He was on orphan, did not know his age, and of course had never been to school. He was grazing buffaloes for a farmer in a nearby village and was receiving only his food in return. The food also must have been poor, because Boomiraj had been treated by us several times for malnutrition. This was exploitation, of course, but the farmer did not blame himself, because he was at least providing food without which the boy would be starving, and grazing buffaloes is the lowliest and least exacting of work, not to be paid much in any case.

As the boy had come back to us several times we though it might be quicker, in respect of treatment, to have him as in-patient for two or three weeks. We asked permission of his employer, who readily agreed. So the king of the earth came to stay at Seva Nilayam.

His shirt had never been washed, and probably could not be, without falling to pieces. He was fairly small and slight of build. He might be ten or eleven. From the first moment a new world opened to him.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in "A Child's Garden of Verses" that "the world is so full of a number of things, that I am sure we should all be as happy as kings." I doubt very much if kings are exceptionally happy, but Stevenson was writing for children in a child's world, and accepting the innocent assumption that kings are happy.

But Boomiraj was happy and avidly reached out for the 'number of things' offered to him. He had the chance to ride on the bullock cart when it rattled off to the mill loaded with sacks of grain, and he could see the grinder working. He could water the garden with the hose pipe, and he was seen every morning at it, with the first daylight. He used the jet too strongly and washed all the small seeds out of the ground. He could bring sand and cement to the builders and watch them at work. He could watch the carpenters saw up planks. He could climb ladders and help to cut down coconuts from the trees. He could bring firewood on the push cart, always overloading it so much that frequently it capsized in an irrigation channel. (Who would want to push a small load?)

One of our neighbours used a seed drill to sow his grain. In this area agriculture is very little mechanised, and seed drills are not often seen. Boomi spent a whole day following the seed drill up and down the field (not forgetting to come back for his meals, of course).

When he was quite well we decided that we should send him back to his employer. He wept bitterly and went away with slow, dragging steps. But within a short time he was back again. His employer then said we could keep him as long as we wanted (probably being tired of him). So all was well.

Never having had any money, Boomi wasted no time thinking about it. It is life he wants. He is ready for any work and comes running when called. Sometimes he cannot be found, and then he has probably been on some voyage of exploration somewhere, but when he is on the spot he never holds back. His clear eyes are unclouded by greed, dissatisfaction or jealousy. We are paying him a small wage but we are putting it aside for him, for another day. He wears out his clothes, especially his pants, at a fast rate, but we can provide replacements.

Sometimes we long to find the path back to primal innocence, but we do not know where the entrance to this path can be found. Once we have tasted the falsehood, the jealousy, the hidden and open animosities of life, the path is concealed from us. Only by an accident like this can we find an untarnished spirit, and we do not know how long this state of innocence can last. This is a saddening thought. But as long as innocence lasts, Boomiraj is really a king of his world.

LETTERS, LETTERS

About ten years ago we found ourselves n need of a new source or funds to maintain our clinic. Three large charitable agencies had given grants for a limited period on the understanding that we should not ask for these to be renewed. There was at that time, an idea that money should be used for constructive purposes – buildings, wells, roads, and so on rather than for current expenses, such as medicines, or the payment of clinic and farm workers.

Of course, we have to do both; we do not give unnecessary medicines but at the same time we do not put up unnecessary buildings which would be out of place in a village setting. We try to steer a reasonable course through various changes of policy.

But how, at the moment to raise more funds? I had heard people from Europe and America remark on the number of appeals for help that came through their post boxes, and I realised that these people must know very little of the conditions of life in the communities they were asked to help. Was the picture ever drawn or was it really so bad as to be hopeless? The effect of radio and television (many people told me) was to give the impression that there was no settled daily life, but that communities staggered from one crisis to another. Catastrophes are news but daily life is not. Did people have any pleasures? Did they travel? How were they born, how did they marry, how did they die? What sights and sounds met their eyes and ears every day, from dawn to sunset?

I began to describe all this in a series of short letters, just printed as leaflets and giving our address. The response was amazing. I am sometimes told that, "People don't write letters today. They have telephones and just ring up". Don't you believe it. There are many people all over the world, who write friendly, good, and really interesting letters and really want to write. They say what I write is just what they want to know. Many send donations, large and small and many became regular subscribers. But it is a two way traffic also: I have learned so much about countries I have never visited. Queensland, Australia, has a climate very like that of South India, growing rice, bananas and mangoes, and my correspondent advised me to look for the Camphor Laurel, a beautiful tree which I have not yet found, but which it must be possible to grow here. A West Australian friend has described the delicate beauty of the flowers that appear in their area after rain.

English and Scottish friends have written to me about the changes in life in the familiar places in which I grew up the greater comforts and conveniences, but also the intractable problems of unemployment, coal miner's strikes and pollution of the countryside by industry. They have not left me without pictures of royal weddings and spring flowers. Correspondents have told me about the children and grandchildren, their travels in China, Indonesia, New Guinea, and the Philippines. I have received beautiful picture calendars from Switzerland and family snapshots from California and New Mexico. I am grateful for all of this.

But of course, not everybody wants to write letters or has the time or facility to do so. That does not matter. I will continue to send the printed letters to anyone who wants to receive them and of course that includes all who so generously support our work at Seva Nilayam. But if people do not write or give any response I need to know if they are still receiving the letters. Perhaps they have moved away and not notified their change of address. Perhaps there has been mistake in the addressed envelope. We do not have a computer and our Tamil worker who looks after the post has a difficult task in dealing with so many strange names in unfamiliar languages.

COMPASSION

There is a story about the Buddha which is well known in India. He was called the Compassionate One because of his sympathy for all living beings in their struggles and sorrows. One day a woman came to him in bitter grief, carrying her dead baby, and imploring him to raise the child to life.

The Buddha was a man and not a god; he claimed no miraculous powers. He looked earnestly at the woman, and told her to go and bring a handful of grain from a house where there had been no death. The woman set off and went from door to door, but she returned empty-handed. “O master,” she said, “there is no such house.”

Those who suffer may easily become obsessed with their own pain and forget that of others. The Buddha gave this woman something that is better than a miracle; he gave her a glimpse of his all-embracing compassion.

Two thousand five hundred years after the Buddha lived and taught, we still see around us incurable suffering and inconsolable sorrow. It is true that we now have much more power to

cure diseases, to save lives in famines and natural disasters, and to prevent deaths in infancy. We do not underestimate these gains. But not matter how far we seem to progress, we are still brought face to face with so much suffering that we cannot reach or cure.

It is easy to write an optimistic letter, and often it is justified. The world is a very beautiful place; we have joy in nature around us, in our work and our friendships. Every day brings its satisfactions as well as its difficulties, but there are times when we feel utterly powerless, and we want to cry out for the power to work a miracle.

A few days ago parents came more than eight miles, bringing a child who was obviously suffering from brain damage, perhaps due to previous meningitis. The face was vacant, the eyes unresponsive, and the legs dangled helplessly.

We ask: “Why did you come here? This is only a small place. There are big hospitals in the cities.” “We have been there, and they could do nothing.” The father brings out a handful of crumpled hospital papers. To gain time we try to read them, although we know there will be no help in them. “What made you think of coming here?” we ask. “We heard of someone who was cured by you, and people tell us that you take good care of patients.” The parents stand there with hopeful, questioning eyes. This is a moment we would gladly escape from.

A man has cancer at the base of the spine. He thought it was an abscess, and treated it for weeks with poultices and applications of medicinal leaves. Now it is too late; the swelling has spread right across his back. We have to tell him that we can do nothing. He leaves the clinic, bent over his stick, with pain and difficulty, and as he goes out he bursts into tears.

A boy of sixteen is brought by his friend. He is suffering from a type of chorea. He cannot control his movement, or speak clearly. He has been to the Government Hospital, and now he comes to us, hoping to hear something different from what he heard there. The disease is hereditary, and progressive; his elder brother died of it, and there are no other children in the family.

We long desperately to help. What if our longing could draw to us some power which would give us the gift of working miracles. But what then? We know quite well that our human nature could not stand the strain. It would take divinity, or at least participation in divine nature, to bear it. Folklore is full of tales of the granting of gifts which seem good, but brought destruction to those who asked and received them. And humanity, in its folklore, often sees deeper into the world than reasoning can.

Compassion has nothing to do with sentimentality. To accept the world as it is, without indulging in fantasies, is a very tough discipline. Compassion means feeling with others, not feeling for them, as though we were standing on a higher level and had just so much pity to dole out. It makes us one with all living beings.

The grain is reaped in the fields. It is threshed and winnowed, often with much fun and laughter; it is carried home and stored, some in large granaries, and some in common earthen pots. It gives joy to daily life, to marriages and festivals, and the entertaining of guests. But as in the days of the Buddha it would still be impossible to find a handful of grain from a house where there had not been suffering and death.

1987

THE CATTLE PONGAL

Saint Francis of Assisi would have approved of it. He was the poet saint who saw the beasts of the field as his brothers and the birds of the air as his sisters and gave all creatures honour according to their place in creation. For the third day of our Pongal Festival, our harvest celebration, is dedicated to the farm animals whose labour and produce has given so much to us. It reminds us that we do not regard them as mere machines but as fellow workers worthy of appreciation.

From early morning the yard is cleaned and swept. The white bullocks and the white cow are soaped and sluiced with water until they gleam. They receive new head ropes and garlands of flowers, which they some times try to eat if their mouths come too close to the fresh greenery. Their horns are well rubbed with oil.

Some people paint the horns in bright colours, but this practice too easily gets mixed up with politics. Red, white and green stand for the Indian Congress Party, and red and black for the D.M.K., the party of the Tamil state. As the animals are strictly neutral in these matters, it is not fair to make them bearers of a message which they have not been asked to approve. So oil is best.

The buffaloes are washed too, and their back skins shine like polished jet. It seems incongruous to decorate these great lumbering beasts, but they provide us with the richest milk, butter and cream. They are adorned with spots of vari–coloured powders.

On this day, which is called Madu Pongal (Cattle Pongal) the draught animals do not work. The stone-floored shed and the paved area where they stand outside are washed. Their mangers are filled with the best fodder.

String cots are brought out and set for clinic staff and guests to sit on. A fire is kindled in front of the cattle shed, and rice is boiled on it. The pot must boil over. This a sign of prosperity and abundance. When it boils everyone stands and shouts "*Pongal-O-Pongal!*" three times. Then milk, sugar and ghee are added to the rice. The smoke of incense mingles with the smoke of the fire, and camphor lights are waved in circles. When rice is cooked it is served in portions on pieces of banana leaves and every one receives a piece of sugar cane and a banana.

Saint Francis of Assisi, if he could be here, would enjoy the Cattle Pongal. But he would want to have a celebration for all the animals, as is done in his city of Assisi to this day. What about the sheep and goats, or the washerman's donkey that so patiently trots off to the river or the tank with a huge burden of clothes for washing? We have to admit that although people take reasonable care of most animals, as they are valuable property, they are not held in much esteem. And there is little interest in wild animals except those which are eatable. In India generally, man is thinking only of his own relationship to the animals and not as they are in themselves. When Saint Francis walked in the woods and the birds flew round him, he spoke to them as his sisters.

There are some signs that the love of animals is beginning to grow in India. There are now many very fine nature reserves and the increase of various species of animals is watched and fostered. Research is done to ensure the growth of suitable pasturage and trees. The "India Magazine" has printed many articles on nature reserves and these places are more and more

visited by the public. There are several Natural History Societies and some really beautiful books are published by them.

It is good and right to pay honour to the cattle at *Madu Pongal*, but we would like to see the day when forest trees are revered, as they were in ancient times and when the immense natural wealth of India's wild life can be appreciated for its own sake.

ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Early in the morning, as soon as the first streaks of light appear in the sky, I hear the clatter of a bucket and the splashing of water. Mariammal is sprinkling the paths. She has mixed the water with a fresh pat of cow dung, clean of straw or gravel. As every South Indian villager knows, this hardens the surface of the paths, so that they can be swept clean smoothly without raising a dust. Mariammal is a widow with a grown up family. Her work is not too hard. She sweeps everywhere and amasses many baskets of fallen leaves, which she carries to the compost pit. In the afternoon she cleans out the chicken house. When she has no further work she curls up for a sleep with her blue sari drawn over her head but she is always ready on call with her broom and her basket. Her broom is made of the ribs of the coconut leaves scraped and tied in a bundle. It is stiff enough to sweep hardened paths but flexible enough to gather all the dead leaves.

Her other job in the morning is to collect the cow dung for the Gobar gas plant. If you do not know what this is, I may say that it is about the best fuel saving device that I know of. Fresh cow dung gives off methane gas, which is colourless, and odourless, and can be piped into the kitchen and used in an ordinary gas burner. The gas plant itself is quite a large structure. There is an inlet through which the dung and water pass into a circular pit eleven feet deep in which a drum little less in diameter than the pit collects the gas, raising and falling like a gasometer. After the gas has been extracted in this way the dung passes into a basin and then into a pit from which it can be taken for use to the fields.

Methane gas is of no use to the crops, and the dung, after being processed, has lost none of its value as a fertiliser. Four baskets of dung daily will keep our gas supply going. We have to use firewood as well, but the coconut leaves, coconut shells and branches of trees that have to be cut from time to time give us enough fuel, so that we never need to get anything from outside.

Until lately our buffalo minder, Paramasivam, used to carry the cow dung, but now he is getting too old for the work. So Mariammal does it. Paramasivam still takes the buffaloes out to graze but this is an easy occupation, enabling him, to sit down, and chat with passers by, or even take a nap occasionally.

The coconut tree, which is such a feature of our landscape, has its own special habit of growth. As the main trunk rises, the fan-like leaves age and fall off, leaving the characteristic encircling scars.

Our coconut expert, Chinnasamy, has been with us for nearly twenty years. There is nothing he does not know about the coconut and no nut or leaf may be cut without his permission. He has a very sharp *aruval*, the heavy curved knife that is necessary for this work, and he keeps it sharp and in perfect condition. No-one else would dare to use it. Now that he is getting old he does not climb the trees himself, but all must be done by younger people under his direction. He cuts the tender coconuts – *yellani* – when required for drinking, and the mature nuts when

required for selling or for kitchen use. The leaves, which look like delicate fronds against the sky, are, in fact, very heavy and have a weighty main stalk. There is much more in disposing of these leaves. When the stalk is split in the correct way the leaflets are plaited so as to make usable thatch. If the separate leaflets are detached the centre ribs can be scraped and tied into bundles to make brooms, of which we need a constant supply, and so we come back to Mariammal and her sweeping.

Visitors to Seva Nilayam frequently enquire "How many nurses or doctors do you have? How many patients do you treat?; but they much less frequently ask "How are the paths kept clean? Where do you get your fuel? How do you make your compost?" But without these essential services Seva Nilayam would not be the piece of beauty that it is, but something more like a rural slum.

[Editor's note: A letter entitled 'A special task' appears at this point in the list of letters supplied by VST but no copy can be found.]

BEAUTY WITHOUT CRUELTY

Early this morning, while it was still dark, I heard a bird's voice that I know well. It was one persistent phrase, that cannot be better transcribed than *Que-ill* (koel). This bird appears in the hot weather, which is the nesting season. Its call is as well known as that of the cuckoo in Europe, and like the cuckoo it steals another bird's nest in which to lay its eggs and rear its young. The other bird is the house crow, and by pushing out the crow's eggs the koel helps to keep down (as far as anything in this world can) the numbers of the strident and voracious crows that destroy so much of the grain harvest. The koel is a beautiful bird, with a long tail and strong claws. The male is entirely black and the female is pale brown spotted with white.

Just lately I have heard that people are shooting the koel for meat. This is not from necessity, as the koel is only a small bird, a little smaller than the crow and cannot provide a satisfying meal. Seva Nilayam has become like a wild life sanctuary and we do not allow any unnecessary killing within its borders.

There is much to think about when considering questions of killing and cruelty. It is impossible to be completely logical, as Gandhi found when he was compelled against his will to have a sick and suffering calf killed.

There are many tribes in the hills and jungles of India living by hunting as their ancestors did throughout millions of years of the earth's existence. Agriculture came much later. We have to admit that if prehistoric man had not been a hunter we would not be here today.

But killing for pleasure or from the desire to see a creature suffer pain is always degrading. Children pull the wings off butterflies without realising the beauty they are destroying, but they can be taught as they grow older.

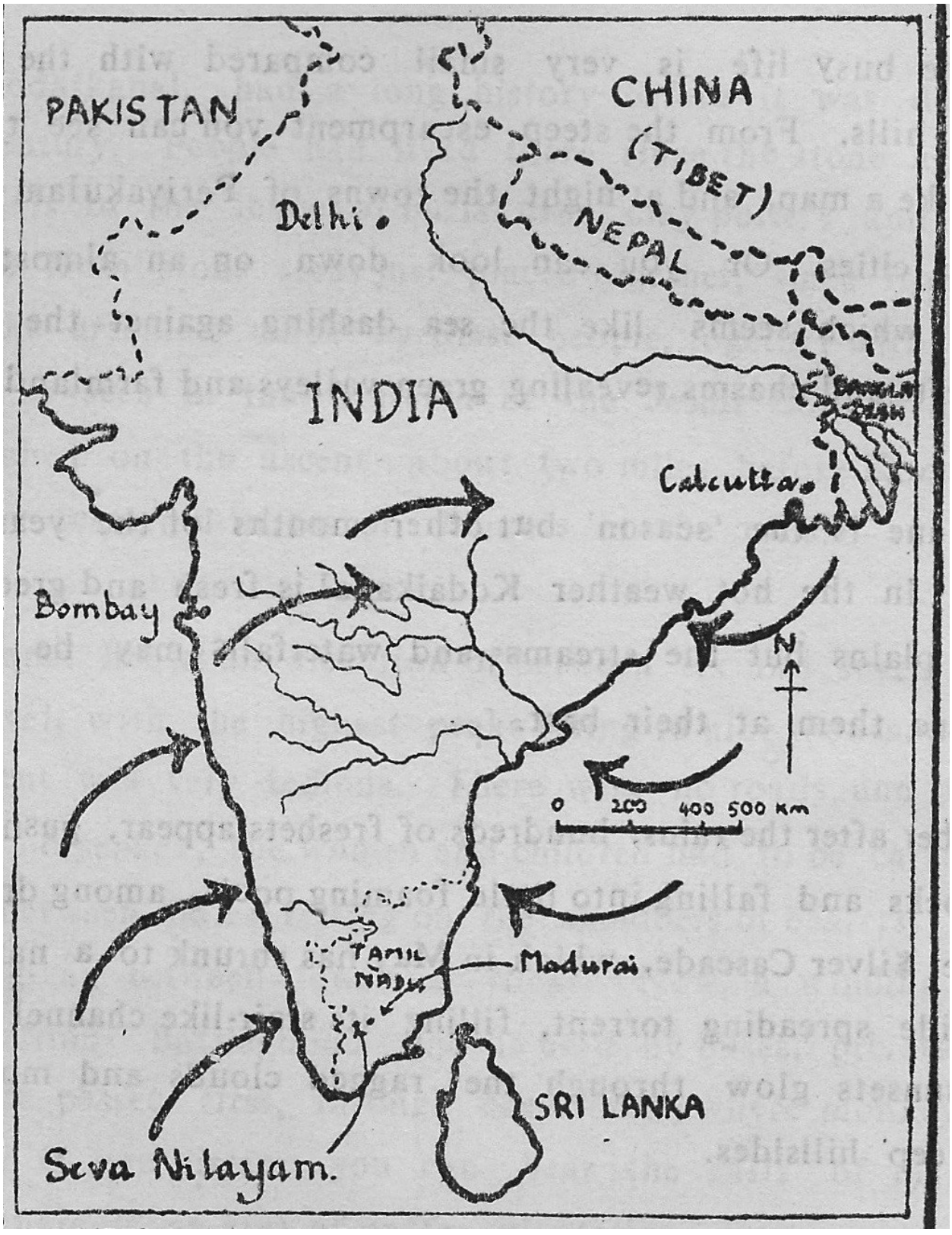
The chameleon is a strange lizard-like creature which is not often seen because it lives in thick trees and does not come to the ground. But it is well known that it changes colour according to its surroundings. If it is placed on a light coloured cloth, its markings change to the palest greenish yellow, but on a dark cloth they deepen to almost black. It is fun for children to watch these changes and this play is harmless enough if the chameleon is placed back again gently into

the trees but it can end in torturing and killing the victim. A friend of ours who is in charge of boys found one day that they had killed a chameleon. He asked for the culprit and said to the boy, "Now go and make another one like it". To meditate on this is to received a sharp lesson on the contrast between human crudeness and stupidly and the exquisite and wonderful creative forces of nature.

There are many snakes in this area but among possibly a hundred species only four are poisonous, and deadly to man. All water snakes and most of the land snakes are harmless but if any snake is seen in the harvest field or garden it will be mercilessly battered with great excitement and without any kind of enquiry as to its species or habits. The killer will be proud to show it as a testimony to his prowess. But if we can watch a snake without fear or repulsion we can take a delight in its intricate markings and its sure and unhurried gliding movements.

Animals kill for their food, and in the process of their development they have reached astonishing degrees of sureness, swiftness and keenness of vision. The kite soars high in the air circling with unhurried grace, but suddenly it will swoop down forty feet on a tiny field mouse moving among the stubble. The egret will stand for hours in the flooded rice field, an unmoving spot of white against the vivid green, but at the ripple of a frog its sinuous neck and long beak will flash out to catch it. The spider weaves geometrically accurate and intricately beautiful webs to catch the flies. All this power and elegance is produced by the necessity of finding food.

In the days of British Raj, hunting of tigers and bears and pig sticking were the sport of the rulers. It was fine to be photographed standing with one foot on the head of the slain tiger and bearers, beaters and camp servants found reflected glory in the sport. There has been a slow but very deep change in mankind's attitude to hunting. True, the tribes in the forest still live by hunting but India is becoming famous for its nature reserves and has one of the greatest experts on bird life in Mr. Saleem Ali of Bombay. In Poona a lover of nature (and of humanity too) Mr. C Dady runs an association aiming to show people how much better it is to enjoy the wonder and beauty of all creatures than to destroy them want only for man's own prestige or selfish gain. There is a long way to go yet but the change in attitude towards the riches of nature is certainly taking place and we welcome it.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THE CYCLE OF THE YEAR

If you want to recount the seasons of the year, it is difficult to know where to start. There is no dead season when the sap is at its lowest ebb, when next season's buds are sealed and dormant, and the woods show only bare branches against the sky. Here, at a latitude of only ten degrees North of the Equator, the sun is too close for nature to sleep, and there is perpetual growth and flowering. Yet the seasons are clearly marked, each one bringing its tasks in field and garden.

So, if we start in January we find the fields full of ripening paddy, the rice crop which forms the staple food of all the South. The plants which have been grown in standing water, are dried off and turn from lush green to pale yellow. They are reaped with sickles, threshed and dried, and stored for the year's food. The rice crop may be followed by millet or ground nuts.

January is a quiet month, bringing fresh, cool air and a sense of fulfillment and peace. The white-washed cottages, which have been repaired and decorated for the festival of Pongal, gleam across the stubble fields. There is plenty of feed along the grass verges for goats and buffaloes, the riches of nature are spread for all.

This interlude of peace may last well into February, or it may end in January. The heat is creeping back, the grass is turning brown, and on country roads the traffic raises clouds of dust. Then we can see the sharp difference between 'wet' and 'dry' – irrigated and non-irrigated land. The poor man, who has only a patch of dry land, cannot grow anything more on it, while those who have good wells may follow with a second crop of paddy, or with onions, tomatoes, chillies and green vegetables.

March is hot, and April is hotter. It surely cannot go on. The tension must break. It does, with the crash of thunder and pouring rain. It is a tremendous relief, the oppression is lifted and we can breath freely again. Here where we are surrounded by many rocks, the echoes of the thunder seem to go on endlessly, being flung back from every little promontory or hill face, till they die off far away. These early rains may be too short to do more than make the roadside vegetation look up again, or they may be heavy enough to cause a good rise in irrigation tanks and streams.

About the middle of May a change comes. One day you feel a gentle breeze from the South West. There is a coolness and freshness that has been missing since January. You may have the illusion that the sea is not far away. It is far, of course, more than two hundred miles, but this wind does come from the sea. It is the South West monsoon beginning. It is unmistakable. It is like a well-known voice heard after a long silence.

But this wind, which at first seemed a friend, becomes and enemy. It grows harsher, and raises dust storms. The garden is full of tattered and shredded leaves, the house is full of dust and every bit of writing paper has to be held down by a paperweight. A menacing cloud bank forms in the west but it does not bring any rain, only occasionally spattering drops. This is because the great mountain wall of the Western Ghats causes the rain to be precipitated over there in Kerala, leaving us with only wind and dust.

The South West monsoon travels slowly northwards over coastal and central India, ending up in Assam, where the rainfall is about the highest in the world. By September it has spent its force and it gives way to the North East monsoon, which travels southward along the coasts of the Bay of Bengal. But the South West monsoon seems reluctant to give up. Sometimes

a cloud bank forms in the East, generally at evening, and there may even be a roll of thunder, but the West wind arises and dissipates it. I call this the "two winds fighting". Inevitably the North East will triumph. It sends a series of cyclones across the coast, often causing floods and devastation, and it drenches Madras in torrents of rain. Usually the mornings are clear and bright; but in the afternoon clouds gather and lightening flickers all round the horizon. The storms follow one another, growing in intensity, and night after night. We hear the crash and roll of thunder. Carts are stuck in the mud and bus services brought to a standstill.

If the monsoon is a good (meaning a heavy) one, the land will come to life, dry water courses will become raging torrents, irrigation tanks will be filled, streams and rivulets will run everywhere. The grass will grow green, the fields will be ploughed for the rice crop, and bullocks will splash through the muddy water leveling the ground till the surface is mirror-smooth. Everyone gets wet but no one minds that. Water has come, life has come. The earth is singing.

So the tender rice shoots are planted in the standing water, and they take root and grow. It is the crown of the year. The monsoon is over, and the grain ripens to harvest. We are ready to whitewash the houses for another Pongal. The cycle of the year is complete.

WHAT IS A GANDHIAN?

Sometimes people ask us if we are Gandhian. That is a fair question and I will try to answer it. But there is no simple answer.

In his years of active work Gandhi made a deep and immeasurably strong impression on India. The people, as a whole, were with him because they wanted independence and they saw him as their effective leader in the struggle. They took up very enthusiastically his teaching of non-violent resistance, and millions felt that a truly new voice was speaking to them, and a new inspiration had dawned on them. He was doing just what they wanted, and in return they were ready to do what he wanted. But Gandhi was in fact extending and carrying on the impulse to independence which came from a group of great people: Ram Mohan Roy, Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarthar Vallabhai Patel to name only the best known.

If we are aware of this we see that every great thinker, every innovator in human thought, is part of the stream of human life and endeavour. Each one builds on the work of those who went before him. This does not lessen his stature, but confirms the validity of his reasoning. Those who want to be pure innovators with special and self-contained teaching become cranks. People often forget this, and seem to believe that Gandhi sprang up like a mushroom from the soil of India. But Gandhi was a follower of Tolstoy and he made the thought of the great Russian writer his own long before the circumstances of his life called him to the Independence struggle of India. And the idea of civil disobedience, non-violent resistance, came from American writer Henry David Thoreau.

Thoreau spend two years living a solitary life in the woods by Walden Pond and he worked out many of his ideas there. When he was called upon to to pay taxes, he refused, because the money would go to support the army, and the whole of his life was directed towards non-violence. He went to prison as a witness to his convictions. True, his imprisonment was very brief, but he had made a statement by his actions and this was the seed which was sown by Gandhi, first in the soil of South Africa, where he tried out his ideas in the struggle against oppression and regimentation of the Indian population, and then in his homeland, India. In a

world of increasing violence, which breeds ever new and more bitter antagonisms, his concept of *Ahimsa*, non-violence, is gaining more and more adherents and has become powerful in the opposition to nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear war. If we are conscious of the power of this unbroken stream of though, to adopt the label "Gandhian" is to narrow the meaning of it. This is why we do not want to be called "Gandhian".

Gandhi's life was an experiment in living. Scientists who make experiments must have flexible minds. They must be open to accept unforeseen results and to admit it if they have started out on the wrong path. Gandhi's experiments were tested out, not in a secluded study or a quiet laboratory, but with the ever-moving, ever-changing, tumultuous mass of human beings. His idea of village self-sufficiency and self help was certainly the right one to inspire the people of his day. It gave them something to do. They must spin and weave and show that they could supply their own needs and be independent of other countries, especially of Britain. It must have been a wonderful experience to live through those days.

A cousin of mine, as a young girl who wanted to do social work, went to a settlement in the East End of London in a slum area. Gandhi, when he came to England to attend the Round Table conference, would not go to any luxury hotel, but only to a place where he could be among the people. And so he came to this same settlement. He used to get up very early in the morning, and the workers at this settlement had the privilege of going for walks with him through the quiet streets in the first light. My cousin came under his spell, and the inspiration of his ideas and personality has remained during her life. He taught her to spin and still today she finds great joy in spinning. It is an activity so different from attending to the roaring and rattling spindles in a great mill, that it can hardly be called by the same name. My cousin has built a community where spinning, weaving, wood carving, metal work and pottery are practised. She knows the value of such activities in bringing calm to disturbed minds, self confidence to those who have lost their way in life and peace to those from broken families.

But how far can India today live by the Gandhian ideal? A symbol of Gandhi's ideal was khadi: cloth which was entirely hand spun and hand-woven. When the Indian village was still undeveloped, people might have benefited from making and weaving khadi. Today, in the cites, you can see lines of elegant shops selling every variety of artificial fabrics: polyester, nylon and terylene. Between the big shops are some little ones; here and there, showing the national flag, bearing the symbol of the spinning wheel, and even a picture of Gandhi. Those are the Government shops selling khadi cloth. For my part, I like khadi, as it usually has a very pleasant texture, but it cannot under modern conditions compete with the mill cloth. Villagers do not wear khadi, however much Gandhians would like them to do so.

An old friend of mine, who was present during one of Gandhi's visits, told me that she was met by an excited group of teachers who were getting new khadi saris to wear in the presence of the great man.

"What are you going to wear?" they asked her.

"What I always wear", she replied. "You will put on khadi today, but you will forget about it tomorrow"

Her whole life had been one that would have earned Gandhi's approval, but she had no wish to treat the wearing of khadi as an empty symbol.

And today I know people who are working humbly and untiringly without noise or publicity in the true spirit of Gandhi.

Complete non-violence, the absolute refusal to kill any living thing, is not possible without falling into absurdities, or facing insoluble problems. But *Ahimsa,* non-violence, is in the heart and the will. If you have no wish to hurt any human being or any living creature, you will find in yourself the guidance to follow the right path, without imposing any rigid rules.

The great river of human thought is wider and deeper than Gandhi himself, and to my thinking we honour him best by seeing him as part of this great movement, therefore we do not adopt the label “Gandhian”.

1988

ABOUT GRANDMOTHERS

The sunlight slants into the quiet yard. The baby is sleeping in a home-made hammock, which is a length from a faded purple sari securely tied to a hook in the rough wooden beam. Chickens are scratching in the most promising corners, and the tethered calf from time to time shuffles its feet and reaches for another mouthful of rustling straw. There is no other sound but the falling of grains of rice which the old woman tosses in a split bamboo tray to clean them and to separate the whole ones from the broken pieces. She works steadily and has got through a considerable heap of rice before the baby stirs and whimpers. Then she rises and swings the hammock, singing an old traditional lullaby. If the baby wakes and is hungry she takes the pot of rice gruel left by the mother, and sits down to feed him. She watches through the long afternoon, till the shadows lengthen, and the chatter of voices and the bleating of goats proclaim that the workers are coming home from the fields.

Many times children are brought to our clinic by grandmothers. We may ask, "Where is the mother?" and the answer is that she has gone out to work or that she has a new baby. The grandmother has time to look more carefully at the child, and to see the rashes caused by heat, insect bites and scratching, and to take notice when it is pointed out that the dress or shirts is unsuitable and are causing chronic irritation and sores. The grandmother is gentle and attentive while the mother is quite often too concerned with her own health troubles which also need attention.

A child of four or five can establish clear, uncomplicated relations with the grandmother, away from all the stresses and strains of the married life of the parents, which are felt by the children even if they do not understand them, and also from the bickerings and jealousies of other children. I have often seen a grandmother and a little girl going round the garden bushes together with a small basket into which to pluck the jasmine flowers to be made into garlands. The gap in their ages brings them closer together and they work in perfect harmony and contentment.

Having written this about Indian grandmothers, I began to think about my own grandmother whose life was so utterly different, in a society which outwardly bore no resemblance to that of the Indian village, yet which had basically the same character. Poverty and hard work are anywhere.

My grandmother was born in the South of England into a farm labourer's family. My grandparents were illiterate, and my mother never went to school but somehow, at some time in her life, she learnt to read and write. Instead of schooling she learnt lace-making. It was a local industry, and in my childhood I thought that would have been very pleasant. I imagined the cottagers sitting outside their doors in the sunshine, chatting as they worked, surrounded by roses and marigolds.

Later, I found Karl Marx's account of the lace making in this same locality in *Capital*. They had to work in unheated rooms, and were not allowed to wear boots far fear of soiling the lace, so they suffered from chilblains. I have never heard any first hand account of this, but I know that it was pillow lace, made by moving bobbins on a pad, and that my grandmother kept her lace pillow for many years, although she had no time to use it.

Few people realise today that there were a number of epidemics of cholera in England in the nineteenth century. Both my great grandparents died of cholera within a week, when my grandmother was seventeen. She went out to "service" in a gentleman's house, and in the course of time she married a manservant there. The couple moved to South London, and there my mother, and her two brothers and two sisters were born.

The house was newly built, one of eight composing "Factory Square" built by the owner of a rubber factory. The great expansion of London had begun, and with it the drift from the countryside. At the time my grandfather and grandmother made the move, Factory Square was on the very edge of the city, and outside the back gate were fields, full of buttercups and daisies in summer, where the children could play. My mother's first memory is of a great tree being felled, probably to make room for building.

My grandfather did not work at the rubber factory. He became ostler at an inn called "The Pied Bull", and looked after the horses. My mother remembered that when he was brushing his coat he always made the sh-sh-sh noise usually made while grooming horses. He never earned more than thirty shillings a week, and out of this my grandmother had to pay eight shillings a week rent, and bring up six children. Consequently, she had to go out to work. She took in servants' washing. There were many big houses in the area keeping numbers of servants; and it was to such houses that my mother and aunts went out "into service" as soon as they were old enough. The washing consisted of cotton dresses with narrow stripes of grey, blue or lavender, and starched caps, which had to be crinkled with a "goffering iron". My mother remembered the house as being very often full of steam and wet clothes.

My grandmother also used to read letters for neighbours who could not read, and sometimes she took documents for safekeeping. She went out at night to sit up with sick people. The profession of nursing was in it infancy. It was not so many years since Florence Nightingale had sailed for the Crimea to start a new era in the care of the sick, so even wealthy invalids who needed night nursing would think only of engaging any honest and kindly woman for the task. My grandmother had many tales to tell of life in the great houses. The children were much impressed by hearing that she was provided with a pair of black velvet gloves with which she could pick up coal to replenish the fire, without risking the clatter of fire irons. With night and day work it was a mystery how my grandmother could get time for sleep.

Although I never saw my grandmother's house when she was living in it, for she died before I was born, I can visualise it very well. The kitchen, where the family had all their meals, had a red-tiled floor, and a stone mantelpiece bearing two china dogs. The hearth was whitened, the grate black-leaded, and the steel fire irons polished with emery paper. There was a rug made from triangular snippets of old coat cloth, sewn onto a hessian backing, so heavy that it was hard to move it.

Food for the working classes in those days was expensive and, wherever possible, adulterated. The milk was so much watered that it looked blue in the can. The children often had nothing for dinner but sago boiled in water and sprinkled with brown sugar, or sometimes, just bread and an apple. My grandmother bought sheeps' heads, as this was the cheapest form of meat. At tea time she put on a clean white apron and sat with the loaf of bread on her lap, cutting off slices as required by the hungry family.

When I was a child, a photograph of my grandmother stood on our mantelpiece. It showed her with a very placid round face and a gentle smile. She was wearing a black bonnet (she never wore hat and coat but only bonnet and shawl) which was tied under her chin with a

bow of black ribbon with white dots. The picture was in a metal frame in the form of lilies of the valley, and I can remember re-painting this in green and white. The lily of valley, small but strongly fragrant flower, seemed appropriate to her.

I feel very humble when I think of her. Her religion and outlook on life were wholly conventional, but I imagine that she never betrayed a trust, never put her own wishes before the welfare of her family, and never countenanced any unjust action.

Because of her I exist, and have inherited wider opportunities and freedom to use those opportunities. Our lives are built on the faithfulness and endurance of countless thousands now forgotten, and I am glad to be able to save so much of her memory. And often I can see the same qualities in the grandmothers of India.

A HILL STATION

Under the British Raj hill stations were very important. In the hot weather the whole Government, from the Viceroy down to clerks, accountants and cooks, moved up to the Viceregal Lodge of Simla, travelling on the little puffing mountain railway. Up there, between the great trees and the ever-shifting clouds, glimpses of the snow fields can be seen while the plains are sweltering far below. Similarly, Ootacamund, among the tea gardens of the Nilgiris, served the officials of the South as a refuge from the heat.

But I have to speak of another hill station, which had no governmental origin. Its modern history began about 1821 when a British engineer, surveying the Palani Hills, rode into a quiet green valley, afterwards named Kodaikanal. At that time British residents and their families suffered very much in the hot weather. Tropical medicine was not much studied, and clothing was heavy and unsuited to the climate. Epidemics were frequent, especially among children, and the memorials in the churches of Madras bear witness to the loss of life among the families of missionaries and others. So the idea dawned on them to create a small community in the hills, where the children could be kept as long as possible away from the heat.

But Kodaikanal had a long history before it was discovered in the nineteenth century. People had lived there since the stone age, and had left their memorials in the shape of burial urns, clay pottery and dolmens; rude shelters made from stone slabs just placed together, since iron tools did not yet exist. The artefacts made by these people, together with models of their villages, can be seen in the Museum at the Jesuit College at Shenbaganur, which is reached on the ascent about two miles before Kodaikanal. There are still many scattered tribes of hunters in the hills.

Kodaikanal lies at an elevation of between six and seven thousand feet above sea level, with the highest peaks rising to nine thousand feet. In early days the ascent was very tedious. There were no roads, and while the men could ride on horseback, the women and children had to be carried in '*doolies*', litters slung between poles resting on the shoulders of bearers. The path was rough and zig-zag between towering rocks. Now a winding but well-kept road ascends from Batlagundu and is used by buses, private cars, lorries and ponies. It passes, first, through deep forest, where monkeys swing from the trees, and if you listen, you can hear the calls of many beasts and birds. Then there is an area of coffee plantations interspersed with bananas, jack fruit and oranges. Higher again are bare grasslands with thick trees marking every depression or

watered valley. Lastly, you come out into the busy life of Kodaikanal, with street markets, fruit and vegetable shops, churches and schools, a boating lake, pretty gardens and lush meadows.

Kodaikanal was largely the creation of missionaries, but today it has become a tourist attraction known even as far afield as Calcutta or Bombay. In the 'season' from April to June, it is crowded, and has an eventful social life, including music festivals, meetings of Lions Clubs and Rotarians, summer schools and even flower shows and dog shows.

But all the busy life is very small compared with the everlasting grandeur of the hills. From the steep escarpment you can see the southern plain laid out like a map, and at night the towns of Periyakulam and Theni twinkle like star cities. Or you can look down on an almost unbroken, stretch of cloud which seems like the sea dashing against the rocks, but with sudden clefts and chasms revealing green valleys and farmlands far below.

April to June is the 'season' but other months of the year have more appeal for me. In the hot weather Kodaikanal is fresh and green compared with the dusty plains but the streams and waterfalls may be low, so the tourists never see them at their best.

In November after the rains, hundreds of freshets appear, gushing through clefts in the rocks and failing into little foaming pools, among dripping moss and ferns. The Silver Cascade, which in May has shrunk to a narrow stream, turns into a wide spreading torrent, filling its stair-like channel from side to side. Red sunsets glow through the ragged clouds and morning mists cling to the steep hillsides.

Kodaikanal is to me the most beautiful of hill stations.

WASHING DAY

"It is Dhobi day, have you brought your Dhobi Wash?" I may be greeted like this when I come into our kitchen on a Wednesday or Sunday. For the Dhobi is a washerman and he washes the clothes and bedding of those of our staff who live in at Seva Nilayam. Washing in this country is a hereditary occupation and one to my thinking of great skill. Washing is done by men and if a woman is taking part she is the Dhobi's wife and helper. He comes on Wednesday and Sunday. Sunday is not a holiday for our villagers. They take holidays perhaps 2 or 3 days at a time when there is any important festival. Our Dhobi has been with us for fifteen years. Of course he has many other clients in the villages. For us he does all the washing on the premises. We have a tank (approximately six feet by six feet) filled with clean water pumped up from our well and above the tank are a large basins set in cement so there is ample convenience for washing and rinsing. But many village houses do not have such advantages and the Dhobi has to take the washing away on the backs of donkeys to a lake or tank or stream where there is enough water. Our Dhobi, whose name is Palani, owns 6 donkeys and at a time they all go off to Vaigai Dam where water comes out of the reservoir.

He is a short tubby man going bald and with a fringe of curly hair. He is well-established, as he must be to own 6 donkeys, and he is a good and regular worker and well known. All the Dhobis slap the clothes wet and folded on the stones with such vigour that they make a report like a pistol shot. Non-Indians often complain that this wears out the clothes but I question whether is does any more harm than much rubbing and scrubbing because the clothes are folded flat. However, it does break the buttons and a few more buttons will get broken later on by the

Dhobi's huge box-iron. Dhobis have their secrets and it is truly remarkable to see that they can bring the clothes dazzling white out of what sometimes looks a muddy pool.

After washing, rinsing and wringing our clothes are hung in the sun shine on lines of wire. It is a lovely sight to see vari-coloured saris, petticoats, shirts and sheets billowing in the wind. Our climate in South India is very favourable to the Dhobi's profession as we have many days of breeze and sunshine when the clothes dry quickly, but there are times of great difficulty. If there is a drought and water shortage, then the Dhobis can be seen slapping away beside any tiny rock pool or shrunken stream or driving the donkeys long distances to find water.

At other times in the monsoon season there may be continual thunder storms and the Dhobi may not get the washing dry for several days so we have to wait patiently until he can return it. After washing comes ironing. The traditional Dhobi's iron is a very heavy gun metal container polished on the bottom and opening to receive burning charcoal. Many visitors or amazed at its weight but the technique of this ironing requires that the clothes be folded very accurately and then the iron pushed across them smoothly so the work, although heavy enough, is not as exacting as it might seem. Lately we have had difficulties about ironing. The Government has banned the use of charcoal because it leads to de-forestation so electric irons have come in but the Dhobis still require them to be very heavy as this is the only method they are used to. We regret the fact that we had to discard the old box-iron which was beautifully effective with its glowing mass of charcoal inside. Now the Dhobi complains he cannot work well with the electric iron. We do not want to break the law by smuggling charcoal at night from the hills. We are considering trying to make our own charcoal as we have a number of big trees which we have cut at one time or another. I may say here that we have never had any share in deforestation since our land was entirely barren of trees when we took it over. All trees here were planted by ourselves but sometimes when they get overgrown it is necessary to cut big branches or dig up roots and these we can use and our conscience is clear.

We have to learn the technique of making charcoal. It is done by slow combustion. The burning wood must be covered with a thick coating of mud so that it does not flare but smoulders. If we can succeed in this we shall make our Dhobi happy again.

AN ESSAY ON CHARITY

When I was a child I read, as I was bound to do, Saint Paul's great letter to the Christians of Corinth on Charity. One sentence in it puzzled me extremely: "I may bestow all my goods to feed the poor, but if I have not Charity I am nothing". I could believe that, as Saint Paul said, anyone could have great wisdom and the knowledge of the most recondite truths and not have Charity, but to give all one's possessions to those in need, that was itself charity. At Christmas time you were pursued everywhere by requests to "give something to Charity". A great singer gave a concert, and devoted all the proceeds to charity. Street urchins sang shrilly, "Ye who now would bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing".

So charity has come to mean, in general, the simple act of giving, often without any trouble taken to investigate the real nature of the cause for which the gift is made, whether it is worthy, or really beneficial, what its effect will be, or whether, in fact it ever reaches those for whom it is intended. You have given something to "Charity" and so you have done your duty and salved your conscience.

There is really no exact translation of the word used by Saint Paul for “Charity”. It may be translated as “love” as it is in the modern versions of Saint Paul’s writings. The human heart knows many kinds of love. There is the sudden generous impulse, (perhaps regretted afterwards) to give away something to someone who seems to need it more than we do. There is the quiet and fully responsible decision to care for a sick relative, and bear all the consequences. There is the deep sympathy felt for all the unfortunate ones of the earth, those whose homes have been ravaged and destroyed, those whose relatives have been killed, those who are unjustly imprisoned and perhaps tortured, those who have no hope for the future.

There is no organized Charity that can help them all but something can be done here and there. When Group-Captain Leonard Cheshire came across a man who was suffering from cancer and had no one at all to care for him, he was moved by Charity to take him into his own home and to care for him until he died. From this arose the idea of the Cheshire Homes, which take in only those who cannot look after themselves because of their disabilities and have no one at all to whom they can turn. The Cheshire Homes do not take away the responsibility which should be borne by the families of helpless and disabled. The people taken into these homes can never in any way repay the care and sympathy they receive.

Since I grew older and knew more about the ways of the world I have come to see that there are many without charity “Charities”. Money can be given just because others are giving, and it is ‘the right thing’. It can be given just because some enthusiast is pestering potential givers, and the only way to get rid of the nuisance is to give something. It can be given for show, to make one’s club, or church, or oneself, into a “public benefactor”. It can be given without the trouble of any real follow-up or assessment of the practical value of the gift. It can be given for the purpose of dominating others (especially children) and impressing one’s personality on them.

But if money can be given for all these wrong or imperfect motives, it still has its value as so much hard cash. It may be made on the black market, by adulterating commercial products or by smuggling. It can buy just the same number of bricks to build houses for the homeless, it can pay for the same amount of food or medicines as money honestly made. It was said long ago that “money has no smell”. I would agree that if such ill-gotten money is lying about and has to be got rid of then one solution is to devote it to “Charity”. But all the deepest instincts of humanity rise up to tell us that this is not Charity but a shabby make-shift. I believe, with G.K. Chesterton, that these deeper instincts of humanity are a sure guide to action. Literature and folk tales are full of examples showing that the worth of a gift is something other then its material value. The poor shepherd boy who had nothing to offer but a song played on his pipe, the simple gift of a poor man mysteriously turned into gold, the widow’s mite of the Gospel which was worth more then all the donations of rich man, and the cup of cold water which earns a great reward. This is a mystical notion and nothing about it can be proved, but mankind, in this commercial and practical age, still, at heart, accepts it and obstinately clings to it.

But, you will say, what are these mystical notions going to do for all the suffering of this world? Because of modern transport all this suffering lies at our doors instead of far away, unseen and unknown, as it used to do. We need millions of pounds or dollars, we need shipping or rail transport, trucks, jeeps and helicopters before we can make any impact on any scene of disaster or mass starvation. I can only say that the underlying need for the spirit of Charity must still hold good, as a great tree may still follow the bent and direction it has as a sapling.

It is possible to believe that the sum of all the world’s suffering will not grew less whatever we do. Old diseases are conquered or at least their impact is lessened but new ones appear. New cities are built, but they are threatened, with devastation from all the minor wars that

ravage the face of the earth, while the word itself could be annihilated by nuclear power. We are stopping the leak in the dyke while the sea is pouring in from behind us. We try to build a just society but it is threatened by brigandage and terrorism.

Whether the world will ever be made better or not, the voice of Charity is the one we must follow. Where there is no real Charity there is no respect for the individual as a human being. What are we really trying to do? The urge for social betterment may be an arrogant wish to clean up the world, and this can lead as it did in nineteenth century England to putting the troublesome poor out of sight in dreary and inhuman "workhouses"; worse still, it can lead to putting the socially or politically unacceptable into concentration camps. This may seem far-fetched but it has happened in many countries of the word. Charity respects the individual without any distinction. Without this we are on a slippery slope which leads to something very different indeed from Charity.

Worth of a charitable action cannot be measured. When captives were being herded into Hitler's death chamber one man cried out in agony "What about my wife and children?" A priest stepped forward, offered himself in the place of this man. His offer was accepted and the doors of the death chamber closed on him forever. How can we calculate the results of such an action? We do not know the value of two different lives. We do not know if the man who was saved was better than the one who died, if he was a worthy citizen, or what he felt for his rescuer. Such calculations have no place before such a supreme act of Charity and by this we know that it is not the calculating but the mystical view of Charity which is held by mankind. When we strive for the betterment of the world, we do not know how much we shall achieve; but if we neglect Charity we shall surely fail.

ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF SEVA NILAYAM

The day begins before sunrise. It is still dark when there is a sound of clanking buckets and splashing water. By the time the first rays of the sun slant through the trees, the paths have been swept and sprinkled. They will be swept some more times during the day, for sweeping is a great feature of any well-kept house or institution in India. The brooms are made from the central rib of the leaflets of the coconut tree and they may be said to be expendable, as half an hour's work by any group of women (here, in-patients) will replace them.

If we look across to the clinic building we shall see a few dim figures, as early patients are drifting in. But the first requirement for our staff is a cup of tea or coffee in the kitchen. So there we meet and greet one another, and we may have time for a chat or a discussion on the plans for the day. The buffaloes are milked, and the cans brought into the kitchen. The cook lights a fire to boil the milk and sets about preparing a simple breakfast. The in-patients come to their kitchen and each has a cup of hot milk.

By seven we begin the clinic. It is for the convenience of the patients that we make this early start. If they can get treatment soon, they need not lose a day's work.

New patients coming in walk down an avenue of coconut trees to a table set under a small bamboo shelter where they give their names, father or husband's name and village. This is necessary because Tamil people have no surnames but go by the father's name and as many have the same first or given name, there could be much confusion. New patients pay a token fee of half a rupee when they are registered but there is not a payment for medicine. It is just to mark the fact

that they hold a card, and nothing more is charged, no matter how many times they come for treatment.

The doctor arrives at seven, by local bus. She lives in Aundipatty six miles distant. There may be a hundred and fifty to two hundred patients, but she sees them all herself and listens to their complaints even if she has to pass them on to others for laboratory tests, and in these cases they are returned to her for prescriptions. This is strenuous work and may go on until two or three in the afternoon, but our doctor is very popular because no patient has any reason to complain of not being heard. Patients come with troubled minds, and they need to have some outlet and to talk about themselves.

At 9.30 there is a tea break for the staff. Those who live outside and come daily have brought food in their "tiffin carriers", the small stainless steel cans which have become such a feature of Indian life today.

After the break we go on again and work until about twelve, when we have our midday meal. We used to like to finish the clinic before our meal, but the doctor's popularity has made it last that much longer, and we must be glad of this even if we feel tired.

Patients come from all the nearby villages, but some from very far away, even from the next state, Kerala, and many from remote hill areas where no help is available. We do not refuse to see anyone although for some we can only give advice. This is important because we can sometimes persuade people to go to their own government hospital and not to waste money on quacks or doubtful "cures". We find that more and more are listening to our advice.

The clinic is like a world in itself, and, once you get into it, it is hard to turn your mind in other directions, but a lot is going on. The buffaloes are taken out to pasture. Vegetables are gathered for the two kitchens of the staff and in-patients. There may be more than twenty of the latter. The in-patients are usually capable of light work, and they sit in a group on their verandah cutting vegetables. Perhaps the fields are being ploughed, and we can hear the encouraging "Ai! Ai!" of the ploughman. Perhaps the cart has to go to the mill to grind rice or millet, or it has to fetch bricks or building sand. There is a constant coming and going, and sometimes a group from a village will come to look at bullocks and discuss possibilities of buying or selling, and will sit around turning the subject over, unhurriedly, as farmers do.

Sometimes the work of the clinic may be interrupted by an emergency. Someone has been bitten by a dog or gored by a bull or fallen off a cart, or perhaps injuries may be due to the too ready use of knives in a family quarrel. Everything is held up while the doctor attends to the patient, and if the case is serious, first aid is given and the family is consulted about possible ways of getting him to the hospital. Sometimes a diversion is cased by the arrival of wandering musicians or peddlars, but these must be seen only after clinic hours.

When the clinic is over there is a short time of rest, but then work begins again. The consulting room, the dressing room, the dispensary, and the laboratory all have to be cleaned and the floors swept. The verandah by which patients enter the various rooms shows signs of the many feet, some with shoes and some without, which have passed over it. Discarded bandages are taken to the incinerator and broken glass thrown into a deep pit.

There is other work however, which seems to be more attractive to our staff. This is not surprising since there is a sense of release after the demanding and continuous work of the clinic is done. The young men are called upon to do carpentry jobs or repair the electric wiring system.

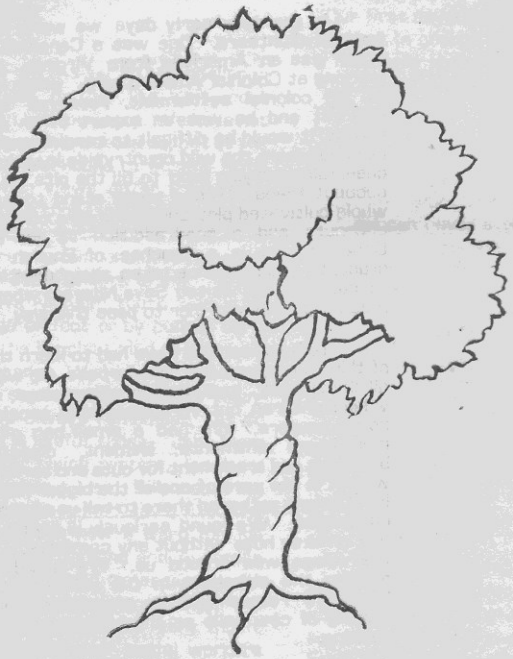
They have become keenly interested in the garden work and will do anything under direction – seed sowing, transplanting, taking cuttings, or training creepers. But the greatest attraction is the sewing room. We make cushions for ourselves and for sale and at present we are making soft toys, of which the most popular is the teddy bear. We have a whole philosophy about this work which would take too long to describe here, but I can say that any skills acquired may be useful and may widen one's outlook. One of our young men assistants, before he joined up, was very often unemployed, and as there was a tailor's shop near his home, he used to go and sit there and watch. We find now that he can use the sewing machine and even do small repairs to it and that he is very handy with a needle. He can even make teddy bears. If any work is going on in the sewing room it acts like a magnet on anyone who has a little time to spare in which to come and ask for work. But owing to the increase in clinic work since our doctor joined us, we find they have less time then they did before.

In the afternoon there is a tea break. The stress of work is relaxed and the pace can be easier. The sun is sloping westwards. In the tropics, dusk falls early, and there is only about one hour's difference in the length of daylight between the "summer" and "winter" seasons. In the hot weather, it is very good to feel the cooler air of evening.

With the return from pastures, we hear the tinkling of goat bells down the lane. Our buffaloes come into the yard and are fed and milked. The evening meal is prepared. Those of our staff who live outside leave at five o'clock by cycle or bus. Those who are living at Seva Nilayam have time for a bath and rest, or perhaps an evening walk accompanied by our dog, Meena, who is always delighted at the opportunity. It is dark when we gather in the kitchen for supper. If visitors are staying with us this is the best time for conversation without the interruptions that so frequently come during the day. But we go to bed early because we must get up early. Our day is the sun's day, the birds' day, nature's day. The flocks of mynah birds that inhabit the tall trees chatter loudly as they find their places for the night, but then they fall silent and all is at rest.

SEVA NILAYAM

25 YEARS



Seva Nilayam
25 years

The following three articles were printed in a booklet issued for the Silver Jubilee of Seva Nilayam in 1988.

BEGINNINGS

In 1963 there was no bus route to the land on which Seva Nilayam stands. The area was so open and bare that, after we had bought the plot and often walked up to it from the village in which we had found a temporary home, we had to find some small landmark by which we could know when we had arrived there. This was a very small thorn tree which is still there today, but has grown to a very large size. There was a very old, ramshackle van which travelled the six miles from Aundipatty, always overloaded, with passengers sitting on the roof or even the bonnet. This might or might not start and often needed a good push by the passengers to get going.

In the very early days were were joined by two foreign volunteers, one was a Canadian girl and the other was an American from Virginia. He had been working at Colonial Williamsburg, which is a replica of an old colonial settlement, reserved for historical interest and he was an expert in antique silver spoons. It would be difficult to imagine anything further removed from the wild countryside in which he worked, cheerfully carrying sand to fill the pits we had dug for coconut trees. These trees stand today ringing our whole cultivated plot and giving us a constant supply of coconuts and a good addition to our income. The Canadian girl is a teacher of English to overseas students and has since taken assignments in Java and China. She has visited Seva Nilayam when her travels made it possible for her to pass this way.

To begin our work we had to learn the geography of this region, and for this purpose, we walked through all the villages, barked at by the village dogs, stared at by village children but very hospitably received by many house owners. We had a small bag of very simple medicines, ointments, liniment, digestive tablets, bandages and treatment for cuts and sores. Sometimes we sat in the yard of one of the bigger houses, and the local people gathered there to tell us of their needs and difficulties. We found seriously ill people lying in dark and smoky huts without any comforts. The whole of the village was around us. We heard the children droning the alphabets in the schools, we saw the labourers returning from the fields and heard the tinkling of cow bells as the herds came home in the evening.

Life was far from comfortable, but the memory of these early days remains still today. Much has changed since then, but we shall not forget the comradeship, ungrudging work, and cheerfulness of those with whose help Seva Nilayam was founded.

A SHORT HISTORY OF SEVA NILAYAM

Dear friends, the seventeenth of December, 1988, is the 25th anniversary of the registration of Seva Nilayam as a Charitable Society under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act. I have been asked to write a brochure for this occasion and the first thing to be done is to tell the history of Seva Nilayam from the beginning.

In 1960 I was working for the YWCA in Mudichur, a village eighteen miles south of madras. I was living in the village, and the YWCA had a clinic there to which a van with a doctor and a team of volunteers came out from Madras every Thursday. Between these visits I was left alone to carry on with the simple medicines prescribed by the doctor and to help the local people in any way possible. The YWCA had a good connection with the village school (a one room mud and thatch building) and on this basis we started a supplementary feeding programme, and a very small and simple sewing class. Some money was sent from Australia to make a children's playground so we set up swings, a slide and a see-saw. There was a small well in the compound, and the children came on Saturdays to wash their clothes and spread them out to dry while they enjoyed themselves in the compound.

A local farmer, Seetharama Reddy, began to take interest in the clinic and visited it daily. By his advice many people came for treatment who would otherwise have been hesitant about coming. He also helped to fence the compound which had been left entirely open with herds of goats passing over it, making it impossible to grow any trees or garden plants. Trees were needed because the clinic building was quite bare and unshaded, and the heat of Madras is fierce in the dry season. Seetharama Reddy came from a high caste and very conservative family. He was censured for helping me, a foreigner, and also because the clinic was open to all without caste distinction. In 1960 there were no buses on the roads and no doctor within reach except by bullock cart. By the time we left, in 1962, a bus route had been opened to Madras and a free Government clinic had been started in the nearest small town, Tambaram.

By 1972 I felt that there was not much future for our work. The village did not change much in appearance. There was a caste village with brick or stone houses, and there were three '*cheries*' of Harijan settlements with only mud and thatch houses. These were mostly of one room, very dark inside and with such steeply pitched roofs coming down so low that it was necessary to bend to enter them. This style of building arose I think because of the necessity of keeping off the torrential monsoon rains of Madras but life was not comfortable in them. These settlements were spaced quite far apart with areas of thorny scrub between them. Agriculture was not flourishing, and many young men hoped to get jobs in industry as factories were springing up along the South Trunk Road from Madras. When disappointed in this, they took to gambling, and to get money for gambling they needed to steal something, so robbery was common. The character of the village was being destroyed while its appearance remained the same. I felt that this was a situation which could be tackled buy the YMCA setting up young men's clubs and starting some useful activities.

In 1962 I resolved to look for another place to work. I knew well that as a foreigner I could not do this alone. I therefore asked Seetharama Reddy if he would come and help to set up a social service centre, and he agreed.

When we came out of the clinic building for the last time, I had no idea what lay ahead. I had learnt a lot about one village, but I was to see far different scenes and far different villages.

We tried a number of areas, looking for a place where no social work was being done. We found this in an area due west of Madurai, going towards the Kerala border and near the market town of Aundipatty. Here we were given a small room in a village house, and we were joined by Seetharama Reddy's wife, Hamsa. Then we were given the chance to build a small thatched hut of two rooms in a very tiny garden.

This is an area of great natural beauty. We did not choose it for this reason but because someone gave us a contact with his family living in a nearby village. But we can appreciate the magnificence of the scenery. Grey rocks rise above the green valleys and the good red earth of the cultivated land. To the north the Kodai hills stand like a wall, often cloud-capped, with the highest point in Perumal Malai at nine thousand feet. The ascent is by a winding mountain road passing through plantations of coffee, oranges, bananas, jack fruit and eucalyptus. The mountains often seem to melt into mist and rain or open up into glorious sunsets where earth and sky seem as one.

We bought a small plot of land, just over three and a half acres, dug a well, and put up our first buildings. Seetharama Reddy's help was necessary for this purchase because, as a foreigner, I could not own land in India, and only after Seva Nilayam became a Registered Society could it be purchased in that name. Seetharama Reddy bought it in his own name and later transferred it at cost to Seva Nilayam.

A Swedish lady missionary who helped with the business of registration said, "You must choose a name. Something like Seva Nilayam, which means Home of Service". I said, "Let it be Seva Nilayam," and so, without any argument or discussion the name was fixed. Slowly we built up our institution, without any showy plans or lofty calculations. We choose the symbol of a tree because it grows quietly and steadily, increasing in strength and following its own nature. Our first buildings were made with mud walls and red tiled roofs, the style of village houses. Our first building, which now contains the kitchen for our working staff and any visitors who come, has walls three feet thick and an arched verandah opening on the garden where blue morning glory and red and yellow bougainvillea are always in flower. Some of the other early mud buildings have been replaced by brick but without any alteration in style. We have never employed a contractor but Seetharama Reddy took responsibility himself, working the with local masons.

For nine years we had the services of Dr Edward, a retired medical practitioner, who did not wish to give up work while he was still fit for it. Today he has finally retired, and we have a lady doctor recently qualified at Madurai Medical College. She is a hard worker and has much sympathy with the patients, taking time and showing patience in listening to them. Our clinic staff numbers ten, almost all being local young men or girls. We have an average of two hundred patients daily and accommodation for twenty or more in-patients. We can do all the usual clinical tests, and we treat most of the local accidents and emergencies.

During the past few years we have instituted a special section for tuberculosis sufferers because there has been an alarming spread of this disease. We are trying to eliminate it within a two mile radius of Seva Nilayam. Few of the local people understand the significance of a chronic cough, with night fever and loss of weight, and because they come too late to us, the cure is often very long. As the patients do not realise the need of constant uninterrupted treatment, we have to keep them under supervision by house visits and constant instruction.

Our three and a half acres provide a small farm to produce food for ourselves and the in-patients. At present we are growing groundnuts which are looking very well, and we had this year a very profitable crop of onions. In addition we grow many kinds of vegetables – gourds, beans,

carrots, beetroot, radishes, tomatoes and different sort of greens. We have a very prolific banana patch which bears heavy bunches. We are growing our own rice and getting our own coconuts, and for our milk supply we have buffaloes and a cow. We also have bullocks for ploughing and pulling the cart. We sell our surplus produce in the market., but we do not go in for big cash crops. It is a small, compact area of production as dictated by our own needs. The flower garden in my concern and this is not just a pastime. I think that every place should be made beautiful. There are shady trees, glorious with flowers in their season, hibiscus and amaryllis. There are many spots where one can sit, relax and talk to visitors, and we get ample testimony that these things are appreciated. In all these years we have never asked for money. It has come, from many countries of the world and has been gratefully accepted. In the first years we were very poor, and had to practise strict economy, but we have never failed to receive enough for essential needs. This year we have been able to double the tiles on the roofs of the buildings, an improvement we have long wanted, as it keeps the rooms at a more even temperature and also make the building stronger. In this way, we find, many times that our needs are fulfilled by patient waiting. We have faith that as long as our spending is wise and moderate, all our needs will be met.

A PHILOSOPHY

You may travel by train for three days and three nights and yet not have reached the frontier of India. You see many hundreds of places which are only names on the map to you and must remain names on the map. It is a humbling experience. You have been immersed in the day to day cares and frustrations of a social service centre, disheartened by failures or rejoicing in small successes, and have not raised your eyes to look across the hills and plains, the uncounted villages and crowded cities of India. We are less than a speck of dust on the map.

To many people the answer to this challenge is to try to spread out further, to visit more villages and to take on new projects. We have not been appointed to judge what others do, but at the same time, we do not feel bound to accept criticism form those whose views differ from ours. We are all trying to help those in need, as we are bound by our constitution, but there are different ways of doing it. There are fashions in social work as there are in other departments of life. When we first came to Seva Nilayam, there was little choice. We had to go on foot or by bullock cart, and in many villages the simplest kind of help was something new and strange. We had only ourselves to rely on, aided by a succession of foreign volunteers whose work we always remember, as so much of it stands and is useful today. John from Scotland laid the water piping system, Ian from Australia built the chicken house, Bill also from Australia and an American named David fixed the tiles on the roof of what is now a ward for in-patients, and nurses from England and Australia treated patients and answered emergency calls under the most primitive conditions. Still the character of the area has changed very much. This is not due to the efforts of social workers, but to economic conditions. High tension lines cross the country, enabling remote farms to receive electricity, and electric pumps have superseded the cumbersome buckets drawn by bullocks for irrigation. The roads are now passable for heavy lories, and farm produce can be sent to distant city markets. Building is constantly going on, and the population has doubled, or more than doubled. There is a network of bus services, which reach the most interior villages. Public health schemes are springing up on every side, and thousands of social workers are being trained. Seva Nilayam is still only a speck on the map of India.

Those in charge of big institutions such as training schools or orphanages sometimes say, “Our first days here were the happiest.” One lay Brother in charge of such an institute pointed to

a little old thatched building and said, “This is where we lived when we first came here. We don't want to pull it down because it holds happy memories.”

This is a common experience. We do not do charitable work in order to be happy, of course, and we can never avoid worries and failures, but this kind of happiness is a sign that we are travelling on the right road. As the years pass, we spread farther, build bigger and take on new projects. How can we retain the simplicity, directness, and joy of the early days? One of our principles is that we should never take on anything unless it is a felt need for us to do so, and another is that we should avoid thinking that to grow bigger is in itself a good thing. “But we can reach more people, we can do more good.” In fact we cannot. We must admit our limitations. We can reach more people in a superficial way, but we cannot reach them ‘in depth’.

We find that those institutions which last many years are those based on a single place, a community, and a philosophy which aims to preserve the spirit and keeps true to first ambitions. From such places influences spread out very far, even without their intending to do so. So our growth is moderate, quiet, and slow like that of the tree we have taken as our symbol.

1989

OUR CHOICE

I think that I should go on record regarding the giving of free medicines to patients. It is a question often debated, but as far as Seva Nilayam is concerned it was settled from the beginning that all treatment should be free, and this is embodied in our Constitution. There is a very small token payment to be made when the names are registered and a card given. Sometimes better-off and more educated people are given a prescription to buy their own medicines, especially if they live far away, or if they are ones we do not stock, but Seva Nilayam has never, at any time, asked or received money from patients.

The most obvious reason for this is that if you charge for medicines the poorest people, those whom you most want to reach, do not come. If you look at the patients coming to any hospital where a charge is made, and at any free hospital, you can see at once the difference in the kind of patients attending them.

It is frequently said that free medicine is not valued by the patients. This is not our experience. We find that patients value the medicines far too highly, and think that it will do wonders for them. They are, of course, very much influenced by the character of the person who gives the medicine. They want to be listened to sympathetically, to be allowed to tell their troubles and be examined with attention. It is in their traditional culture that the character of the person giving the medicine has some effect on its action. We do not believe this, or encourage such belief, as far as it involves some magical effect, but we do see that the patients who receive personal and sympathetic attention are better prepared to receive advice and to follow instructions.

Our daily struggle is not to get them to value the medicines, but, in a way, to value them less in the sense of realizing that their effectiveness is often linked with the personal habits, and even the mental attitude of the patients themselves. But the medicine is not only a personal matter. It is, or should be, the concern of the whole of human society. It is a far-off ideal, which seems like a distant star, that health should be within the reach of all and that even those who are congenitally defective in some way should have all they need to make the best of their lives and capabilities.

In Britain the National Health Service was founded on this ideal. It is clear, of course, that medicine, free or otherwise, must be paid for by somebody, and the idea behind the National Health Service was that the country's work force, those who were in employment, should pay by contributions deducted from their salaries, for the sick and the aged, who were unfit for work. In the beginning many voices were raised to say that what was, or appeared to be, free, would not be valued and that there would be many abuses. But whatever its defects, the N.H.S. has worked for most of this century. This is not the place to discuss British politics, but I can only say that the N.H.S. was regarded as a great possession and now that it is being whittled away for political reasons there are many, including my own friends, who refuse to work in it.

Why then, with this experience of a very worthwhile National Health Service, do we say that free medicine is not suitable for India? We grant that there are very great obstacles to the proper use of medicine in India. It is hedged about with superstitions and belief in what must be done or not done, on auspicious or inauspicious days. Patients are branded with a hot iron to drive

out the disease. Parents put a dried toad in an amulet case and hang it round the neck of a child whose growth is retarded, when what is really needed is good food. Others will drop a correct course of treatment to follow a soothsayer or wonder-worker. We are up against the almost complete absence of scientific education so that patients suffering from tuberculosis will take four or five injections at some hospital, and refuse any more because they are not cured.

We are also up against the stress of daily life and the need for people who are not fit for work, to do what is beyond their strength. But none of these reasons seem to me to justify the complaint that people do not value free medicine. We often wish that they would value it less. They come unduly long distances to get tablets which could easily be prescribed for them in their own locality. Others, when we tell them that their trouble cannot be cured by our medicines and that they need investigation at one of the government hospitals, will refuse to go, saying, "Just give me some tablets". However, these unnecessary visits give us the opportunity of advising the patients correctly, which it is sometimes clear has not been done by whoever treated them.

All human activity is based on some philosophy, whether this is known to those concerned in it or not. The movements of human society have very deep roots, and their outcome is determined by these roots, as the nature and type of a flower is determined by the underground parts of a plant which are not seen. The theory behind a free health service is that all members of the human family should have the right to health, and all that is needed to preserve and maintain it. They would be free, of course, to refuse the gift offered to them, but they should not be denied it or debarred from it by lack of money. Perhaps it will be very long, or it may be that never shall we see this realized. It may be like a dream of a golden age, but in fact it is the only fully human philosophy of medicine.

There was a great North American Red Indian Chief who, when he heard that someone owned a piece of land, said: "But how can anyone OWN a piece of the earth? It belongs to all people". His great astonishment at what he found hard to believe might be echoed in that future golden age by someone hearing that a sick person could not get medical care because he was too poor to pay for it, "But do you REALLY MEAN he cannot get it because he has to PAY? It is our obligation to give everybody the means to be healthy." If we cannot see this golden age, or even if we cannot dare to hope it will be realized, we must still work in the philosophy which we think to be in line with it.

SAYING THANK YOU

Last year, 1988, I wrote an "Essay on Charity" in which I said there are charities without charity. Money can be given because it is customary or because others are giving and we do not want to stand out. It can be given for prestige or to get rid of the inconvenient burden of black market money. But I am sure that none of this applies to the donations which reach Seva Nilayam from many parts of the world; those who give do so because they know us and are in agreement with what we are doing. There is no other incentive offered. We are not internationally known and our name does not appear in large type in any journals.

About fourteen years ago we started sending out, six times a year, short and simple letters describing the Indian scene as it really is in villages and small towns in the south. The letters give a picture of work and customs, farming, food and travel, rains and droughts, tea shops and washing days. Some of the letters explained the philosophy of Seva Nilayam and the principles underlying our dealings with patients and the belief which we have always held that service to the people should be direct and personal.

We were surprised at the response. Many people wrote to tell us that this was the sort of thing they really wanted to know about India. They felt that this was the stuff of daily life with all its struggles and hardships as well as its beauties and enjoyments. These very simple letters have found a response in so many countries that we have "put a girdle round the earth".

It is not one way traffic: we have received very many letters from people who like to tell us about their own countries. I have learned more about life in Australia than I could have done from many guide books and I have become very conscious of both the great differences between India and these other countries and also many similarities. For example, I see the vast difference in the standard of living but also find that the fear of unemployment can be as great in an apparently flourishing society as in a remote and primitive Indian village.

We have friends in Canada and many parts of the United States – in Chicago, Colorado, California, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New England. New Mexico and Tennessee. Our letters to friends in the United States are mailed to individuals by an Indian friend living there who receives them from us in bulk and forwards them at her own expense. This is a great service which we appreciate very much.

We have friends in many parts of Australia from north to south and now in Tasmania. Some of our correspondents are in the big cities of Melbourne, Sydney and Perth but others are in country places in Queensland where the climate and vegetation much resembles that of South India. They have sent us many pictures of the wild life of Australia which is entirely different from that of any other part of the world, and as a great contrast we have good friends in Switzerland, Holland, and Ireland.

In the United Kingdom we receive money through a Trust called Village Service Trust which channels funds to us as well as other charitable causes in India. This enables many friends to send us regular donations without the risk or trouble of posting off individual cheques and as Village Service Trust is a Registered Charity, it enables people to take out covenants and to have the advantage of a tax rebate. The trustees are not people who are remote or unknown to us: they are all old friends. Some have actually worked here as volunteers and others have visited us. So they understand us and know what we are doing. They are responsible to the British Charities Commission to satisfy them that the money channeled to us is used for the right purpose.

The Village Service Trust does more than this: its members give talks on India and Seva Nilayam and raise funds for us and others.

We cannot offer a similar service in other countries of the world, but I would like to reassure our friends on this matter of the safety of the postal service. We have found it is very rare indeed for a letter to be lost if it is fully and correctly addressed, and it is practically impossible for crossed cheques to be stolen. Contributors who doubt the honesty of the postal service have the alternative of sending a bank draft or an international money order and these are perfectly safe.

So now we wish to thank very sincerely our friends around the world who by their contributions have enabled us to live and grow and work all these twenty-five years.

THE DOCTOR'S HOUSE

When we came to the completely bare and empty plot of land which has over twenty years developed into Seva Nilayam, there was not a single house nearby. There was a small thorn tree by the roadside and this served as a landmark, so that we knew when we came to the right place. There was no water supply and no well.

Today there is an entrance flanked by a line of tall coconut trees. There is a shop selling coffee, biscuits, sweets and newspapers just outside the entrance and people come streaming in from the bus stop to a busy clinic. Now there is a solid clinic building with five rooms and a spacious verandah. There is a ward for men, and one for women and children, who are admitted as in-patients, and there are rooms for those of the staff who live in and for visitors. There is a spacious grain storage building and all the necessary kitchens, store rooms and bathrooms. What is missing? A place for the doctor to live.

Up till now the need was not felt as urgent. Our first Doctor, who served us for nine years, was a widower with one grown up son, and he was pleased with a single room, his armchair and his books, and the meals provided by our kitchen. When he retired we were without a regular doctor for some years. Then we engaged a young lady doctor who lived with her family in Aundiapatty, six miles away, and was willing to travel daily by bus. But as she was young and marriageable, it was inevitable that plans would be made for her future and she has now left us.

Fortunately, after only one month's interval, we have found a middle-aged doctor who wishes to settle, with his wife, in a place like ours, where he can have a peaceful, and at the same time useful, life. His children are grown up and independent. So we may hope he will stay with us for many years. As there are no suitable houses in the area, we must build one.

It is very difficult indeed to get doctors to work among the villages. To be willing to do so, they must be truly service-minded. There is so much money to be made in the fast-developing towns, even in a small town like Aundipatty. With modern and powerful medicines the ancient art of healing has grown into a vast money-making affair. But if this is the bad side to it, there is also some justification for young doctors who do not want to work in villages. There are no schools of the kind to which they would be willing to send their children. There are no stylish shops, only the necessary provision stores, and there is no educated company for a young college-trained wife.

We have chosen a site on our land, far enough from our daily struggle with crowds of patients and all the problems that go with our work, but with only a short walk down a field path to reach quiet and seclusion. We have obtained the local engineer's plan. It is actually for a double house because we feel sure we shall need one half of it for the managing staff in the future and it would be uneconomic to build two separate houses. It is very compact, and each half has a similar hall, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, verandah and all conveniences. It will be surrounded by a small garden.

It has taken some faith and courage to plan all this but we feel that only in this way can we ensure the stability and steady running of Seva Nilayam in the future. The doctor is at present using our largest guest room which is generally occupied by overseas visitors. Hospitality to our guests is an important part of our work, as we want as many as possible of our friends and supporters to know us at first hand. Visits here often lead to enduring friendships. So it has been rather difficult for us to give up this guest room for the next few months.

The building will have a red-tiled roof in keeping with most of the other buildings at Seva Nilayam (except the clinic which has a flat roof of reinforced concrete) and it will enjoy the sunshine and the partial shade of the coconut trees. It is already present to our mind's eye but we must soon make it a reality.

A GREAT PLEASURE

It is ten o'clock Friday morning. Mothers carrying babies are gathering on a sandy space in front of our buildings. They are waiting for our baby clinic to begin. They sit in the shade of a hedge, for the morning sunlight is too strong. There is also a very tall tree which casts a long shadow. Three chairs are placed in this shadow, one for the doctor and two for his assistants, but before the clinic is finished this shadow will have moved as the sun ascends, and we have to move our chairs to follow it.

More than thirty mothers come. An assistant holds a sheaf of cards and calls the name and village of each baby and one by one they come to sit before the doctor. But before we begin there will be a talk by our senior assistant related to health and hygiene, and the feeding and care of babies.

All the babies have been weighed before they come and the weight recorded in a graph in cards. In fact, all babies brought to our general clinic are weighed and the weights compared with the chart given by the World Health Organisation showing the minimum weight for any healthy baby according to age. When a baby is found to be much under weight or to have any serious infection or deficiency, the mother is asked to attend our clinic on Friday, provided the distance is not too great for her to travel weekly. In he latter case will be given medicine and advice and asked to attend her local hospital.

There is a widespread belief among India mothers that babies under one year old cannot digest solid food. This would not matter much if mothers were in good health and milk was plentiful. But most mothers are anaemic, due to the parasite hookworm and also to poor diet. When they have no breast milk they may buy cow's milk but they usually get only a small quantity and it may be watered or not clean. We have a supply of full cream milk powder from CARITAS, Switzerland, but we have to use it very carefully and only in cases of real need, or else it would be used up too soon and leave us without anything to offer.

So we give preference to motherless babies (of whom there are, unfortunately too many) and twins, whose mothers seldom produce enough milk for the two babies. We also give preference to young children with 'Primary Complex' of tuberculosis so that we may prevent the disease developing. So we insist that all babies over four months should start on a better solid food and go on by stages to full feeding. It happens that one of the commonest breakfast foods in south India is an ideal starting food for lean babies, this is *iddli,* which is a small round cake of finely ground rice and pulse cooked in a steamer. It can be obtained in every village and at most tea and coffee shops. We have also a weaning food, "*BALAHAR,*" a powder which can be made into a gruel. It is composed of various food grains which have been sprouted, dried and ground and it is slightly sweetened and very palatable. We give this in the cases of severe malnutrition.

But we give nothing easily. We hold that responsibility belongs to the mother and we can help her to carry it but not by taking it from her. If we had so much milk powder that we would dole it out all comers, we should get a hundred mothers clamouring for it. But this is not the way.

All breast-feeding mothers are required to take a treatment card for themselves and to be tested clinically, especially for anaemia. If the baby is still very young they are given full advice and treatment directed to improving the supply of breast milk so that they will not need any supplements. But in most cases too many months have passed and there is no hope of reviving the breast milk, and the baby may be a few kilograms short of the optimum weight, and may also have chest infection and skin lesions.

The mothers are asked many searching question. If the line on the weight chart is not growing steadily upwards, why not? Has our advice on feeding been followed? If the mother takes the trouble to come to our baby clinic she must follow the advice. She is not to come just because she hopes that milk power will be handed out.

Skin troubles are common among children of two or three years of age. These can be due to bad feeding or vitamin deficiency or lack of cleanliness. Village babies crawl in the dirt, and sometimes the village may be short of water and the mother may have to go a long distance to fetch it. We must try to avoid any harsh criticism and to appreciate the mother's difficulties but I am glad to say that all the regular attenders at our clinic are showing clean and well cared for children.

South India is a very big cotton growing area, yet the introduction of polyester has made havoc of traditional cotton dress, and especially of children's dress. The markets and city streets are full of barrows loaded with gaudy polyester dresses. Village people, especially, love the bright colour, but polyester is non-absorbent and unsuitable to a hot climate. It is the cause of may skin troubles. Another cause is the custom of dressing up infants with jewellery, bangles, necklaces and talismans. For village people these have to be cheap and therefore are sometimes scratchy and uncomfortable. Added to these may be the irritation of mosquito and perhaps parasitic worms, so it is easy to see why small children are restless and fretful. They may be taken to some clinic run by a private doctor or just a quack, and given penicillin injections, but without cleanliness and loose, comfortable dress penicillin can do nothing. Injections only terrify the children. We have started making simple cotton dresses which we sell very cheaply at the baby clinic. Some of the soap on sale contains too much detergent and is unsuitable for babies. So we advise using Bengal gram flour, which is made from a kind of pulse and is easily obtainable in the villages. We give ointments and soothing lotions when needed and shark liver oil in the case of skin troubles due to vitamin deficiency. But we give only the minimum quantities of medicine, and we insist that cleanliness and adequate food should be enough to ensure healthy growth. If a baby has diarrhoea, we do a laboratory test and if parasites are discovered we give the appropriate medicine, as well as instruction on rehydration, replacing the fluid lost by the body. It is now well known that most infant deaths from diarrhoea are due to loss of fluid from the body and we have to assure mothers that giving water with a litre of rehydration mixture containing salt and sugar will not increase the diarrhoea, but will replace what the child's body loses.

In our baby clinic we also discover birth defects. The most common are hare lip, cleft palate and talipes, which is a condition of the ankles by which the feet are turned inwards instead of being at right angles to the body. The parents very often do not know that these defects are curable by surgery, which is best done at a very early age. These cases we have to send to the Government Hospital in Madurai, but this often entails many visits to hospital and expense for bus fares. Sometimes one of the parents has to stay at the hospital as an attender and this is a dreary and expensive business for them, because they lose working time and they have to buy

their own food. Medically and surgically the government hospital does much for children, but it is so busy and crowded that it is not a pleasant place to stay in for any length of time. We find so much pleasure in our baby clinic, in seeing weak and undernourished babies develop into healthy children. Perhaps it is a dream that one day Seva Nilayam may have a small hospital for children where those who have had operations of suffering from serious illnesses may be cared for in pleasant and peaceful conditions. Who knows?

GOOD WORK

"What a curious tree", said a visitor to Seva Nilayam, "Is it dead?" No, it was not dead or dying, it was a silk cotton or kapok tree after shedding all its leaves. The March sun was hot and the gaunt, dry looking tree was covered with equally dry looking brown pods nine or twelve inches in length. Here and there a few of the pods had split, showing a mass of pure white silk which sailed away in puffs down the breeze.

In other seasons this tree will be crowned by tufts of dark green leaves and in January and February it will bear dull white flowers which quickly fall. If you open one of the pods you will find the silk in close packed and regular curls and within them are even rows of black seeds as big as peppercorns.

Kapok is one of the treasures of South India. The staple is not long enough for it to be spun and woven, but it can be made into quilts, pillows, cushions and padded jackets. You may ask why quilts and padded jackets are useful in a tropical country, but where mountains rise to seven thousand feet the climate becomes quite cold. The mid-day sun can be warm but temperatures may drop almost to freezing point at night. The smooth silk fibres do not clog or become lumpy, and a kapok quilt may even be washed, if care is taken to turn and shake it while drying.

After the outer shell is removed, the silk and the seeds have to be stripped from the brittle central spike. Then we put the cotton through our machine which is a metal drum resting horizontally on a stand and containing a spiked shaft which is revolved by a turning handle. The seeds fall out and pass through an opening to be collected into tubs. They are oil-bearing seeds and can be sold for cattle feed.

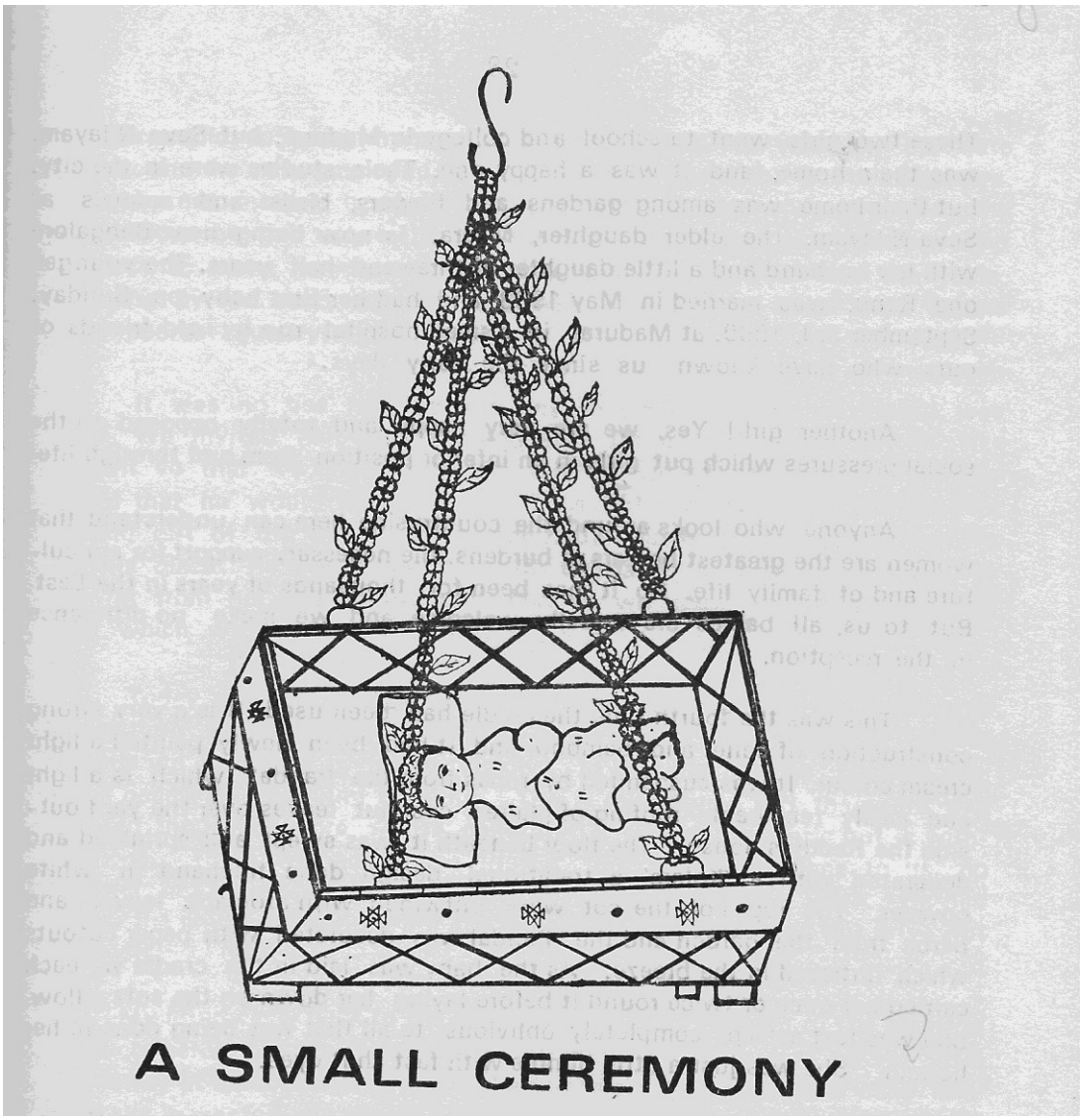
When we first came to Seva Nilayam, we did not know anything about the kapok tree. We learned gradually. We found that we could make ourselves very comfortable with pillows and mattresses but we had not mastered the technique of getting the seeds out. We had to do the jobs by twirling a stick with a wire cross on the end. After using the pillows for a time we found loose seeds accumulating in the corners. But we persevered and after several models with drum and revolving spikes we made the one which is in use at present and which we find quite satisfactory.

The village tailor had no experience in handling kapok or making quilts but he learned the craft and his work improved steadily until now it has become a very good quality product. Having learned the value of kapok we planted more trees, and this was easy because the seeds germinate freely and grow quickly. They will bear their crop in the driest seasons and without manure or irrigation. This year we have had a severe drought but the kapok trees produced a bumper crop and we have been kept busy fulfilling the orders that are continually coming in. There are farms which grow fairly large amounts of kapok but there are others which have a few scattered trees often self-sown and uncared for. A good crop can be sent to the ginning factory

where it is mixed with waste from field cotton and sold commercially, but a small crop is not worth transporting many miles. We are beginning to find that we can help these small producers by buying their crop and processing and making up the articles ourselves.

There is a government rule that "Charities must not run businesses" and we can see that there might be abuses if they were freely allowed. But we feel that this natural wealth could bring profit and interest to our friends and neighbours. Our tailor is an oldish man who was not getting much work because he could not stand up to the competition with fashionable young tailors. Now in this season we have been able to employ him almost continually. We have been advised that although charities must not run businesses, the government wants training centres to be set up to teach all kinds of handicraft to make use of natural products and enable people to supplement their earnings from agriculture. Therefore we have to set up a small training centre completely separate from the medical work of Seva Nilayam teaching all the procedures of the use and preparation of kapok and of making pleasing articles from it. We are also teaching hand sewing and embroidery and the making of soft toys for children, especially teddy bears which are very popular.

Hand spinning and weaving have been practised in India from time immemorial, but it was Gandhi who first taught the people that they could provide for themselves from the produce of their own land and refuse the inflow of foreign mill cloth which was destroying many weaving communities. Hand spun and hand woven cloth is called 'Khadi'. It's become both the symbol and an integral part of the struggle for independence Now that struggle belongs to history, but Khadi holds a very honoured place in Indian economy. It has become the means of helping very many poor families to earn a living when they would otherwise be unemployed. There is a very good Khadi weaving center in our area and its director is a member of our Seva Nilayam Society. Khadi enjoys many privileges and is free of tax. It is usually of very pleasant texture and comes in many printed designs. We find it very suitable to use with our Kapok for cushion covers and quilts, so we intend from now on to turn over to the use of Khadi, thus helping in a small way to provide for the weaver. It has taken us more than twenty years to reach this point but all our staff and our society members are keenly interested in the project and we hope for good returns. Its title is "GOOD WORK HAND CRAFT TRAINING CENTRE".



A SMALL CEREMONY

"Small is Beautiful" – yes, it was a very small ceremony centred on a baby ten days old.

In this area it is the custom to hold a little festival when a new baby is laid in a cradle for the first time. It is a welcome into the world, for hitherto the baby's world has been bounded by the mother's arms. Since we came here in 1963 the Reddy family, Seetharama and his wife Hamsa, our co-workers, have had two daughters born to them. These two girls went to school and college in Madurai, but Seva Nilayam was their home, and it was a happy one. Their studies were in the city, but their home was among gardens and flowers, birds and animals at Seva Nilayam. The elder daughter, Meera, is now living near Bangalore with her husband and a little daughter of three and half years. The younger one Renu, was married in May 1988 and had her first baby on Sunday, September 3rd, 1989, at Madurai in a small hospital run by old friends of ours who have known us since the early days.

Another girl! Yes, we are very happy and totally opposed to the social pressures which put girls in an inferior position through life.

Anyone who looks around the countryside here can understand that women are the greatest bearers of burdens, the necessary support for agriculture and of family life. So it has been for thousands of years in the East. But to us, all babies are equally welcome and we make no difference in the reception.

This was the fourth time the cradle had been used. It is a very strong construction of cane and bamboo and it had been newly painted a light cream colour. It was suspended by ropes from the *Pandal* which is a light and easily renewable roofing of plaited coconut leaves over the yard outside the Reddy's house. The floor beneath it was swept and sprinkled and decorated with a *Kholam,* a traditional design done freehand in white powder. The ropes of the cot were entwined with aromatic leaves and herbs from the garden and the *Pandal* was decorated with paper cutouts which fluttered in the breeze. As the baby was laid in the cradle we each carried her once or twice round it before laying her down on the soft pillow. She was fast asleep, completely oblivious to all that was being done in her honour. She was just a little bundle with fast shut eyes.

We had a community lunch shared with our clinic staff and the in-patients. It was a very simple and special kind of light and well-cooked rice, some vegetables and a cup of buttermilk. There was no waste, no empty show or extraordinary expense.

As I walked round the cradle with that precious bundle in my arms a thought flashed in my mind of the many people to whom such a celebration would be an impossibility. A few weeks ago a man came to our clinic suffering from chronic malnutrition. He was in his late fifties and he was employed by a farmer to drive out the goats to pasture. He was not married, or if he had ever been, it was long ago in the past. Now he has no relatives. He received no wages, only his food and a place to sleep, which was probably in the same yard with the goats. Judging by his condition the food he received must have been of the very poorest quality.

It was no use to give him any medicine. What he needed was food. We invited him to come and stay for a few weeks as an in-patient so that we could feed him but he would not, because he was afraid that he would lose his job. If he did not appear at the time of driving out of the goats the farmer could easily find a young boy to fill his place. He could not come to us daily because the distance is too far from his grazing grounds. And so we could not think of any way which we could help him.

Today news is full of stories of refugees, victims of accident or persecution and many of these are sad indeed. If a public appeal is made we hurry to give our support, to provide shelter, medical aid, and if necessary, food and clothing. This is only right. But there are uncounted thousands more whose condition is not so dramatic but is without hope. There was nothing in life for this man who came to us, no prospect but slowly to grow old until he could no longer work. He had neither the physical strength nor the education to do anything but drive out the goats.

My mind came back to the sleeping baby and I thought of the pleasing prospects before her, the love and protection of her family and all our little community at Seva Nilayam. I felt that while we show our new baby how much she is wanted, we should spare a thought for all the unwanted ones of the earth.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN FATHER CHRISTMAS?

I received a letter recently from a school in Switzerland, asking if I could suggest a way by which Swiss children could send toys to Indian children at Christmas. After some thought I advised the writer of the letter to get in touch with one of the oldest and the best known churches in Madras. This church has a very fine history of Social Service. It has a good day-care center and it staffs and finances many activities in the nearby slums, and in villages outside Madras. I felt sure also, that if any child had to spend Christmas in hospital, that child would receive a visit and a present.

I sometimes have to remind westerners that India is not a Christian country. In countries where Christmas is a great family festival, kept by those who believe in its religious meaning as well as those who do not, it is easy to imagine that all children everywhere long for a Christmas present and feel sad if they do not have one. But Christians make up only 12% of India's vast population and most of these are concentrated in the southern states of Kerala and Madras. Here the influence of Christianity is far greater than the actual number of Christians would seem to warrant because the Christian schools and colleges, many of them founded by religious orders, are held in high esteem, not only for the quality of the education they give, but for their teaching of moral and social behaviour. Parents who would never themselves dream of becoming Christian, think that the best thing they can do for their children is to send them to St. Patrick's or St. Joseph's or St. Francis Xavier's.

When Christmas is near, the stars are lit on the Christian houses. These are quite large and are made in the same way that kites are made, by stretching coloured paper on a light framework of cane or split bamboo, and setting an electric light inside. But not everyone who wishes can have a Christmas star. There are streets in the slums of Madras which are too narrow to hang anything up, and where the huts are too ramshackle to have electricity, but depend only on what illumination they can get from street lighting. But the house servants and coolies of Madras form a good part of the huge congregations that gather at the churches at midnight on Christmas Eve. Many of these may not be officially Christian, but Indians love festivals, and the figure of mother and child has a deep appeal for them.

Slowly the customs of Christmas are spreading. It is now possible to buy Christmas cards and many business firms send Christmas & New Year cards to their customers. Christmas hymns are played on the radio and the church groups go from house to house with greetings and music. Although very few people could have ever tasted a Christmas pudding, dried fruits like raisins and sultanas are commonly called "*kismas*" and Father Christmas is known under the name of "*Kismas Tata*" (*tata* means grandfather). He sometimes bring sweets, but not toys.

Not toys? People who have not seen the congested lanes of the city or the bare one-roomed huts of the villages do not realize that most children have no place whatever to keep a toy. They may have a balloon or a whistle bought in the bus stand, but these are gone in a few days. And sadly, I have seen in the bigger houses, beautiful dolls kept in glass-fronted cupboards as if no one knew what to do with them. Only in the day care centres or nursery schools can toys be kept long enough for children to learn to play with them.

In old times there were many toys in the great houses of rich merchants. These were of carved wood – stiff dolls or horses and elephants on wheels. Many of them are now museum pieces. Now toys are almost exclusively made of metal, plastic or rubber and they have very little appeal beyond that of bright colours or clockwork movement. We do not always realize that children have to learn to play. A child who has never had a likeable, lovable, satisfying toy, will

grasp at a brightly dressed doll and does not know what to do with it. Indians love stories and story telling and there are many good stories including those about animals, but within it there is no make-believe. You do not find a boy pretending to himself that he is some mythological or fairy tale character or a little girl pretending that her doll is sick and needs nursing. You do not find any fairy godmothers or any magicians who can unlock doors into a land of wonder. You do not find any child who will not go to bed without a much loved doll or Teddy Bear. There is a whole world of what we may call child's folklore, the world of enchanted castles, fiery dragons, frogs who can turn into handsome princes, wicked uncles whose plans can be thwarted, poor servants who may be raised above the rich and arrogant.

A child's fantasy world is a preparation for life, and those who have never entered it, have missed one of the most important stages in their development. Through this a child can learn that things are not always what they seem to be, that wisdom is hidden in unlikely exteriors, that the lowly shall be exalted and that honesty and fidelity are more than gold. The moral teaching of Fairyland, is that of the highest and deepest teaching that we know, the never fading moral of the Christmas story. So, if *Kismas Tata* comes to South India bringing toys I will ask him to open for all children the door to Fairyland.

1990

HOLIDAYS

"Do these people ever have a holiday?" asked my visitor. We were watching a group of about 20 workers repairing the bund of a village tank which had been broken in recent heavy rains. Men were shovelling up earth, using the *munvetti* which is the local short handled spade. They were filling baskets which the women placed on their heads and carried up a slope to the spot where the bund had been damaged.

The women had thick cloths rolled into rings on their heads and kept in place by head scarves and onto these they raised the rough baskets.

It was non-stop work, and the whole scene resembled a dance, with rhythmic movements of full baskets constantly ascending and empty baskets being tossed down to the foot of the bund to be refilled. Work, at this primitive level, is very hard, so it can easily lead to questions as to when or whether holidays are the rule in India.

The idea of an annual holiday which is planned in advance and is solely for pleasure, is something new in India. Like other Western customs, it is copied to some small extent by the middle and upper classes but it has no roots in the Indian past.

Families may spend a few days or weeks at one of India's many scenes of natural beauty. They will have their transistors and picnic lunches and book into a comfortable and perhaps expensive lodge in some hill station or wild life sanctuary, and there they will mingle with foreign tourists.

The picture is quite different from that of the past. For many centuries the only reasons for travel were religion, marriage and business. As we are thinking about holidays we must leave out of account the business trips undertaken by rich merchants, but we may note in passing that these were often very extensive. In the prosperous days of trade with Burma the owners of the great houses in South India traveled to Rangoon and brought back beautiful lacquer ware as well as financial gains and no doubt it was as enjoyable as a holiday.

But in such great houses marriages would often go on for as long as five days. The reason for this was that in those times of slow and difficult travel a marriage in the family was about the only occasion that justified a long journey. It might be the only time in years that the family relations would all meet together and have the opportunity of exchanging news and gossip, so they would spin it out as long as possible and would sit around eat, sleep and gossip to their hearts' content. Even those who were educated did not have the habit of writing personal and informative letters, so relationships could not otherwise be kept alive. Even today marriages are the greatest means of meeting old friends and relatives and catching up on the news.

The postal services are quick and cheap but they are not much used to keep friendship bright or knowledge up to date, without personal attendance at such occasions it is possible to lose touch and feel cut off from the family life.

All government employees, including railway workers, are allotted a certain number of days off in the year but they do not usually take it all at one stretch, when occasion arises they may ask for a day or more "casual leave" so they can visit friends and relatives, or go on sight seeing or religious expeditions and this is what suits most people best.

The system creates some slight difficulty because you may go to some government office expecting to get a necessary signature or track down some piece of information only to find this person's desk unattended as he is "on leave today" and there is no deputy. "You must please come tomorrow, or next week". However, it works well for the employees.

From time immemorial one of the chief forms of travel in India has been that of pilgrimage. From North to South, East to West the ancient pilgrim routes cross and re-cross India like a vast tapestry. Far in the north at Badrinath, Kedarnath and Gangotri, the old trails skirt terrifying gorges and crawl around the rock faces of mighty mountains. Today the bus goes all the way to Badrinath very close to the Tibetan border at an elevation of ten thousand feet above sea level. Food supplies on the way are very good, so the journey, if still frightening, can be undertaken as a holiday. In times past it could have seemed more like courting death than taking a holiday. The same thing has happened to many pilgrim centers: Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha found enlightenment under the sacred peepul tree, Varanasi, where the dead are cremated and their ashes immersed in the Holy Ganges, or Hardwar, the point where the Ganges leaves the mountains and enters on the wide open plain, bringing life and sustenance to many millions. All these and many more have become easily accessible to ordinary travellers and sight-seers.

It is true that there are still hundreds of thousands of devout believers, up and down India, who go alone, on foot, living sparely and on alms, meditating and seeking to understand the riddle of life. But for others, not wholly committed to such austerities, the distinction between pilgrimage and holiday is becoming blurred. We may want to see Tirupathi, one of the holiest shrines of South India, and we may take two or three days to do so but we also get away from our daily cares, have a beautiful journey into the hills, eat, rest and enjoy ourselves as we please. The pilgrimage provides a focal point to a holiday. The government is well aware of the need felt by Indians to find this religious motive.

The railways offer many tours or remarkable cheapness, each one covering some hundreds of miles and taking in a number of centres where there are well known and popular temples. These are not luxury tours. You have a plank berth in the train. You wash at the fountain in the station and buy your food in the bazaar.

The authorities are very easy-going towards pilgrimages and allow all the facilities they need. Once at Jodhpur in Rajasthan, I saw an open space just outside the station filled with scores of cooking fires. Each fire was a mound of hot ashes with wheaten cakes cooking on the sides and a little pot of spicy sauce bubbling on the top.

There are also surprisingly long bus tours. Our city, Madurai, has one of the largest temples in the land of great temples in South India. Sometimes outside the temple in Madurai you see a busload of people, speaking another language, not Tamil, but Hindi, and dressed differently from the local people. On top of the bus you see their cooking pots. Not that there is no good food in Tamil Nadu, and plenty of it, but it is different and unknown. Also it may be cheaper to cook at the various stops on the 2000 mile journey.

So what about the people who were mending the bund of the village tank? Do they have any holidays? As most of the farm work is done by day labour they are free to come for work or

not, as they wish, but of course they are constrained by the need to earn sufficient income to feed and clothe their families. At times of intensive work, such as rice planting, rice, groundnut, and onion harvest, they make sure of getting in while the going is good, but in slack times they catch up on their religious and family obligations. The custom is for children to have their heads shaved at the temples and this is done in either the first third or fifth years of life. The occasion is considered a joyful one (irrespective of the child's feelings) and may require several day's absence from work, especially if it takes place at a distant temple. Although few of the village workers ever travel to very far off places or experience the great difference of custom and language in the more Northern States of India, there are many local festivals which have developed into fairs and taken on the character of country markets and these are very popular. Then of course there are family visits to be paid, especially in the school holidays, when children can be shown to grandparents and other relatives living at a distance from the village.

We can safely say that nowadays holidays are taken at all levels of society much more generally than in the past and more Indians are learning to know their own endlessly varied and fascinating country.

THE BRASS POT AND THE CLAY POT

If you walk on the soil of India you will be walking the remains of countless clay pots. Potsherds lie beside the wells, among the pebbles in the brooks, and under the hedges. Some are buried deep in the earth and most of them return over the years, to powdered red earth. They are unremarked, unnoticed. For thousands of years India has made clay pots for carrying water and millions of them have been broken.

On the hills of Kodaikanal are the remains of a prehistoric culture which made burial urns and beakers of clay. These were not made on a wheel but built up by hand, and they can be studied in the small museum at the Jesuit college at Shenbaganur. Today the potter's wheel revolves in hundreds of thousands of villages in India.

Over the centuries many a young bride has gone out proudly to fetch water for the home, many an old woman looks back on long years of water carrying without knowing when it will end, or a little girl is eager to put a water pot on her head because it makes her feel grown up. All the pots return to dust, but new ones must constantly be made. The rival of the clay pot is the brass vessel of the same shape which is given as a wedding present. It is heavier, of course, and makes work more laborious, but it will outlast generations of clay pots. It is valuable property and many great old houses have an immense array of brass vessels of all sizes and ages, some only to be used at special festivals. The polished brass pot can strike sparkles from the early sunlight as it goes to the well, and we can imagine it looking down on the humble clay pot, which comes from the wheel today but may lie in fragments a few months or years hence. The brass pot is a symbol of the family's wealth and stability but it can even be pawned in time of need.

The potter's work does not begin with moulding the clay. He first has to find the raw materials and this sometimes becomes difficult because more land may be built on or taken into cultivation. He has to go farther afield to find his clay, and after digging it out he must drive it home on the bullock cart. Then it has to be dried and finely crumbled, then mixed with water to form a very smooth paste. The fine texture can be felt between the finger and thumb. But if the

weather is wet or even cloudy the work has to stop because the pots cannot be sufficiently dried, and the clay must lie there till conditions alter.

The potter's horizontal wheel is made of heavy wood and can be set in motion by twirling with a long pole. The lump of wet clay placed on its center seems to grow by magic under the potter's hands and rise into a pot. Onlookers are attracted by this seemingly effortless rise into a beautiful rounded shape, but unless they have learnt pottery in their own country they find that the magic eludes them. Sometimes three or four pots can be made at once by forming a wide pipe which is then cut into segments which are then moulded at the bottom and sealed.

Sometimes you find a piece of natural stone which has clearly been fashioned into shape by human hands, being rounded but having a larger and smaller end with a definite "waist". This is a potter's stone which is used for smoothing the surface of the post when they come off the wheel. The smaller end is just convenient to the hand and the larger end evens out every slight irregularity in the moist clay. The pots are left to dry for a day and then are ready for firing.

There is no kiln, but a fresh one is improvised for every batch of pots. A bed of brushwood is made and the pots carefully stacked on it. The whole is covered with a thick layer of wet clay and the brushwood is set alight. These dome shaped structures can be seen smoking away outside any potter's village. They burn for a day and night, and then are carefully broken and the pots lifted out when sufficiently cool. The ashes are brushed off and the pots are ready for sale. If they are to be sold in the same area they will be carried individually on people's heads, or they may be taken into the store room in the potter's house. But if they are to go to market more care must be taken.

You can imagine how few pots could survive if they were loaded on to a bullock cart without springs and driven on a rough country road. If a load of pots has to be taken on a cart a light framework of wood is built up and the pots are attached to this inside and outside in such a way that they cannot clash together, and so they are driven into the town.

Tourists from many countries are fascinated by clay pots and they watch with admiration as the women lift them to their heads and walk with straight backs and graceful carriage. The tourists would love to take one home but doubt whether they could get it there in one piece. But they know little or nothing of the labours of the potter who struggles with the harsh and intractable lumps of clay or watches the sky anxiously fearing that the rain will put an end to his day's work.

A SHOP ON A MOUNTAIN

I have written several times about our small Handicraft which we call The 'Good Work' Training Centre. Originally we started this center because there is a very valuable product of nature in this region which is not really well used. The Kapok tree bears long pods which are dry and brown looking on the outside out break open to reveal a most beautiful silky floss which, if not gathered, sails away on the breeze. This substance can be made into pillows, mattresses, quilts and padded jackets. Our workers have now acquired a very high degree of skill in making all of these items. Our reason for being very interested in this silk cotton is that this area suffers from frequent droughts and other crops may fail but the Kapok tree will live and give its produce practically without water, manure or any other kind of attention. So it seem to us that with proper care in harvesting the Kapok could become a secondary source of income when other crops fail.

It has taken as a good many years to reach this stage because we had to devise a way of removing the kapok seeds which are about the size of pepper corns and at first we did this in a very primitive manner by twirling a bamboo stick in a basket of the cotton, but after a few trials at making a prototype, we devised what we think is quite a satisfactory small machine consisting of an iron drum on legs with spikes in the interior which are rotated by turning a handle. This is very simple. There are factories in this area for processing the kapok and they have very big machines but I do not think that there is great profit to the producers of the raw materials. For one thing, the outer shells go through the machine also and this results in such an inferior product that it is almost impossible to buy pure kapok. For another thing, we believe that by making up the kapok ourselves, using cutting and tailoring skills, we can produce beautiful and useful articles, this adding much to the value of the raw material.

Now we come to the shop on the mountain. Ten years ago the Cottage Craft Shop was started in the hill station Kodaikanal. Its purpose was to help small producers in the villages, to market their products. Marketing is often the snag in small handicraft work. Projects may be started, for example, to help destitute women and widows or to help farming families in times of unemployment, but it may be that there is no one to find the markets and organize the sales for the products. The Cottage Craft Shop is itself a registered charity and it sells goods produced only by registered charities doing social service. During the ten years we have been selling our produce through this shop, their trade has grown continuously. This is partly response to their growing experience and skill in management, but also to the growth of Kodaikanal itself. This little town among the mountains has now become an attraction for Indian and foreign tourists. If you spend a day there you can meet people from Delhi and Bombay and also from England, Israel, Italy, Switzerland or practically any other country you may think of. We, on our part, have perfected our work to a fairly high degree and I am sure that if we could see now some of the objects we tried to sell at the cottage craft shop in the early days, we would laugh at them. It took us a long time to make teddy bears with a pleasing expression and I remember a large green frog which came apart and was sent back to us in pieces and some pillows in the corners of which we found kapok seeds remaining. However training and practice have improved our work to a level which seems to meet the demand of customers. We can, of course sell some of our products locally but the reason for selling in the hill station is that the climate can be quite cold. In January the temperature at night may fall to only one or two degrees above freezing point and this is because, although we are so near to the equator, Kodaikanal is on a mountain ridge which rises to a height of more than 6000 feet above sea level and warm quilts and padded jackets are in demand and for these our kapok is most suitable.

To get our goods to this shop is quite an adventure in itself. We have to set out about 4.30 in the morning and walk half a mile to a point where we can catch a bus. Our goods are packed in a very capacious bag which has to be fastened on the roof of the bus with a strong rope. At Batlagundu we have to change to the Kodaikanal bus and again secure our bag on the roof. From there the road winds upwards with many bends, through plantations of coffee, bananas and oranges, some times plunging into deep forests, some times emerging on to the high grass lands, and after a two hour journey we reach the hill town with is busy market, beautiful old houses set in green gardens, its new shopping centres, schools and hotels. There we are sure of a welcome. The Cottage Craft Shop now has a very impressive display of hand made goods from many parts of India: dresses, embroideries, spices, greeting cards, wall hangings, bags and cushions.

April and May are the months of the ‘Season’ for Kodaikanal and trade is flourishing and this brings benefits to many social service and charitable institutions through the sale of their goods. We are happy to have our part in this.

A BABY AND A TELESCOPE

The news on the radio last week was very exciting for anyone interested in science. A space telescope has been launched on a journey into unknown parts of the universe and is sending back photographs to earth. The first pictures received have led scientists to believe that the result will be a very great extension of human knowledge of the universe of which our earth is an infinitesimal part. The stars which were shown in the first photographs are seven hundred light-years away (a light-year is the measurement which scientists use to express the immense distances they have to deal with when making astronomical observations. A light-year is the distance light can travel in the course of a year). The stars which were photographed by the space telescope are seven hundred light years away and that means that the light which reaches us now was sent out seven hundred years ago, in our 13th century. This gives us just a faint idea of the enormous distances involved which are more than our imagination can grasp. The scientists hope that future pictures received from this telescope will reveal more facts about and history of our universe.

For scientists to be able to make and launch and use such a telescope means that they are people who have had great advantages in life and I am sure that most of them are very conscious of this. They must have been born in a country where scientific knowledge is highly developed and they must have been born with minds which could be trained to take advantage of the very highest scientific education. They must have had the financial means to make full use of their capacities for study and also must have had an unfaltering sprit of enquiry to lead them on. As a lay person with only a very general knowledge of these matters learnt at school and carried on by some reading of publications of popular science, I find these facts quite staggering but what I also find staggering is the immense difference in awareness of the fact of science, of the nature of the human body, between what we call the higher and lower orders of society, or shall we say the rich and the poor (and here by rich I do not mean only rich in money but in opportunities for learning, understanding and acting upon any part of scientific knowledge.) Shakespeare, who had a deep reverence for nature, when addressing through Othello the sleeping Desdemona called her "thou cunningest pattern of excelling nature". Shakespeare had very little knowledge of the complexity and wonderful adjustment of the human body although he recognized it from his sympathy and poetic understanding of nature. He would have been utterly amazed and enthralled if he had known even a small fraction of what we know today of the complexity, delicate adjustment and responsiveness of the human body. Yet there are millions of people who, through no fault of their own, are entirely ignorant of the working of their own bodies, especially where this concerns heredity.

In this part of India there is a custom frequently followed of making consanguineous marriages, that is marriages between closely related persons, which would not be allowed in most countries. A man may marry his sister's daughter. Doctors can see very clearly that these marriages bring about a high rate of congenital deformities, but it is very hard to make the ordinary villager understand this. These marriages can be made for various reasons, perhaps to keep property within the family, perhaps from poverty and the inability to find a dowry. People do not want to believe that these deformities are the result of consanguineous marriages. They say, "But this is an old custom, it has come down from past times and we see no reason against it". It is true that you cannot prove that any particular deformity is the result of such a marriage. You can point to totally unrelated couples who have had defective children. But the number of such defects in this society is great enough to prove to the medical profession that consanguinity is responsible. These defects may be quite harmless, like the presence of a sixth finger or the absence of hair on the head except for a short fluffy growth like that on a baby's head, or they

may be disfiguring like hare-lip and cleft palate, or crippling, like club foot or talipes (condition in which the feet are turned inwards from the ankles).

A baby named Vijayakumar was brought to our clinic. The mother was carrying him and the grandfather accompanied her. The grandfather drew back the towel which covered the baby's feet and showed that they were crossed beneath the body and rigidly fixed. This boy has double club foot and double talipes and if nothing is done he will not only never walk but even will be unable to sit up. He will need very extensive surgery, probably seven major operations before he can move like a normal child. The mother is poor and her husband has left her (and this was a consanguineous marriage) but she cares for the child and has not had any temptation to abandon him, as we know that others have done. She went to the government hospital and was only asked to come again at a later date, and it seems that no plans were made for performing any operation on this child. The government hospital is always overcrowded and there are always many urgent cases, so this may be the reason why operation was not considered. But the local government hospital doctor wrote to us asking us to try to do something as the mother could not afford to continue going to the hospital with no result. Accordingly, we took the baby to a private hospital where there is a good team of doctors, one of whom we know very well, having taken many patients to hospital. We asked him frankly what would be the cost of so many major operations fearing this would put too great a strain on our resources. The doctor told us that he was willing to do the operation over a period of several months, but that he would not send us a bill but would only ask us to pay what we felt we could afford. This is a great kindness on his part, but of course we cannot offer a very small sum. There must be at least some correspondence between the nature of the case and the payment. We cannot refuse to go through with this and we trust that we shall be able to pay something appropriate but while people have a total lack of understanding of the mechanism of heredity, it is impossible to find any meeting ground on which to explain the reason for congenial deformity.

I am not arguing against the Space Telescopes. If man has the ability to probe the remotest parts of the universe he must and will continue to do so, but I feel saddened as well as discouraged by the great differences in knowledge and understanding between human minds which some times seem as unbridgeable as the distance to the farthest stars.

SONS AND DAUGHTERS

When Kipling wrote *Kim*, that entrancing story of the orphan boy who travelled through India with a Tibetan lama, he described how the boy followed a marriage procession shouting the good wishes, "May you have hundred sons and no daughters" (as the saying went).

Such a wish is outdated now and, of course, was never meant seriously, but even today it is a reflection of the fact that sons are considered valuable and daughters are not. This low status of women has not been equalised even today although there have been many far-reaching social changes. Centuries ago, women of the higher castes, the Brahmins or the famous warriors, the Rajputs had no independent existence apart from their husbands and therefore if he died, should throw themselves on his funeral pyre, since there was nothing left in life for them.

The way upwards to full personal identity and equal rights is very long. All the babies brought to our clinic are weighed and records are kept. We frequently find that a boy is normal weight but his sister may be seriously under weight because the boy has had all the good things

and the girl has had to take second place. You can see the difference in the dress. The girl may have a frilly frock but the boy, even at one year old, may have shirt with a stiff collar like that of a man's shirt which sits awkwardly on his chubby neck. I think this is largely the fault of the village tailors who make the shirt and want the mother to show proudly that she has a boy. To a village family without education or special opportunities, each added girl is a misfortune because a girl must have a dowry and that may be difficult or impossible to find. Unfortunately, the answer may be, as it has been throughout history, even in the time of ancient Greeks, female infanticide. It is very sad but well known to be true. We are proud of the fact that as many girls as boys come to our baby clinic and we take great care to see that none of the girls is neglected.

But all social customs change no matter how slowly and this is no exception. When I was first in Madras I was working for a women's organization and I was very critical of the committee because they knew nothing about proper procedure for meetings and spent the time in trivial chattering, but somebody said to me, "You must remember that twenty years ago these women would not have been allowed to go out and do social work at all". An old friend of mine whom I loved to visit in Madras was among the very first batch of women pupils at the Hindu University at Varanasi (formerly known as Benares). I have seen the building. It has a high wall and the students were allowed only to go out for walks in a procession. The schools founded by Annie Besant did much to bring women forward to take their part in education. Today there are many women's colleges and women can become teachers, doctors or even government officials. But it is still the custom to ensure that the husband should be better educated than the wife, just as he must be at least an inch taller than she.

This is true and we can see now that everyday work for women and managed and organized by women is increasing and holding a bigger and bigger place in society. What of those who have no education and will never learn to read or write? Their only asset is strength and endurance. During any building or other similar work you can find girls of fifteen carrying baskets of soil or stone chippings on their heads and looking proud of being grown up.

Now all this is full of misconceptions. It used to be said "We must have sons to look after us in our old age". But like as not the sons will have married and gone away and the daughters will be looking after the old people. Without women's work Indian agriculture would be impossible. It is the woman who carries the small sickle and binds the sheaf, it is the woman who crouches in the field of groundnuts, maize, or beans patiently pulling the weeds, it is the woman who picks the cotton balls and carries them in the front of her sari.

Very often a middle-aged women comes to our clinic bringing a young girl, her daughter. I know at once from the care and solicitude of the mother that the time has come for the girl's marriage. Now that polyester is available in the villages, every women or girl tries to have one polyester sari which is kept for best and it is mark of respect for clinic that is put on when they come for medical advice. The colours and designs may be very lovely but it is often worn over a blouse or skirt which clearly has not been made for it. The mother will show carefully every smallest blemish on the daughter's face, neck or arms, but if you look at the feet under the long skirt you will see that they have never worn shoes and are often very sore and rough. The hands, too, may be scarred and scratched with work, but the overall effect will be one of elegance. The heavy iron rings which were used to stretch the ear lobes are no longer inflicted on growing girls. They will have small neat earrings and slender hair clips. I think it is very important to respond to the care and solicitude of the mother and to give the girl the best start we can on what is going to be a life of daily toil.

THE SECULAR STATE

Many people are surprised when they learn that Christmas Day is a bank holiday in India. Of course, there are other bank holidays in a vast country like India which contains races, communities, tribes, beliefs and allegiances too numerous to count. Before independence much of the country was in the hands of Indian Princes, who were a law unto themselves. In his own dominions, the Raja was the supreme authority and in many cases it was impossible for a foreigner even to enter his area.

If a country is composed of believers in one religion, that can be adopted as the state religion but such a thing would be impossible in India. Nehru was the man with the vision to tackle this problem. The answer in his mind was that the state is purely secular and that personal religion is a matter for the individual and, further, that all religions should be given freedom and equality.

So the Indian Government decided to allot public holidays to all the main religions and it was only fair that the number of holidays should bear some relationship to this strength of each religion among the populations. For the Hindus there are not only some holidays dedicated to the Gods but there is also Mahatma Gandhi's birthday, and the for the Muslims who form a very large minority, there are commemorations of Muharram and Bakrid. The Jains are a small minority centred chiefly in Bombay. They are complete vegetarians and also will never knowingly kill even the tiniest insects. Their God, Mahaveera, is celebrated on this birthday. Buddhism has not had much influence in India until recent years, when refugees came from Tibet with their Dalai Lama, but as a religion Buddhism is deeply respected and the Buddha's birthday is celebrated. In addition to these celebrations we have also the national holidays – Republic Day, when there is a great procession and march, and there is also Independence Day in August, when there is also an official march and all the schools and colleges are on holiday. So having regard to all this it will not seem strange that Christmas is a bank holiday, although the Christian community is numerically small.

It was Nehru's wish to bring India from the old traditional fragmented condition into full being as a modern state and he told the people, "The old world is dead and cannot be revived. India is now one of the nations of the modern world".

The path is not easy. There are so many sectional interests, frictions, animosities and even outbreaks of violence, even to bloodshed, that his clear and logical idea of the secular state can be obscured and even seem lost altogether, but this is, we believe, the only true path for India, so that is why we welcome the fact that Christmas Day receives official recognition. We are able to preach the message of Peace on Earth and Goodwill to all Mankind.

1991

WHERE THE WATER COMES FROM

Many visitors to South India come from countries where the field crops do not depend on irrigation but only on rainfall. Such are most of the countries of Europe. Therefore, when visitors see water running rapidly in a small straight channel, they may wonder where it comes from and where it is going to. They may see it running into small depressions around coconut trees or pouring into the flooded rice field. If you take them to the beginning of this channel they will see a well and an electric pump raising the water and then they will understand that, in the torrid zone of south Asia and in many desert areas, very little can be grown without frequent irrigation.

In our part of South India, crops have been irrigated from time immemorial, but before the coming of electricity, irrigation had to be done either by animals or human beings.

We came to this area 27 years ago and at that time the usual method of irrigation was by lowering a very large pumpkin shaped bucket into the well and having it drawn up by a pair of bullocks. The bullocks were trained to run down a slope as the bucket came up and then to move back slowly as the bucket was let down again. This method was rather clumsy as much of the water dripped back into the well, and also there was a limit to what you could expect from the bullocks, and that meant a limit to the amount of land which could be cultivated. About the year 1964, the first electric power lines were installed in the area, and from then on the cultivated area increased year by year. Without irrigation by electric power, crops were dependent on the monsoon rains in October and November, but after the main rice harvest in January much of the land had to lie fallow. Now with continuous supply of electricity, the land will yield three crops a year of groundnuts, onions, chillies, tomatoes or cotton. Rice still remains the most valued crop, as it is the staple food of the population and it is cultivated wherever possible in the monsoon period. Now the whole area is crossed by high tension wires, with transformers at many points. In some of the dry parts of north India, such as Rajasthan, irrigation is by the Persian wheel. These wheels have been known from very ancient times, perhaps for 4000 years, and very effective even where the water levels are low. The animals, often camels, walk in a circle turning a horizontal wheel which is geared to a vertical wheel which carries a string of buckets which discharge their water into the channel. We have tried this method of irrigation but we have found it extremely difficult to get bullocks that will walk round in a circle. Draught animals such as cart bullocks or irrigation bullocks are creatures of habit and always want to do the same thing over and over again. As most of bullocks here had been trained to run down a slope, drawing up the bucket and then to move back to let it down again, we found it very difficult or impossible to change their habits. But the coming of electricity makes us independent of draught animals for irrigation. We keep a pair of bullocks for our cart and for ploughing and cows and buffaloes for milking, but use electricity for irrigation.

Unfortunately, as the population has grown, more and more water has been pumped from the earth. More wells have been dug and the wells have been made deeper and deeper. We are now irrigating from a depth of 90 feet and the general situation is causing anxiety. For this reason we have decided not to grow rice in future years. It was with some hesitation that we took this decision because rice takes a great deal of water as it has to grow until it starts to ripen standing in water. But it is the pride of every good farmer to have a flourishing rice crop and, if possible, provide his family's needs for the year as well as a good income. In fact rice, which is the staff of life here, as wheat is in the Northern hemisphere, is considered as something sacred. However we

felt that we must keep most of the water for our bananas and coconuts which give us a continual income as well as food for our patients.

The question may be raised as to why we cannot conserve more water. There are many places in South India where a large artificial lake has been made to keep water through the dry period but this is only possible at lower levels where the water can collect without seeping away. We are situated on a very gradual slope where this is not possible. Our water flows underground through permeable beds of sand. The water in our well rises to a certain level each day when we discontinue pumping but this level gets lower and lower as the dry months, May to September, pass. Imagine that you are standing by a stream which is always flowing and that you can dip out a certain amount of water as the stream passes you but you can not stop it flowing and therefore you can not conserve it but must just take what you need for use. This stream is actually underground but the principle is the same and that is why in this area there is very often anxiety about water supplies. All the same in spite of many changes and periodic droughts, we have managed for the past 27 years to keep crops growing on our land.

INDIA YEAR

The year 1991 was chosen to be India Year and tourists were encouraged to "Visit India Now!" but the Gulf War had not been expected or allowed for and naturally when it started the number of tourists from Europe and America fell drastically. Although India was pledged to remain neutral, and although very tight security was imposed on air travel from Europe and America, the number of tourists continued to fall and hundreds of thousands of airline workers lost their jobs. There remains of course much tourism within India and also from other Asian countries.

Now that the war has ended, it seems very likely that the deficiency will to some extent be made up. Tourism is expected in any normal year to bring rewards to countless rickshaw men, taxi drivers, handicraft shop owners, guides, cooks, and hotel servants as well as to the big hotel owners themselves. Here in South India January and February are the favoured months for visitors as the weather is relatively cool and pleasant without much wind or dust, and the countryside looks green and flourishing. But later in the year the weather can also be quite pleasant, especially in the months of August and September.

Last year we at Seva Nilayam had an idea to arrange an informal study tour for some of our visitors. During the course of a year we receive many letters from friends abroad, some of who want to work as volunteers in our medical centre. Others have in some way felt the enchantment of India and perhaps others again simply want to travel and see as much of the world as possible before settling down to college studies or daily work. We realised that some of these people did not know what they were really looking for. South Indians are the most hospitable of people and the travellers found they could collect invitations to private homes very easily, but possibly it was not always rewarding or even wise to follow these up, and much time and travel could be wasted by them.

The treasures of India are inexhaustible for those who know how to find them. I could argue that it would be more profitable to stay in one place and to try to penetrate deeply into this world of ancient tradition and culture, and to learn something about the social changes that are coming in India and the disappearance of some aspects of the old life. However, I know that most people visiting India feel that it is like a treasure house opened in front of them, and they want to

see and experience as much as they possibly can in the two or three moths that they are able to stay.

We were not able to put this idea into practice in 1990, possibly because we did not give it enough publicity or explain it sufficiently. Now we still have before us 9 months of 1991 and we are willing to go farther with this plan if we find there is a response. Our purpose will be to learn about the real lives of Indian people. To take one example, we would like to show what the life of a fisherman is, what it means to be out all night in a catamaran – a craft that is nothing but logs tied together – and to be in competition with well-equipped motor boats. We would like to show how tea is picked and something of the skill that is necessary to keep the bushes shapely and productive for even 70 years or more. We would like to show how lemons, oranges and the huge jackfruit are grown on the slopes of the Kodai Hills and the coffee plantations in between them. We would like to show the ideas that have been worked out at Gandhigram for the conservation of energy, and especially the Gobar gas plant, which produces methane gas from cow dung to help save fuel and prevent the destruction of the forests. We would like to show some of the many crafts and occupations that have been opened for women, especially for the destitute and those unemployed on farms because of drought. We would like to show what is being done for the handicapped, especially for children and leprosy patients. This catalogue could be extended indefinitely, but we would like to strike a balance between work and recreation. We should have to reckon with the monsoon seasons., because Tamil Nadu and Kerala have their rains at different times. The Southwest monsoon starts in Ceylon about the end of May and travels north, passing through Bombay and ending in Assam, whereas the Northeast monsoon starts with cyclones in the Bay of Bengal about September and travels south till it reaches Madras and other parts of Tamil Nadu in August and September, and we might arrange a tour of Kerala in October or November. Our idea is to use Seva Nilayam as a base, and the participants could begin at Seva Nilayam by spending about 3 days there; they could then leave any luggage they did not require for the tour at Seva Nilayam and they could possibly come back to Seva Nilayam for a few days rest at some further point in the tour. We would be able to provide a guide who would travel with them and explain what they were seeing. We think that for a beginning, five people plus the guide would be sufficient. The group would travel by public transport, and this alone would give them an idea of conditions in India.

We think that a programme of this sort would be attractive to young people who would not mind a fairly strenuous trip. Older people would probably prefer to have more leisure in comfortable hotels, but there is no need to exclude the over-fifty if they are genuinely interested. We would not be willing to arrange a tour in December, January or February because in these months we often welcome old friends of Seva Nilayam who we have known for many years. But apart from this, we can keep our plans fairly flexible until the final dates are decided.

Organised by Village Service trust in conjunction with Seva Nilayam.

EDUCATING THE DOCTOR

In the past, and that may mean a hundred years ago or more, the country doctor use to have his rounds and visit his patients. Of course only people of standing and substance could ask for a doctor's visit but I would think that servants and farm workers might get some share of the doctor's attention while he was visiting. But for rest of the population there may have been little besides country remedies. The way of life, even in the houses of great merchants, seems to have been abstemious. Before the hills of India were planted with tea and coffee, people had only rice water flavoured with lime juice or tamarind to drink. Many people claim that their grand parents

and great grand parents were much healthier than the old people of today. I am not able to answer for this although, of course, I know that modern antibiotics and surgical skills can now save many desperately ill patients who would otherwise be lost. The doctor's visit of course was undertaken in some horse-drawn vehicle and the roads did not have macadamised surfaces. These old houses were not put up in a matter of months as they would be today. When the landowner felt that he was ready to begin building he would buy suitable logs and they would lie seasoning for a few years. Then he would choose the stone and have it dressed by the local stone cutters and then without haste walls would be raised. This would be a joint family house, there would be a large central hall and rooms opening off it so that each son, when he married, could have his private life. This was a way of life which has almost disappeared and the country doctor no longer goes on his rounds but waits for patients to come to his modern well appointed clinic. It is not for me to argue that the old ways were the good ways but of one point I am sure: the doctor used to know his patients. He knew their way of life, their houses, their fields, their relationships, their occupations, their virtues and their vices. Today it is very rare for a doctor to see anything of the daily life and home conditions of the patients. One after another during the busy hours of the day patients come to him, their troubles are diagnosed and they receive the appropriate treatment.

Now, what I want to say is that all medical questions are social questions and that very often doctors are unable to treat patients effectively because they do not know the social conditions.

Recently, in the radio feature entitled "Science in Action" I heard a very interesting account of an invention by a research worker through which mothers treating outbreaks of diarrhoea and dysentery could obtain clean water. And it is now known that babies and small children suffering from diarrhoea and dysentery die from dehydration, that is, loss of body fluids, rather than from the actual infection. The modern remedy is to give a solution of salt and sugar or even simply water in large quantities to replace the body fluids and it is wonderful to see how children revive when this is done.

The research worker realized that in an emergency many mothers could obtain only dirty or contaminated water. He then hit on a very clever idea: he invented a bag of a material through which water could pass by osmosis. Osmosis is the means by which plants draw in their nourishment, always in solution, through the root-hairs, and it depends on there being a higher concentration of salts in solution on one side of the membrane than on the other. It is found that water passing through this membrane by osmosis is pure and absolutely free from any bacteria so the mother could fill one side of the bag with any water and would find over night that perfectly clean water had accumulated on the other side of the bag. This is a very clever idea, and good thinking, but I would question where the bags would be kept. They might be distributed to village mothers to keep but my guess is that the mothers in a panic would fly off to a doctor for an injection, or if the distance was too far would helplessly let the child die. Any teaching on the use of the bag would be forgotten or would seem too unreal for the mother to place any confidence in it. In any village there might be no serious outbreak of dysentery for perhaps a year and the bag might be lost or it might be found to have a rat hole in it or be taken by the children for play thing. You have to experience life in one room with several children to know all the hazards of trying to keep any object, especially one which is unused for a long period, from destruction or misuse. I feel that this bag might be useful in time of emergency if kept in some central place but it would take a good deal of organization and management to use it well. The whole set up of village life makes this difficult. People do not distinguish between clean and dirty water unless it is much discoloured or has dirt floating on it. There are many other ways in which well-meant plans can be frustrated.

An American doctor who was visiting here was treating a very serious case which could lead to amputation of a foot. He was very anxious that the patient should attend the clinic with absolute regularity. I knew very well that village patients were inclined to think that one day would be as good as another for attendance at hospital. So I said, "How will he know when to come?" The doctor said, "We can send him a post card". I asked, "Can he read?" It had not crossed the American doctor's mind that there would be a patient who could not read although he must have known that the rate of literacy is very low in India. If an illiterate patient receives a letter he may just put it by until he chances to meet the schoolmaster or another educated person and by that time the information in it might be quite useless.

In Madurai next to the General Hospital there is an admirable institution called *Anbu Illam* which will take in patients and give them food and place to sleep if they have to wait for admission to the hospital. We have directed many patients there to their great benefit but there are many other cases which we lose sight of entirely either because they cannot find the place or because they are frightened by the sight of the hospital and wander off who knows where. This happens although we take every precaution, giving them full directions, a letter addressed in Tamil to *Anbu Illam* and their bus fare if necessary. Sometimes we make arrangements for our visitors or friends to take them to *Anbu Illam* on a certain day. The patient may come on another day when there is no one to guide him. I could go on for pages listing the obstacles to medical work arising from lack of education, lack of hygiene, literacy or self confidence as a member of human society. But I think have said enough to show that medicine is a social problem.

PRIMEVAL INNOCENTS

About five miles south of Seva Nilayam there is a temple. This used to be a very quiet place surrounded by trees, but today it has become very popular and buses are carrying loads of devotees or sight-seers to it, especially on new moon days which are kept as festivals. Much has changed, but there are some people living nearby whose lives have scarcely changed at all. They are tribal people, of whom there is only a very small enclave of a few hundred, little known to the outside world. But there are probably thousands of tribes, many of them better known, but still segregated and having their own traditions and culture, in this vast country of India.

The particular tribe which ranges through the jungles just beyond this temple are Palliyars. There is an area of hill paths, high rocks, and a few waterfalls which is their dwelling place and hunting ground, lying between the valley in which Seva Nilayam stands and the open and fertile Varusanadu valley. In the whole of India there are many large areas of jungle inhabited by tribes, but this particular group of people lives to itself and does not have dealings even with the numerous tribes surrounding the Wild Life Sanctuary at Periyar Lake. There seems to be no special reason for this isolation beyond lack of motive to link up with others; such people know nothing of the outside world. I once saw a woman of the Palliyars wearing a hammer and sickle badge and when I asked why she was wearing it she told me that a communist once came there and said: "Wear this and when the revolution comes you will be safe," but what revolution was or when it would come she had no idea.

These hills are teeming with small wild animals which can be snared but the ordinary food of the people consists only of the root of a creeper which can be boiled. When I wanted to taste the root they very readily brought some. They seemed to regard it as something very important but I found it unpalatable and tasteless, also rather glutinous. When someone said to them, "Do you ever cook meat?" their answer was: "You bring it, we'll cook it".

They tell us that at one time their number were much greater but they had an epidemic of cholera and many died. I asked one woman what she did to survive and she said she lay down near a spring of water and she kept drinking continuously and ultimately the disease left her.

These people are slowly becoming more integrated with the villages. They speak Tamil, although they must at one time have had a language which is either disused or becoming lost. They now go more to the villages where they exchange honey, which they take from the rocks, for grain. In India, all processes of integration take a very long time owing to the adherence to caste and to discrimination against those without caste.

Now I have mentioned a dwindling remnant inhabiting a tiny corner among the hills of South India, disregarded by everyone and without any future, but if you go to the Nilgiri Hills or to Bihar or Rajasthan you can find many populous tribes with their own art and culture. In the Nilgiris, for example, I have visited the Panniyars, the Badegas, and the Thodas, and each of them has a very different way of living. The Thodas are a very fine looking people who practise embroidery and other crafts and are much studied by anthropologists while the Badegas have become quite shrewd business people and the Panniyars have remained very simple. The government has tried to settle them on the land by giving them two acres per family, and while some of them have developed nice little holdings growing tea or lemon grass or spices, others have simply walked off and left their holdings. From time immemorial people had lived in the Nilgiri Hills without doing any fixed cultivation. They had no sense of property and simply cultivated what land they required. The Nilgiris had not been planted with tea because access to them was them barred by an area which was highly malarial; but when the swamps were drained the Nilgiris were terraced without any thought to the tribal people who were thereby dispossessed to make way for tea and potatoes. The tribal people were exploited as cheap labour and it was considered quite fair to cheat them. When there was sugar rationing some of the people brought their cards to the provision shop. The shop man would simply take them, and give them a little sugar, with which they went away quite happily while the shop man kept their ration card.

I can deal here only with tribes in the southern part of India and there must be thousands of tribes who are quite outside my knowledge. Some of them in Rajasthan are so numerous that they form an integrated society. They have developed a very individual style of art. Some of them have very large country fairs where young men go to choose their brides, but any tribal society is vulnerable. People have been living for centuries in thickly wooded areas without roads, sheltered from modern civilisation, but now there come wood merchants to buy the trees, and to get the trees out they drive a road through the forest, and along the road come the moneylender, the arrack maker and all kinds of swindlers and tricksters. An innocent society is fair game to them. The government of India has a heavy responsibility to carry towards the tribes under its dominion.

A BABY AND A TELESCOPE – PART TWO

In August 1990 I wrote one of these letters from Seva Nilayam which was entitled *A baby and a telescope*. I was inspired to write it by the radio news that a space telescope had been launched and was expected to send back some exceedingly valuable pictures to the earth, showing aspects of the universe which man had never seen before. Just at that time we were very concerned about the case of a child who had been born an apparently hopeless cripple. The local government doctor appealed to me to do something to help the mother get surgical treatment for

this baby as it appeared the government hospital in Madurai did not intend to do any surgery and was only putting the mother off from week to week. It struck me then what an immense gap existed between the scientific and technologically advanced sections of our society and the impoverished and illiterate village people of our locality. It is hard to find words to describe this gap. It is not that I have any objection to the building of space telescopes but I only have a wish that more could be done to bridge this gap.

But it was only after we started to investigate the case of this baby, who name is Vijayakumar, that we realised the extent and difficulty of the task we had taken upon ourselves. This baby had double club foot and double talipes (that is, the feet were turned sideways upon the ankles) and also his hands turned backways upon the wrists. But the mother clearly loved this child which was her only one, and the child also seemed very affectionate towards the mother. We had promised to do something about this case.

It was clearly not going to be possible to get an operation done free of charge at the government hospital. At least seven operations would be needed and only the chief surgeon at a hospital run by a Christian foundation was willing to undertake the task, and even he sent us a letter warning of the difficulties ahead. But having started we could not draw back. It is now twelve months since this task was commenced. At the beginning treatment had to be postponed a number of times because the baby was underweight and developed fever. Slowly we managed to get him growing normally and fit for operation. There was always a danger that the baby would have a relapse, and if he died we should be blamed for undertaking surgery at all, but we knew that the doctors were taking very strict precautions and we had to consider what his possible future would be if nothing was done. He would never be able to stand up or walk and probably not even able to sit up. As the family were quite uneducated and did not even understand the meaning of education, Vijayakumar's future would be to lie on some kind of truck and be wheeled around bus stands or railway stations for the purpose of begging. A hopelessly crippled child is seen by many uneducated families as a source of income, and they may even be unwilling to have the child made to look more normal. The fact that Vijayakumar's mother kept all her appointments faithfully, and followed the doctors' advice, encouraged us to hope that this baby at least would escape the fate of being used as a beggar's mascot and encouraged us to go through with the treatment.

We are now nearing the last operation. The baby's legs are straight and his hands will, we hope, be capable of normal use. He is putting on weight and is happy, but there is still some way to go yet.

We just had to take the plunge and say that we would go through with this, whatever the cost or however long the treatment. We have had regular bills from the hospital and we have to manage to meet this out of our general funds but we have been very gratified that a number of sympathisers came forward to offer subscriptions. One of our subscribers wrote that he himself had been born with double club foot which had been corrected by surgery. The total bill looks like amounting to Rs 20,000, but we have already been helped for part of this and more is promised. But what is that, when the alternative is to condemn an apparently bright and intelligent child to the life of a helpless beggar (and we know by sad experience that is what happens). It is only now that I have felt able to write this letter when we seem to be nearing the end of a year-long precarious and anxious journey. Although at the very best, there must still exist the enormous gap between the baby and the telescope we are happy that the resources of the most modern surgery could be used to lessen this gap by even an infinitesimal fraction, and to bring happiness to a mother and her child.

A CHRISTMAS APPEAL

No, not an appeal for money! We never appeal directly for funds, as our many good friends know us and support us, but this is something quite different.

When I went to Calcutta I was told that I ought not to miss seeing the Victoria Memorial. I felt like replying that I had heard enough about Queen Victoria to last my lifetime. But the Victoria Memorial is not all about Queen Victoria, far from it. True, her marble statue stands in the centre of it, as she was in her early years when she ascended the throne of England. The later statue, in her bulky middle age, yet dignified, sits outside the entrance, but the Memorial is far more than that. It is a unique Museum of British India, containing many historic documents, relics and portraits of Generals and Princes, and many paintings by artists of the East India Company.

In one room there are gathered the portraits of those leaders of the end of British rule. There is Rajaram Mohan Rai, and the poet Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote the Indian National Anthem, Mahatma Gandhi, of course, and Mothilal Nehru, the father of Jawarhalal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India. As I stood there I felt that I was in the presence of true greatness and this feeling has remained with me till today. It is now 44 years since the labours of these men bore fruit and India passed peacefully into the new era of freedom.

India then, as always, was the home of many religions, castes and tribes. The largest group was, of course, the Hindus, but even after Partition from Pakistan there remained a very large Muslim minority. There were Christians, Sikhs, Parsees, Jains, Buddhists, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of tribes. Nehru was a highly educated man and belonged to the modern world. He saw quite clearly that if the country was to have peace within its borders no one of these would have any right to be dominant. The Indian state had to be a secular state, that is, while allowing freedom to all religions it had not to be tied to any one of them but to treat them all as equals. In the eyes of the state people must be seen as human beings without any label attached, and all must have equal rights before the law. Government holidays have been allotted to these varying religions roughly on the basis of the number of their adherents. The Muslim holidays of Ramadan, Bakrid, Muharram, Meeladi Nabi are bank holidays. The birthday of Buddha is celebrated and the Jains similarly honour Mahaveera; and for the Christians Christmas Day and Good Friday are bank holidays. Nehru hoped that by keeping to these principles of equality the adherents of these various creeds would live at peace, allowing India to enter into the modern world and play its part in the family of nations.

I do not usually discuss politics in these Letters. They are intended to describe the daily life of ordinary people, especially village people, in India and they contain many descriptions of things I have seen and known myself in the 27 years I have lived here, but now I feel that for once I must break this rule. The recent history of India, as all the world knows, is one of violence, bloodshed and assassination. It is also a history of communal violence and we have experienced our share of that here, when there was a feud between the Thevars and Pallars. The killing, looting and burning of huts reached such proportions that for six days no vehicle of any kind dared to travel along the road from Aundipatty to Seva Nilayam. Our clinic which had been serving about 200 patients daily dropped to about 40, just the neighbours who could reach us by walking across the fields. The rioting was quelled by police firing and a number of people (we do not know how many) were killed. I want to cry out that India is throwing away the precious heritage of those great men who fought for freedom, but I am nothing and and nobody and my voice is not heard.

Then, on Christmas night, I join with others in keeping the birthday of the Christ Child. Very many of those who throng the crowded churches at midnight on Christmas Eve are not Christians, but they are attracted because Indians love festivals, and they also love children, and the image of the mother and child speaks to their deeper feelings. They are mostly of the labouring classes, house servants, market coolies and dwellers in the congested slums of South Indian cities. We welcome all to keep the feast. May India cast out fear and hatred and approach more nearly to the ideals of the architects of its freedom.

1992

AFTER THE MISSIONARIES

When Seva Nilayam was started in 1963, most of the work was done by volunteers. At that time India was still strongly influenced by the British Raj, and British subjects did not even need a visa to enter the country. There were volunteer agencies in Britain, America, Sweden and a few other countries and they were conducted in an organised way. The would-be volunteers were interviewed and, if found suitable, were asked to sign a contract for one year or two years. On the part of Seva Nilayam they were given the most comfortable accommodation that we could offer, but that is not saying much, because we were too poor to provide the amenities the volunteers might have expected; but they on their part were usually very adaptable, willing to rough it, and anxious to get down to work. The agency provided funds for a month's holiday half way through the term so that the volunteers could see something of India, but they were expected to return to the place they were employed. Not all of them stayed the course; in some cases their health was not good enough or they had some family commitments which prevented their carrying through to the end. But those who did stay performed some very valuable work. Our water supply system was set up by a Scottish volunteer, working with his own hands; the ring of coconut trees which surrounds our piece of land was planted by an American volunteer. The patients at our first clinic were treated in a very simple way by two Australian nurses. Severely ill patients who could not be treated here were often taken to hospital by one or other of the volunteers, who travelled with them on the bus and saw that they got to the right hospital and the right department. The missionaries, especially those belonging to the Swedish Lutheran Mission, were our friends and did much to help us.

Today the whole picture has been altered. In what follows I am not criticising the Indian Government. After Independence the Government of India was in control and it was discovered that there were hundreds of bogus charities which were doing no work but collecting money from abroad. There were so-called orphanages which were not sheltering any orphans but simply providing a house for the family which had set them up. But the trouble was more far-reaching than that. There was much money coming into the country which was not accounted for and could easily be used for political purposes. It was decided that the missionaries must go. This was not because they were Christians but because their employees – teachers, pastors, doctors, and their staff – were paid from outside the country.

In South India there are large and impressive churches of many Christian denominations. In fact there were Christian communities in the southern States before any existed in England, and although there are no written records, legend tells that they were founded by the Apostle Thomas, whose body is believed to lie under the Cathedral of San Thome which stands close by the sea in Madras. If this sounds unlikely we must remember that trade within the Roman Empire was very wide spread and generally safe. Roman coins can be picked up in Kerala, the most southerly state in the Indian Union, and the name Thomas has for many centuries been a favoured name in these areas.

We remember with friendship and gratitude all our former friends in the missions. Before the coming of air travel it was not possible for those who came to India to return for a holiday more than about once in seven years, so many of them grew to love India as a second home and threw themselves into the work wholeheartedly.

It was of course inevitable that the work of the missions, with their schools, orphanages, and hospitals, should in time be taken over by Indians, and with the spread of education in India there are now sufficient pastors, teachers and doctors to take the place of former missionaries, but I have heard many stories of the early missionaries which, for heroism, should not be forgotten.

Foreign travellers are now granted visas very easily, but only for three months, with a possible period of another three months. The only exceptions to this rule are for people who have been invited by the Indian Government for important work; but it should be quite possible, with proper planning, to see as much of India as anyone can take in within six months. When I first came to India I had nothing official except a little cash box and a note book to keep account of all money received and its spending. The Indian Government is right to protect itself. If we listen to the radio news daily we can get a picture of the ramifications of international conspiracies, and we cannot deny the right of any government to protect itself; but the amount of book work we have to do today would have been too much for me to undertake had I known about it beforehand.

But there is another side to this picture: we are now allowed to employ only Indian staff. We are living in a rural area where there are many young people whose families are too poor to offer them prospects in life. Some have only been to day school, but there are others whose parents have been able to save enough money to send them for higher training in the hope that they will get a good job. But jobs are scarce, and many of them are very glad to get a job in our clinic although we cannot offer anything like the salary that might be expected by one with a degree. Among the young people we employ we can see a big difference in intelligence as well as in faithfulness and general understanding of the world. There is as much undiscovered talent in a row of thatched huts as there is in a busy commercial city street, but few people ever think of that, because labourers are just labourers. What more can be expected of them?

One of our employees took a course as a fitter but he did not get enough work. There is a tailor's shop near his home and when he had no work he used to go and sit there and watch the tailor. As a result we found when we employed him that he knew very well how to use a sewing machine and even to mend one that had gone wrong. He is now very useful to us, not only in our clinic but in repairs of our electricity services and our irrigation pumps. Another one has a natural talent for drawing, although he never had any lessons, and he can draw subjects as different as bullocks working at an irrigation well or a smiling baby. Another one can do mason's work with a mastery and facility which he can only have acquired by watching local masons at work.

There are many stories of buried treasure and the hunt for it but there is only one real treasure in the world. It is not gold or silver but the human intelligence. We look on it as one or our most important tasks, to get further training for those of our employees who show the aptitude for it. Of course if they are useful here it may be very hard to spare them, but we know that it is something we must do.

A NEW TURN AND NEW PROSPECTS

On the 17th of December 1988 Seva Nilayam celebrated 25 years of work for the local people in Aundipatty and its surroundings. A table was set out under the coconut trees and there was an enthusiastic audience of more than 200 including various Doctors, who served us chiefly as consultants, local farmers, housewives and of course children. We had come to this area from a very small village near Madras and with the help of several foreign volunteers (who were freely

allowed in India at that time but now only get tourist visas) we had put up very simple but adequate buildings and we had continued to help any cases in need of medical and surgical treatment, with special attention to child health care. All treatment was given free according to our constitution. The patients were asked to put a very small sum of money (at first 25 paisa but later raised to 50 paisa along with rising prices) and we have never departed from this rule. This contribution was simply a token to make patients realise that registration and treatment at Seva Nilayam were of some importance.

How did we manage to grow in size and influence, put up the buildings required, and feed our staff? We never needed to make direct appeals for money, but we had many friends in England and America and in various countries of Europe. We answered every letter meticulously and found that, contrary to expectation, there were many people eager to write and receive letters and above all to get some real knowledge about South India. People really wanted to know how the local people lived, and what were their needs and difficulties, what were the local crops, how was the water supply (always a difficult question in tropical countries), what were the prospects before school boys and students, how much unemployment was there, and what kind of life they look forward to.

As we became more widely known we received donations from a number of agencies including Oxfam and from a number of churches. We received supplies of milk powder from Switzerland and the enthusiastic co-operation of the pupils of the Inter-community School, Zurich. We made our Baby Clinic a top priority and besides giving advice on nutrition we were able to arrange for operations for various defects and deformities.

28 years is a long time and we are growing older. People naturally began to wonder what would happen and whether we could carry on in the future and us all our assets profitably.

In the early days, in one of our newsletters, I drew the picture of a tree. It was a very sturdy tree with many thick branches and an unbending trunk; such a tree must be of slow growth and must need patience before its full strength can be attained. We adopted this tree as a symbol of Seva Nilayam because we felt confident that it would stand in the future. We resisted all attempts to make Seva Nilayam into an ordinary clinic, charging for medicines and ignoring the many needs of the people, which go far beyond the simple medical treatment with which we started.

One of our chief concerns had been to stop the spread of Tuberculosis which took many lives including those of children and young people as well as the old. We started with high hopes that we could make a Tuberculosis-free area within two miles of Seva Nilayam but we were baffled and could become very despondent. There are several reasons for this. One is the pressure of work. This is a plantation area growing tea and coffee and many kinds of hill fruits; naturally higher wages can be obtained on the plantations but sometimes at the price of health or even of life itself.

We always ask people to tell us if they are going away for work but they seldom remember to tell us or to take the medicines which we offer. There is also a lack of responsibility and no realisation of the great difficult of curing pulmonary TB. People will go away because of a family quarrel or personal business and will neglect their treatment. So even after all these years we have found new cases of TB constantly appearing.

It was when we felt the most baffled by this insidious and intractable disease that we received some hope about the way forward. The Ryder-Cheshire Mission had been working in

North India to fight Tuberculosis and we felt their ideals were very similar to ours and that we could co-operate with them without losing our identity or our readiness to serve all who need. But we realised that without extra help we were going to be defeated in the fight against TB. It took two years before the Ryder-Cheshire Mission felt ready to offer us co-operation and financial help but it was worth waiting for. With their resources they can bear the cost of a full and comprehensive Anti-Tubercular service which can include its own X-rays, full coverage of the area and probably an in-patient ward and a medical team well equipped for the task. We are now in the process of interviewing candidates for a new Director for Seva Nilayam, as for several years I have wanted to retire, and we are confident that the person we will choose will be able to enter into the spirit of Seva Nilayam and will work closely with Mr Seetharama Reddy, who has been with us from the beginning, and that even when the tree unfolds many new leaves it will still remain the same tree.

BRIGHTEST IS BEST

About a mile south of Seva Nilayam there is a temple. It is a quiet place and it is very good to go there in the evening to watch the sunset. There are some other points of interest about it. At the side entrance there are large figures of two strange beasts which have long bodies like crocodiles and paws like lions. There is also a very attractive carving of a dancing girl. In one wall some very minute bees have been established for years. They are very small, some scarcely larger than mosquitoes, and the surplus honey sometime seeps thorough the masonry; but it would be impossible to get at the honey comb. In short it is a really quiet and interesting place and I recommended an artist friend our ours to go there to watch the sunset. I was afterwards very disappointed in the water colour he produced because he had not at all caught the richness of the sunset. When I showed my disappointment he said, “I am not going to paint in glorious technicolour.” I said, “But South India is in glorious technicolour.” You can’t get away from it. The love of colour is everywhere, in the street, shops, villages and towns, and indeed in nature itself. In the monsoon time I have seen rows of trees against the sky with the sunset glowing behind them like a forest fire, or I have travelled on the back of a motor cycle entering a sea of pure gold in which only purple mountains can be seen to show that we are still on the earth.

Seva Nilayam has a tailoring section in which we do handicraft work based on the use of Kapok (silk cotton) which is the produce of a tree found all over this area and from which we make quilts, cushions and padded jackets. I encounter many difficulties in the choice of colours. If I order a pale rose I may get a bright cherry colour, or if I want a very soft green I get one that rivals the green parakeet which inhabits our gardens. If I complain about this I am told there is no other colour in stock and if I want any very light or soft shades it is necessary to go to one of the more expensive shops which cater for foreign visitors.

When you have lived in South India some time your eye becomes accustomed to this brightness and you can see that it is really right and proper to the surroundings. Women and young girls wear sarees of a bright red with blouses to match and no hint of any contrasting colour, or they may wear brilliant turquoise blue or parrot green. The taste may be crude but in the air and light of south India it is effective.

You have only to go to a city like Madurai to see this love of bright colours reflected in the lives of the people. Rickshaw drivers and lorry drivers may themselves live in houses which are ramshackle and little better than slums, but their relationship with the vehicle by which they make their living is one of pride and, I might even say, of reckless abandonment to the love of

brightness. Rickshaws are decorated with mirrors and brightly coloured seats. They may carry pictures of film stars and they have brightly coloured plastic brushes on the axles of the wheels to catch the mud. I know for a fact that one of these decorated rickshaws was bought by tourists and taken to America.

Sugar-cane syrup is a delicious drink in the hot weather and it is pressed in a machine like a mangle and served out in glasses on the spot. These machines may also be decorated with portraits of film stars or with slogans by which the government hopes to popularise family planning such as "We two, ours two" or "Be Indian, buy Indian"; all of these of course in the brightest of colours. But there is nothing to rival the decorated lorry. The cabin may hold pictures of the gods and the sides may be embellished with panels depicting mountains, rivers and lakes, and there may be swans or blue-birds, and garlands of flowers, and of course the usual slogans emphasising what the owner considers right behaviour on the road.

I believe that there are no swans in India so how did they get in the popular decorations? Some years ago there could be seen in some of the hotels framed pictures in the very worst traditions of Victorian art. These must have come from the households of some missionaries or perhaps some of the foreign technical workers required by India at the time. I have seen paintings depicting languorous ladies floating on lakes fanned by beautiful children. Some of these pictures would show white swans and even blue-birds, so I think that this is where the inspiration has come from. I do not know how many of the pictures remain but they have given the inspiration for various unreal and totally imaginary landscapes and this has been transferred to even the horse-drawn *jutkas* and later still to lorries and rickshaws.

For many of the people of South India life is hard and food may be poor but the love of brightness is indestructible. It has created a genuine pop art for which the people have taken beauty where they have found it and made it their own.

STAMPS

A boy of twelve was helping with the work at Seva Nilayam. His job was to take the foreign stamps off letters and trim them neatly. We discovered to our amusement that he thought the stamps were being taken off the letters so that they could be used again. We laughed at his simplicity but how many of us really know how our postal system works? I freely confess my ignorance. Supposing I sent a letter from India to America. I have to buy stamps at the Indian post office, but when the letter arrives in America it would seem as if the American post office has to deliver it without charge, because I do not have to buy an American stamp. How does it work? I know that there is a Postal Union which in some way has to balance out the income and expenditure but I must admit I have no information about this. At one time, Tibet was not a member of the Postal Union and if you wanted to send a letter from Tibet to India, you had to know someone at the border station who would receive the letter, remove the cover and put it in a new cover stamped with an Indian stamp. I shall be very glad if anyone can enlighten me about the Postal Union.

Until the 19th century there was no way of sending letters but by personal contact. If you wanted to send a letter to another country you had to find somebody who was going to that country and you had to rely on the goodness of that person to take your letter and get it to its destination. Roland Hill conceived the idea of the Penny Post in 1840, and it transformed all our expectations of Postal Services. (Of course, a penny was worth much more than it is now.) The

first postage stamp printed was the 'Penny Black' which had a rather blurred and inartistic picture of Queen Victoria. The new postal system was a great success and in fact appears to have given better service than we can expect now, as letters posted in the morning could be delivered the same evening and there was no Sunday holiday. This of course raised the whole question of hours and wages which I cannot discuss in this letter. Now, of course, we grumble a lot if we think the post is too slow, and now we have air mail as well as surface mail, and we expect our letter to reach its destination in any part of the world in just a few days. We have no idea at all what our ancestors had to put up with if they wished to communicate with some member of the family who had gone perhaps to Australia. In fact in many cases it was goodbye for ever to the emigrant.

Since the invention of the Penny Post developments have been rapid. Anything that is scarce has a value if people want it or can be persuaded to want it. A postage stamp is a very small piece of paper which can easily be lost, but once people realised that stamps could have a value far exceeding their original face value, the habit of making stamp collections grew up and lucky collectors who were awake to their chances were able to build up collections worth many thousands of pounds, so the value of the stamp has nothing at all to do with the pieces of paper they are printed on. During the war, when the future seemed very uncertain, some people put their money into buying stamps as these are easily portable and may keep their value even if a currency becomes worthless as the German Mark did.

There is another aspect to stamp collecting. It has great educative value, and children who become stamp collectors will learn a lot about the geography, history, flora and fauna of the countries from which they are collecting and they can get keenly excited about 'swapping', that is, exchanging stamps with others. We sell all the stamps we can collect at the Cottage Craft shop in Kodaikanal and we can never get enough to satisfy the demand. We charge five rupees for a packet of twenty stamps and we select these very carefully so that we do not get two or more stamps from any one country. The Post Offices of many countries have now become aware of the possibilities of selling 'First Day Covers', that is, where any very important person or event is to be commemorated the Post Office brings out commemorative issues of stamps already fixed to a cover and usually with a write up explaining the commemoration. We may commemorate events like the Declaration of the Rights of Man during the French Revolution, the founding of some great hospital or public institution, the accession of a reigning monarch, the death anniversary of a famous poet, explorer, writer, or any subject or event of national importance. The First Day Covers are sold at the face value of the stamps affixed to them but if they are preserved carefully they will, in time, acquire scarcity value which will depend very much on the course of history, but this may take many years. The First Day Cover is not only a thing of beauty but an investment which may in the future bring in many times it original value.

Oxfam is a very well known agency which does an immense amount of good, helping the economies of poor countries, and the disadvantaged in many countries, the victims of war and persecution, or of natural disasters. A writer for Oxfam was complaining recently that every day in any big city, or throughout the country, thousands of stamps are thrown in to the waste paper basket and burnt. If collected and sorted these stamps could do a lot to help the funds of Oxfam or indeed many other agencies, but mostly they are a dead loss because people do not know their value or will not take the very small amount of trouble needed to save them and pass them on. We in our small way benefit from the stamps collected for us. But we could sell many more than we do, if people would only remember to keep them for us. Often it may be just a matter of having a receptacle in which to put them instead of taking the easiest course and throwing them in to the rubbish. Please think about this.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

On the 17th December 1988 Seva Nilayam celebrated its 25th anniversary. This project was started as a voluntary organisation for helping poor patients and giving free medical treatment without any distinction of caste, creed or race, and it has meticulously followed this principle. Seva Nilayam grew from very small beginnings and during those years we were greatly helped and encouraged by Martin Henry, managing director of Madura Mills, later Madura Coats, and his wife Margaret Henry. We have many benefits to thank them for, but not the least was that on the occasion of a dinner party, Margaret Henry placed me next to Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, founder of the Cheshire Homes and, of course, famous for his war record which earned him the Victoria Cross, DSO and DFC. I cannot now remember the details of our conversation, but I do know that I felt very strongly the attraction of a kindred spirit. So I felt honoured and deeply interested when Leonard Cheshire expressed his desire to work for the cure of tuberculosis in south India and to use Seva Nilayam as his starting point. This work had already been started in Dehra Dun in the north, but Seva Nilayam could give a foothold from which it could have a beginning in the south.

A few months after my first meeting with Leonard Cheshire I sent him a copy of the Brochure we had printed for our 25th anniversary. On the outer cover of this brochure I had drawn a tree which I have since taken as the symbol of Seva Nilayam. It is a tree of slow growth, but for that reason strong and able to withstand many changes and vicissitudes without losing its identity. This symbol has satisfied me ever since. Leonard Cheshire expressed himself greatly interested in the prospect of future collaboration and he waited until he felt ready to start in southern India. But last year, 1991, he felt that the time was ripe for a closer relationship. The Ryder-Cheshire Foundation approached the leadership of Seva Nilayam, through the Village Service Trust, which was acting as an agency to collect funds for our work, and offered permanent help and support. But unfortunately during this time Leonard Cheshire himself contracted tuberculosis, possibly from one of the patients.

Throughout the years the basic motive of Seva Nilayam has been simplicity. When Leonard Cheshire found something to be done, he simply did it and collected the necessary funds afterwards. It was in this spirit that he began, by taking a dying man into his own home and nursing him until he died. From this beginning he went on to establish the Cheshire Homes which are now looking after people who have no other help and therefore cannot make any return. I myself have found that this principle always works. When I left Mudichur village near Madras to start Seva Nilayam, I had six hundred rupees in the bank and the bank manager said, “You can invest the funds of your institution with us”, not knowing this was all we had. Since then we have never been without the help and support we needed, but now we have come to the point that if any institution is successful in doing the work, it must grow, and in growing it may lose the first impetus which can be transformed into continuing inspiration. The problem for Seva Nilayam was how to make this transformation without losing any of the original spirit.

Ryder-Cheshire Foundation is now willing for this closer co-operation with special reference to our work for tuberculosis. In 1982 we started a special TB clinic at Seva Nilayam with the intention, or at least the hope, of eliminating the disease within a two-mile radius of Seva Nilayam. Our hopes were frustrated both by the conditions of life here and the nature of the work. This is an area of tea and coffee plantations, and people go away from their homes for many months at a time because they can get higher wages on the plantation, but often at the cost of their health or even of their life, because they fail to carry on the treatment which we began. We have involved all our clinic staff in this work and have carried out house to house visiting and village

survey, but we still find new cases constantly arising and we are still left with people who have been totally incapacitated by this disease, so that they cannot even walk the few miles to our clinic and therefore cannot get nourishing food or bed rest.

The Ryder-Cheshire Foundation is willing to give us our own transport and also to build a small in-patient ward for TB patients, and to provide X-ray facilities when the time seems right. This has given us fresh hope and confidence. It has come at a time when Leonard Cheshire himself was seriously ill and unable even to sign his letters. He died on July 31st 1992 at the age of 74 but we are sure that his spirit of direct, personal and ungrudging service will continue in the work he started with the help of his wife Sue Ryder.

[Editor's note: at this point in the list of letters is a letter entitled The Story of Mayandy Pandy. No copy of this letter can be found. Information from former Seva Nilayam staff tells that this letter was about a local teacher, well known to Seva Nilayam, who needed a kidney transplant, and the cost of the medicines required to keep him alive and prevent rejection of the new kidney was beyond his means. Dora wrote about the decision Seva Nilayam made to assist this man with the cost of his treatment.]

1993

RAIN

Rain comes to India through two monsoons, the Southwest and the Northeast. The Southwest monsoon starts some time in May in Ceylon and moves northwards though Kerala reaching Bombay in June or July and ending up in Assam, in the north-east frontier area where Cherrapunji is supposed to be the the rainiest place on earth. It also affects Bangladesh which being mainly low-lying is in constant danger of floods. The Northeast monsoon begins in October and travels down the coast of the Bay of Bengal, often bringing cyclones to the state of Andhra which suffers severely from high winds, floods and loss of crops. Wind-resistant housing has been developed in Andhra, but there is scarcely a year when we do not hear of devastation there. The Northeast monsoon usually strikes coastal areas of Tamil Nadu in October and travels southward to Madras. A meteorologist could tell you much more about the cause of this regular alternation of monsoon that I can.

This year has been one of very freakish behaviour by the monsoons. The Southwest monsoon was delayed by several weeks and cultivators, especially those of the tea plantations, were getting desperate. Then the monsoon struck Colombo with alarming violence, bringing down trees, buildings and electrical installations, and blocking roads. The tea plantations were saved but the cost must have been tremendous. Then it moved on its usual course northward through Kerala but still with great intensity. The local papers carried pictures of telegraph poles with only their tops showing above the flood waters. In Tamil Nadu we were surprised to experience very heavy rain in the first week of October but we found that the wind was still blowing from the south-west and we concluded that this was part of the Southwest monsoon. Then we waited for news of the Northeast monsoon, feeling some foreboding, that we might not get our proper share of the rains, but we were wrong. Before the floods of the Southwest monsoon had time to dry up, the Northeast monsoon struck the west coast with torrential rain and floods.

In this area of Tamil Nadu many of the tea plantations are on steep hill slopes. When the soil became completely saturated with rain, the whole mass started to slide downhill with irresistible force. In the area of Chinnamanur three villages completely disappeared. The loss of life was chiefly among the tea pickers who provide the most of the labour on the plantations.

I have noticed that on many of the older plantations towards Munnar the tea bushes are interplanted at intervals with a silver oak. This very beautiful tree is small, and deeper rooted than the tea bushes and I think that besides providing the light shade which is needed by the tea, it holds the soil and prevents land slides. We have found the same story in many areas of India right down from the Himalayas. When we came here 29 years ago there were many charcoal burners selling this fuel, which was largely used for cooking and washing clothes, but the deforestation has been so serious that is is now illegal to use charcoal. Tree felling is forbidden without a licence but even so trees legitimately cut for building have not been replaced in the area. The land holdings are so small that farmers are afraid to allow any large trees to grow on their land because they cannot allow the field crops to be shaded. In the past five or six years we have witnessed the cutting down of many large and beautiful trees. Now there is a penalty to pay for this short-sightedness. The government has started a wide scale tree replacement policy but the lesson had to be learned at great cost in lives and property. The brighter side of the picture, however, is that we at last have had an adequate monsoon. For the past five or six years rainfall has been

insufficient and the water level has fallen alarmingly. We do not know what the next few years will bring but I have a feeling that light and heavy monsoons go in alternating cycles, so we cannot believe that the water shortage is banished for good. We have to be prepared for other dry years and we have to ensure that a great deal more forethought is exercised and that there is less vandalism and un-perceptive destruction of tree plantations.

LITTLE DROPS OF WATER

India is entirely dependent on the monsoons for rain. Monsoon failure can cause a real famine as happened during the 1940s. About that time, the Young Women's Christian Association were taking an interest in the villages, where many people were drastically short of food. Two of their members went cycling through the countryside and they came upon a village named Mudichur, where they found people sitting about listlessly unable to work and with nothing to eat. It was impossible to feed everybody because they had no lorry loads of relief supplies but there was a little school there and they decided that the best thing they could do was to feed the school children. They engaged a cook and started school meals but of course these were of the simplest and most primitive kind. They continued with this service until the year 1956, when the Indian government started giving school meals. As there was no doctor in the area for many miles, they asked a doctor to give her services and many people came for medical treatment, very often after having travelled several miles on a bullock cart. Those who remember that time tell us that India was importing rice from Brazil.

Since we have been at Seva Nilayam we have always been dependent on the monsoon; some years we have almost nothing, and other years we have periods of very heavy rain; for example, one year we were entirely cut off from the outside world, with no transport and postal services, by the heavy downpours of rain, but on the whole the dry periods have exceeded the wet ones. Perhaps meteorologists could tell us the reason for this.

Owing to the growth of population and also the use of electric pumps the water table has gone down and continues to do so. People have been digging their wells deeper and deeper. One man in this area has gone down more than 100 feet and this is without any machinery but only picks, ropes and baskets. One man whom we have known since the very beginning of Seva Nilayam has spent all his money on well digging and has not found water. The rubble from the well boring has been piled up along the road sides, because there is nowhere else to put it. It looks very unsightly and if another such boring has to be done, I do not see how it can fail to encroach on good agricultural land.

It is now nearly a century since the first Jewish engineers came to Israel at the end of the first World War. Many of then came with nothing but the clothes they stood up in and it was impossible to give them agricultural machinery and separate holdings, so it was then that the idea of drip irrigation came into being. In a dry climate only the minimum water is needed and also the minimum of labour since by turning on one tap a whole orchard can be irrigated. The Israelis have had outstanding success in reclaiming semi-desert areas and they have made a garden of the wilderness. It is only just recently that drip irrigation has been put to use in south India, but there are a number of firms now making the very simple equipment. It has been found excellent for coconut trees and these are probably the most important product of this region, since every part of the tree can be used for food, oil and shelter. During the last few years I have seen a number of coconut trees affected by drought and they are indeed a sad sight, since the whole tree when dying bends over as if it was weeping.

We have decided that the next step for Seva Nilayam will be to install drip irrigation and we are willing to begin with our coconut garden. The old method of irrigating by flooding the land from open channels is very wasteful of water as the land is often too dry and then sometimes too wet. Drip irrigation is also a great saving in labour and electricity as it keeps the whole ground sufficiently moist without any flooding. We think that we can do a bit of pioneer work by showing an example of good cultivation without any waste of precious water.

A BIT OF HISTORY

My origins are entirely in the agricultural working class of England. My great-grandfather was an agricultural labourer in High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire and could not read or write. He and my great-grandmother both died within a few days of each other in the last great epidemic of cholera in the reign of Queen Victoria. My grandmother was left alone in the world at the age of 17. It was this epidemic which at last woke up the City of London to the need for provision of a proper sewage system. My grandmother had never been to school but she had been taught to make lace. It was bobbin lace, made in the same way as Brussels lace, by moving bobbins on a padded cushion. In my innocent childhood I though this was a delightful occupation and imagined a group of cottage women chatting among the hollyhocks and sunflowers while their hands were busy with the lace, but later on, when I read Karl Marx, I learned that it was extremely low paid; he mentions in *Das Kapital* that the lace makers of High Wycombe had to work for very low pay in large unheated rooms and were forbidden to wear boots for fear of soiling the lace and in consequence suffered very much from chilblains.

My grandmother found the refuge that all working class young women could find in those days – she went 'into service'. She married a gentleman's servant and I know little of her life until she moved to London with her family. But at some period she had learned to read and write because she used to help the neighbours in writing their letters and would keep documents safely for them when needed. The family moved to Factory Square in Streatham, London, and there began the part of her life about which I know most. The houses were newly built by the owner of a rubber factory and were of brick with slate roofs, much more decent than a lot of housing in those days. My grandmother had five children: Willie, Walter, Annie, Ethel and Sophie, but of course as was practically universal in those days, two more died in infancy.

My grandfather became an ostler at the Pied Bull in Streatham and never earned more that 30 shillings a week. Consequently much of the burden lay on my grandmother. There were many great houses in Streatham in those days and so my grandmother used to take in servants' washing. This consisted always of dresses with a very narrow blue or lilac stripe and caps which had to be starched and goffered with a goffering iron which made the edges crinkly. As my mother remembered it, the house was always full of steam and washing. In addition my grandmother used to go out to sit up at night with sick persons, as there were no district nurses in those days. My mother used to marvel at how she could get enough sleep. She died at the age of 60 which was reckoned to be old in those days. All the girls including my mother went into service but my mother had been to school up to the age of 11, in the first batch of pupils under the new Education Act which made education free and compulsory. In spite of somewhat crowded conditions, my grandmother was able to let one room to an old lady called Mrs Dibbin. This lady had, as they say, "seen better days", and she had some very elegant china cups which she always washed herself and she used to say to the children, "All my things will belong to you when I am gone", but alas for any hopes, Mrs Dibbin had a stroke and died after lingering a few days, and

immediately a nephew whom we had never seen and who never visited her arrived and took away every single piece of china and furniture, even pulling up the carpet on the floor. That was a first lesson in gratitude.

There was a 'wise woman' called Mother Shipton who made prophecies, one of which was:

'Carriages without horses shall run
and then the end of the world shall come
in eighteen hundred and eighty one.'

This was taken very seriously because the first motor cars had appeared; if one part of the prophecies was true, the rest must be. The children waited until the last moment, New Year's Eve 1881, and then when nothing happened went to bed very disappointed.

My paternal grandfather was a stone mason in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland and he used to sing very old songs, even those dealing with the Battle of the Boyne, quite different from the music hall songs which were becoming popular. Like so many others who had seen army service he worshipped Queen Victoria, and in his later life, when he used to spend his days staying with one or another member of the family, he took a large, framed picture of Queen Victoria with him wherever he went. After a wandering life during which he fought in the Boer War, my grandfather became a pay sergeant in the Guards at Buckingham Palace. He wore a scarlet coat and the great bearskin named a busby. One incident which was remembered by the family was that my father, when a little boy, had whooping cough and Queen Victoria stopped her carriage to enquire who was coughing and was told that it was Sergeant Scarlett's little boy. The next day she sent a footman to enquire if he was better. Queen Victoria in her years of widowhood took a very keen interest in all the palace servants so this was quite typical.

My father was self-educated and took a degree as an external student at London University. He became a teacher and his first appointment was in an academy for the "sons of gentlemen" at Horsham in Sussex but he did not feel at home with this class of "young gentleman" and he took an appointment at the Oulton School in Liverpool. My grandmother, who was still living, said to my mother, "But Annie you will never go so far from your home", and my mother replied, "But it will be my home". This shows how little people travelled even after the coming of the railways. That is why I was born and brought up in Liverpool. The great Mersey estuary played a great part in our lives, as our holidays usually consisted of a week spent at New Brighton on the opposite shore of the estuary. One of our greatest excitements was to have a donkey ride on the sands. The owners of the donkeys had 7 or 8 of them and I must admit they a were rather tatty lot. The owners would make them gallop and we went right out to the Battery which still guards the entrance of the Mersey at the farthest point looking out across the Irish Sea. My brother and I played with lead soldiers which all carried the inscription 'Made in Germany'; and so we went on till the first World War came upon us and my eldest brother David who was 9 years older than myself was killed in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Since then we have seen the Second World War, and the rise and fall of Hitler, and we have seen Stalinism rise and crumble; but I like sometimes to turn back the page to the old simplicities of life and the honest working people who have made life possible for us today.

THE DAY OF THE VOLUNTEERS

It used to be possible to get long term volunteers to work in India. There were a number of agencies recruiting such as Quaker Peace and Service and a number of others. These volunteers had to go for interview before being selected and then they would be given a two year term and they would receive no salary but all their expenses would be paid. They were entitled to take a holiday half way through their term but we found that most of them preferred to take it at the end of the period of service. They had to be willing to do any work that was asked of them, and indeed I have never since then seen such willingness to endure hardships in a generous spirit.

In 1963 the land on which Seva Nilayam stands was an empty field and we were living in cramped quarters in a local village. Our first volunteer was John Davis who had been working at Colonial Williamsburg, which is a Museum of American Colonial History, and John Davis was an expert in antique silver spoons. Yet he adapted himself very cheerfully to the hard conditions under which he had to live. We were preparing to plant coconut trees and for this it is necessary to have pits dug and partially filled with sand to prevent the white ants attaching the roots of the young trees. The pits, three feet by three feet by three feet, were dug by local workers but John had the task of filling them with sand. At that time there was not yet any water on the place and John had to take his water bottle many days. He spent many mornings filling the pits and he was often an object of curiosity to the neighbours.

We had ordered the wood for our first building but the contractor had dumped it at the entrance of our field where it lay fully exposed. It would of course have soon been pilfered so our only solution was that we should take turns to sleep on it at night, and we did this until we could get the builder to come and make our first kitchen. Every Sunday we went in our bullock cart, which was really a *jutka* or light covered cart such as is still in common use today for short distance travelling. In Aundipatty we held our first leprosy clinic just outside a small temple and when the clinic was over we did our shopping, sometimes bringing back a sack of charcoal which was our only fuel then. John had great difficulties with Indian food but he persevered faithfully and he has gone down in memory as one of the best of our volunteers.

When he left, his place was taken by David Camp, a Quaker from Philadelphia who is still in touch with us. David is now a teacher at a Quaker school and has two sons, one of whom, Geoffrey, visited us lately and took great interest in collecting information about the tribal peoples of India. In David Camp's time we were gradually providing ourselves with a little more comfort. We had built a kitchen which still stands on the same site today, but the accommodation for volunteers had to be in a small room next to the cow shed where the heavy breathing and snuffling of the buffaloes could be heard through the thin partition. We had first to dig a well and to start cultivation and we needed all the help we could get.

Since then David and his wife Margaret have visited South India to do a season's work for Kodaikanal School which is now an international school so we have never lost touch with them.

Bill Arthur, an Australian, was never actually a volunteer at Seva Nilayam. He was working for Boys' Town at Nagamalai near Madurai. In the 17th century Jean Baptiste de la Salle had founded the order of Christian Brothers to educate the street urchins of Turin in Italy and his order now has many schools in many countries of the world all dedicated to teaching poor boys. One of these was founded at Nagamalai and had workshops for many different trades as well as a school for general education. Bill Arthur was engaged in buying sheep for Boys' Town but he

also became a very frequent visitor at Seva Nilayam and helped us in many ways. I still have the picture of Bill and David laying the tiles on the roof of our first in-patient ward. We also visited Boys' Town frequently so we saw it developing alongside Seva Nilayam and there was always much of interest going on there. I remember especially the gentle Bro. Machar, who has since become a monk of the Capuchin order, one of the branches of the Franciscans. Bro. Machar had the true Franciscan love of animals. He bought a baby donkey which he said was for the boys but everyone believed he bought it for himself. Today we are in touch with another member of the community of Boy' Town, Bro. S. James, who has set up a shelter for the street children of Madurai. There are many children who have run away from their homes, or from a family quarrel, or are just unwanted by their parents. In the busy streets and markets of Madurai they can maintain themselves by going on errands or polishing shoes but at night they had nowhere to sleep except in doorways and odd corners. Bro James has made them into a real community by giving them not only shelter but some education.

All this may seem like digression from the story of Seva Nilayam. But in those days we were very close to our friends and neighbours and there was a spirit of helpfulness and consideration which has always been a part of our daily experience. Bill Arthur later went to Queensland, Australia where he was farming a large area.

One more volunteer I should mention was John Kooyman who came from Dundee, Scotland. He had been working for a firm making transformers. He had very good technical abilities and he laid our first piped water system, working with his own hands. This piping system is still in use today unaltered. He had, and still has, I hope, a very fine singing voice which was a joy to hear as he sang at his work. When he left Seva Nilayam he decided to hitch-hike to England and he did achieve his wish. On one stage of the journey he was taken up by the Rajah of Bharatpur and entertained with all the best that the Rajah could give, including Scottish whisky served by a butler before breakfast. When he returned to Dundee he found quite a different job awaiting him: his mother and aunt and sisters were living together but his aunt and his mother were greatly feeling the need for help in advancing age and John felt it his duty to look after his family. He took on the burden of doing the shopping, repairing all the household gadgets and generally running the home. After all his adventures this may seem very humdrum but I respect him greatly for having taken it on.

We have had many other volunteers since then, they had included nurses and technical workers of many kinds, but the Indian government no longer accepts volunteers on the grounds that India has now reached a higher stage in technical education and skilled workers can be found in India for any job, and also there are many unemployed persons in India. So we had to consider this episode as closed. But there was so much fun and so much good fellowship and cheerful tackling of all kinds of difficulties that it can only be with regret that I look back on those early days.

CHARITY

Liverpool in the 1920s was a very dirty city. This was due not only to factories but to hundreds of thousand of domestic coal burning fires. Looking across from the cleaner air of the Cheshire side you could see a pall of smoke lying over the city. I do not know in what year the Sisters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul started a hospice for the dying in Liverpool but I was familiar with the sight of them from my teens onwards. They went about their errands of mercy always two together and their dress was a gown of dull blue cloth and a coif of spotless white

linen which framed the face and extended on either side like a sea bird's wings. Each one carried a big umbrella and I felt sure that a rain storm would mean catastrophe to the white wings.

St Vincent de Paul was a French priest in the 17th century who went round the streets of Paris at night to look for abandoned babies, and then went to tea with duchesses and cajoled or persuaded them into giving large sums to his orphanages. I believe that the distinctive dress of these sisters was copied from that of French peasant women in the environs of Paris. The sisters nursed very sick people in their own homes but also kept the hospice for the dying which must have anticipated the hospice movement in England by many years.

At that time I knew nothing about Mother Theresa of Calcutta and only later came in to contact with her all-embracing charity when I visited her Home for the Dying which is in the very precincts of the Kali temple. Kali, like most Indian deities, has many aspects, but the one for which Calcutta is famous is that of the terrible goddess of destruction who demands a vast number of bloody animal sacrifices. But the Home for the Dying as I knew it was spotlessly clean and a place of complete peace and tranquillity, and so it was in the very heart of Kali's empire that the work of charity was set up. It must be around the time when I first knew the Sisters of Charity that Mother Theresa left the comfort and prestige of a very elegant girls' school to go and help the homeless and abandoned in the slums of Calcutta. I would like to think that it was the same wind of grace which sent the Sisters of Charity to Liverpool and Mother Theresa to the slums of Calcutta.

I have seen people dying in the streets both of Calcutta and Madurai. In Madurai I saw a man lying on the bare ground just outside the entrance to the bus station. Apparently somebody ha given him a bread roll but his hands were too weak to hold it and it had slipped out of his grasp. It was the evening rush hour and a constant stream of people was passing very close to the dying man, only just managing to swerve sufficiently to avoid treading on him. I tried in vain to call someone's attention to this man but nobody would do more than just glance at him as they rushed past.

The word charity may be translated either as 'charity' or 'love' and both aspects can fit different cases. The word is just like a spectrum which goes through all possible variations and all different colours of meaning. Charity can demand very great things of us but it can also show itself in very simple things. It is a work of charity to cover up someone's mistakes and failures so that the person is not made a laughing stock. It is a work of charity to give even a cup of cold water in a hot and thirsty land.

I have recently come across a book of Prayers for Teenagers and this book, I think, should be as valuable to parents as to their children in bringing about an understanding of charity between those who are troubled and those who may be blamed for lack of understanding. These prayers do not put any fine words into the mouth of teenagers but simply express all the doubts, fears and longings which are so often kept secret. For example, fear of being ridiculed, fear of failure in examinations, discouragement at not being popular, not getting to the top of the class and being left out from friendly parties. I think this book should do something to help parents understand the anguish that can be hidden in children who are generally thought to be happy and well provided for. Teenagers do not pray in fine words but from their heart.

The suicide rate among young people is very high and it is often caused by anxieties which they can not bring themselves to reveal to anybody. It is also caused by perverted religious teaching, whether Christian or Hindu, and we have seen in recent years many students immolate themselves for causes which could be much better served in other ways. In all such cases charity

is needed, or if you prefer it, love is needed. And love must be prepared to reach out through all obstacles of willfulness, shyness, and frustration. When Hitler's guards were lining up victims to be sent to the death chamber a man cried out in unbearable anguish, "What about my wife and children?" Immediately a priest, Father Maximilian Kolbe, stepped forward and offered himself in place of that man. His offer was accepted, and the death chamber closed on him for ever.

The gospels tell us that no one can have greater love than this; but such a response cannot come spontaneously without the long practice of charity. I do not know anything about the life of Father Maximilian but I am sure that his sacrifice was only the result of many years of charity.

When Group Captain Leonard Cheshire found a dying man who was completely friendless he took that man into his own home and looked after him till he died. This is a great example but there are so many ways, much less spectacular, in which charity can be shown. To help someone whose well has run dry to find water, to get someone with no hope of education admitted to a school or college, to help somebody to repair a house which has been damaged or to buy a new bullock cart if one has smashed in an accident, thus depriving someone of his sole means of livelihood.

One phrase which used to puzzle me very much as a child was St Paul's statement that one could give up everything, but if it was done without charity it would be worthless. Now I realise that there can be charities without charity. Money can be given for prestige and popularity or even to try and dominate another person, but when we meet the true spirit of charity we shall certainly recognise it.

But we shall not recognise it only among Christians. The examples I have chosen were from my early years, but now I am in India I have seen some wonderful examples of charity especially among the Parsees of Bombay and Poona, but above all I want to mention my dear old friend Mrs Kumar in Madras, who seems to embody in herself the spirit of charity. Charity is very patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or selfish or rude. Charity does not demand its own way. It is not irritable or touchy. It does not hold grudges and will hardly even notice when others do it wrong. It is never glad about injustice, but rejoices whenever truth wins its way.

THE COTTON MILLS

It is Sunday morning but Sunday is not a day of rest in this busy town, for Sunday is market day. You can see an endless stream of vehicles ranging from giant lorries to small bullock carts and anything else in between. They are all loaded with raw cotton and this could never be concealed even if you wished to do so, because it clings to the outside of all the rough packings and it can be seen in the bulging sacks. It is all local produce and is going to what is said to be the largest cotton market in South India.

In 1492, when Christopher Columbus was navigating the waterways of what are now the islands of the West Indies he was not looking for America but for Japan. He though that by finding Japan he could discover a short route to the orient. He had heard of Japan, then called Chipangu, as a fabulous country where the buildings had golden roofs. But nowhere could he see a golden roof. Yet he found something else, the value of which far outweighs any amount of gold. He found people wearing cotton clothing which they had spun and woven themselves.

Up to that date the daily clothing in Europe was either wool, silk, or linen and all of these were costly and not easily washable. Cotton to us is now a very ordinary fabric but it must have been of incalculable benefit to health and hygiene. Now children can romp in freedom and get as dirty as they like and all the clothes can go in the wash-tub the next day.

Although the discovery of cotton was an inestimable benefit to civilisation, the greed of the mill owners would not allow them to lose any time. It also brought the slave trade. The cotton growers of North America needed labour to exploit the newly discovered crop. The history of the slave trade is too vast a subject for us to deal with now, but we all know of the abominable cruelty practised by the slave traders who descended on African villages, and forcibly carried off the inhabitants to be shipped to America to work the cotton plantations. We know the long history of the struggle to free the slaves culminating in the victory of the northern states over the southern ones, and we know the great names of Wilberforce and Abraham Lincoln.

But it was not only in America that cotton mills were built on slavery. In England the first mills were operated by water power and for this reason they were situated not in the towns but in lonely parts of the country. Unwanted children were used to provide cheap labour. The conditions were so bad that Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wife of the poet Robert Browning, wrote a heart-rending appeal against child labour in the mills. And she describes very graphically the misery of hearing and seeing the wheels turning without stop day and night.

For all day, the wheels are droning, turning –
Their wind comes in our faces – till our hearts turn – our head, with pulses burning,
And the walls turn in their places:
Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling,
Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling,
All are turning, all the day, and we with all,
And all day, the iron wheels are droning,
And sometimes we could pray,
"O ye wheels" (breaking out in a mad moaning),
"Stop! Be silent for today!"

The poem ends with these words:

"But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper,
Than the strong man in his wrath."

What actually put an end to this exploitation of children was the invention of the 'Spinning Jenny' in 1767 by Hargreaves. This meant that the mills no longer needed the water ways but could be situated in the heart of towns.

The result of this was the rise and prosperity of the mill towns of Lancashire. The climate of north west England is damp compared with that of the south and it was found that the cotton threads would snap too easily in a dry atmosphere, so the great mill industry was located in the mill towns of Lancashire. Cotton came in to the country through the port of Liverpool and the necessary transport resulted in the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal and Manchester became the centre of trade in cotton goods. Lancashire mill workers became a very noteworthy feature of English life. They wore shawls and wooden clogs and the clatter of clogs sounded on the pavements from very early in the morning when workers went to first shift. Now prosperity without slavery had come to one part of the cotton industry, but the story is not finished yet. Mill

cotton cloth was exported to India and it ruined the old Indian handloom weavers who could not make a living against the import of cotton cloth. Mahatma Gandhi took up the cause of the handloom weavers. The city of Ahmedabad was the centre of this struggle and on Gandhi's instigation in August 1920 the people of Ahmedabad made a huge bonfire of the imported mill cloth. Followers of Gandhi wore only Khadi, that is cloth which is handspun and handwoven. Khadi was in the first place a demonstration that the village could become self supporting but it became a symbol in the struggle for independence. Today Khadi holds an honoured place among Indian fabrics and there are many followers of Gandhi who dress only in Khadi. Khadi silk sarees can be very beautiful and are highly valued, but at the same time India produces some highly attractive and well designed cotton fabrics which are the delight of tourists and a great example of good work.

The mango is a very delicious fruit and very highly thought of in India where it is widely grown and enjoyed by everyone. The mango design is very common in Indian fabrics but during the expansion of the cotton industry it was taken over by the Lancashire mills. It was exported back to India and know as Paisley design, from the town of Paisley in Scotland. Like any working woman of her time my grandmother wore a shawl and bonnet. For Sunday best she had a paisley shawl. It was bright red and had a mango design. My grandmother never saw a mango, still less tasted one, and did not know what the design represented, but it was always treasured.

1994

BEGGARS

Her arms across her breast she laid;
  She was more fair than words can say;
Barefooted came the beggar maid
  Before the king Cophetua.
In robe and crown the king stept down,
  To meet and greet her on her way;
"It is no wonder," said the lords,
  "She is more beautiful than day."

And shines the moon in clouded skies,
  She in poor attire was seen:
One praised her ankles, one her eyes,
  One her dark hair and lovesome mien.
So, sweet a face, such angel grace,
  In all that land had never been:
Cophetua sware a royal oath:
  "That beggar maid shall be my queen!"

(Tennyson)

That is the romantic view but Indians are much more realistic about such matters. There is an Indian story of a king who married a beggar, but whenever it happened that the king was absent from the palace she would go outside and beg. And automatically the hands held in supplication. If anyone has begged for years it becomes an inveterate habit. Children often start very early in life and this will never be stopped until there is an education act compelling children to go to school (and this is not in the foreseeable future).

I have a friend who has been in charge of the Lutheran Mission School for many years and, of course has conducted the affairs of the school in Tamil; but she does not look Indian. She wears a big hat and has short light brown hair. This friend was on the bus, and when two children came up to her chanting, "No mummy, no daddy", my friend said in perfect Tamil, "Now, my dears, tell me where are your mummy and daddy?" Quite unabashed they said, "That is my mummy over there, she is selling fruits, and my daddy has a job in the bus stand".

I had my lesson once when I undertook to take a beggar to a home where all his needs would be met. Although I had paid his bus fare, he begged it from one of the passengers saying he had no money. Of course this venture was a failure. Within a few days, he was discovered outside begging. There are even some places where the beggars have their own cooperative and share the takings.

It is quite understandable when you see the rich, varied and full life of any Indian city street. This is the real world and if anyone can make a living out of it, he will not give up until he is too old to beg any more. There are many Indian men who will automatically give a small coin to a beggar, feeling in their pocket without even turning their heads to see who is begging. In some ways this may be looked on as harmless. It is just a part of life. What is not harmless is the

temptation of parents to use a deformed child for begging and to refuse any corrective treatment. For a time I used to see a potter in this area who has a blind child. I took the case to the blind school at Palayamkottai and they agreed to accept the child at the age of five, when she would be capable of looking after herself. This potter stayed for quite a long time in the area because he was making a certain kind of grain storage bin which is now very old fashioned, but it is very effective as it is built where it is to stand and has sections like a moveable frame beehive. I used to see him very often and tried very hard to impress upon the parents all the advantages of taking the child to the blind school but alas! when his work was finished in the area, the potter moved on and the child was lost in the great mass of unfortunate India.

There was a child born in this area whose parents I knew very well. He had a double club foot and double talipes, which means that the feet are turned the wrong way round on the ankles. He was completely helpless and immobile and there would be no future for him except to be trundled round one of the bus stands on some kind of truck. We were determined to get corrective surgery for this child but the father showed no enthusiasm, fearing that one potential source of income might be taken from him. The mother, however, was very willing to see what could be done. (Incidentally, most of such deformities can be attributed to the inter-marriage of close relatives which is the custom here. Such marriages would not be recognised as legal in any other country.)

Even the chief surgeon was reluctant to start on this case, and we knew very well that once started we had to see it through. The child was under surgery for a whole year, as all his joints had to be turned round. This was not a free hospital and I cannot calculate the total expenses because we had to supply Horlicks, and milk, as well as food for the mother while she was looking after the child in hospital, but certainly it was more than Rs 50,000. We have been censured for spending so much money on one patient but we knew there was no half way house. Either we did it or did not. Now the child is standing up running about and playing and will go to school later this year.

We are not rich enough to pay so much money ourselves but we were amazed at the generosity of people who heard about this case and helped us to see it through. We have no regrets that we did this.

THE STORY OF SEVA NILAYAM

Perhaps the question most frequently asked is, ‘What does Seva Nilayam mean?’ I do not think it can be adequately translated, though it is often called ‘Home of Service’. The nearest I can come to is ‘Place of Helpfulness’ - a place you turn to when you need help.

I should go back to the day when my good friend, Miss Nordmark of the Lutheran Mission, said to me that our work should be registered. Up to then I had not really considered this possibility but I would be required to give a new name, as Miss Nordmark said, “Such as Seva Nilayam”, so I replied “Why not?” so Seva Nilayam it was.

Now I must go back a few years to the time when I was working in Madras for a very small clinic which was providing medical aid in an area in which nothing at all of the sort had existed previously. In those days things were very primitive and very little regard was paid to village work. I was not used to the intense heat of Madras and I struggled to grow just a few

green things and to protect them from the goats. The grass was all burnt dry and it looked as if nothing would ever grow there, but one day I discovered scarcely visible among the parched grass a very tiny blue flower like a minute primula, and in my own mind I called this “the blue flower of hope.”

There was a young man named Seetharama Reddy who took on some responsibilities, especially that of fencing, which was very necessary to keep everything from being devoured by goats. This young man was very willing to work and ask for nothing in return but only wished to see the clinic flourishing.

He was one of the higher castes, the ‘Reddys’, and his parents were very much against his taking any part in the clinic work. It was the situation which made me ask, some people would say very impulsively, whether he would come out from his village and join me in building up a new clinic without any caste discrimination. He replied that he would be willing, and so the seed of Seva Nilayam was planted. I had very little money but I always had the feeling that if you want anything sufficiently you can do it. In the area of this village, Mudichur, there was a very large and shallow lake meant for irrigation. The government sent a team of bulldozers to deepen the lake and the driver of one of these said to us, “Why don't you come to my area? My uncle is living there and he will give you a very good beginning.” So it was done. This was a very neglected and backward area, so almost anything could be counted an improvement. To cut a long story short, we bought some land and planned to build a house. At this time foreign volunteers were freely allowed in India. I have told the story in a previous newsletter about the work of volunteers, and they certainly worked wholeheartedly and selflessly. I have described how the wood we had purchased for building was dumped beside the road and until we had a house we had to take it in turns to sleep on it to prevent it being stolen.

We had yet much to learn about the area we had so innocently come to. It is an old robber area and its origins are unknown but it had been suggested that the army of some king was defeated and left to find its own way. The Thevar caste adopted robbery as their caste duty. Many stories have been handed down about the time under British rule when all the inhabitants of certain villages were fingerprinted and counted to be sure that they remained in at night.

I had a little experience of this soon after we came near to the village where we were staying. There was a very wild area on which a huge sandhill formed and travelled before the prevailing wind so that many privately owned farms became buried and cultivation was impossible. The only use put to this area was for drying chillies. One day I was called to see an old man who seemed to be very sick. When I entered the house I felt very puzzled because I could see no family, only a young man who seemed to treat the sick man with great respect. I was not called upon to give any treatment but just to advise whether he should be taken to hospital. I learned later that this was an old robber chief and therefore he was treated with deep respect by the young man.

We are now familiar with the villages and we know exactly which are the robber villages. As you can imagine such traditions do not easily die out and there have been many murders, usually connected with robbery. It will be a long time before civilisation changes these villages, and communal violence is endemic, occasionally bursting out in terrifying proportions. The Thevars started attacking the Pallars, burning their huts and driving off their cattle. The violence spread so far that the Reserve Police from three adjoining states had to be called in. For six days no vehicle of any kind dared to travel on our road and the only people who could come to our clinic were those who could cross the fields on foot.

You may ask how could we build up our clinic and how could we serve the people under such conditions? You have to understand that this is a caste business and people in general were left alone right from the beginning. Our rule was that we should help all those in need in any way we could and that is why Seva Nilayam should be called what I think is the best title – the place of helpfulness. I hope it will live up to this name for many years to come. We have some ideas which we hope to put into practice and we are of course free to do so. Seva Nilayam has pursued a line of its own during all these year and does not intend to change.

JEYA

There was an old house in Madras, one side of which was covered by an immense bougainvillea always in flower. Under this wide canopy the tiny little purple sunbird nested every year. The sun bird builds a hanging nest hidden from observers by being decorated with cobwebs and dry leaves for concealment. And it is a measure of the tranquillity of the place that it is undisturbed from year to year. I could see the sitting bird with her tiny little curved beak quite unafraid of my presence. This was the house of my dear friend Jeya. The garden was well tended but consisted mainly of tall trees which had been there for many years. There were some flowers which came up year after year which I had not seen anywhere else, and according to my usual practice I felt impelled to propagate these and they are still growing and flowering in the garden of Seva Nilayam. Jeya and her husband had been among the followers of Annie Besant, one of the first great lovers of India. Jeya had also known Madame Montessori, the reformer of children's education who came to Madras because her teaching was unacceptable to Mussolini.

Indian hospitality is wonderful but sometimes overwhelming and for people like myself who wanted to be independent it can make life rather difficult. But Jeya's house was open to me at all times without any formality. At that time I frequently had work to do in the port area of Madras, as I had to deal with shipping agents. I can recall as if it were yesterday the clatter and business of the port, the scent of roasting coffee and grinding spices, the rattle of trains and hooting of ships in the harbour. Jeya said, 'Come any time. There will always be something for you to eat.' and she was true to her word. She gave me always an easy welcome without any formality. She was what many people today would call old fashioned and her sarees, some of them really beautiful, were entirely traditional. She had a dry sense of humour which offended no one.

After supper we used to put our chairs out in the garden where we could look up at the stars through the leaves of the coconut trees. She told me many things about her past activities and especially about the Baby Welcome Home which was at that time an innovation in Madras. This name has remained with me and I have thought that if I had anything to do with organising a maternity hospital, this is the name I should give it.

After leaving Madras I worked in a very rural and educationally backward part of India. At that time there were no telephones. We were 6 miles from Aundipatty but 15 miles from the nearest maternity hospital. So if we had a night call we had to get one member of the family to cycle to Aundipatty, engage a taxi and come back here, then drive the 15 miles to the maternity hospital. I thought the time would come some day when we would be able to do better than this. Now more help is available and there are many more qualified nurses and midwives.

We have thought very much about the needs of this area but they include not only medical aid but moral teaching. Infanticide (that means female infanticide) is quite common and

parents believe they can do whatever they like with the newborn child and that means killing the unwanted ones. There are many deformities due to the marriage of closely related parents but what science has to say about this is not accepted by the parents. We have been concerned with many cases of deformities including club foot and cleft palate and we have been able to send them for operation but this of course only after the damage has been done. It has so far been impossible to get near enough to this problem for our work to have any effect.

We think that in time and with patience a rational approach to these problems could be found and we think that the title 'Baby Welcome Home' would give us the means to teach that every child is precious, and that even from the day of birth, the child is a full human being with human rights and capacities. So our idea of a small and simple maternity hospital can help to bring us near to the people. The government has recently started a project entitled 'Cradle' and has invited parents of unwanted babies to place them in a basket so that they can live and be cared for in the Government Home, but while we welcome this we think is is better that parents should feel their own responsibilities, and should be aided to overcome there difficulties by family planning. More than 30 years have gone by since I sat in Jeya's garden and talked about the Baby Welcome Home, but the idea has not died and we believe and hope that we shall find the means to put it into practice.

We feel sure that the means will be provided by the generosity and understanding of our many friends.

[Editor's note: this is the last Letter from Seva Nilayam. In 1995, as I recount in my book *Love Made Visible: The life and work of Dora Scarlett*, a couple of poorly printed and very badly spelt letters were sent out to Dora's friends and supporters by the "Dora Scarlett Trust for Baby Welcome Home" setting out, in a rather confused and incoherent way, the reasons for wanting to raise money to set up a maternity hospital and abandoned baby home. They did not appear to have been written or checked by Dora, but by then her sight and hearing were very poor. This project was never progressed and was eventually abandoned; any money raised was transferred to Village Service Trust.]