

The Wells of Tamil Nadu



Peter Stokes - Short Stories



The Wells Of Tamil Nadu

Most of the world's great civilisations grew up around rivers; think of the Nile, the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Ganges, the Yellow River, the Pearl, the Tiber, the Danube, the Loire, the Hudson, the Mersey or the Thames. Or the Manchester Ship Canal. Tamil Nadu's great rivers, the Kavery and Vaigai have watered the fertile plains of southern India for thousands of years, but they didn't look very impressive in November, even after months of rain. Local people regarded them as being in full flood. In a few months they will be completely dried out. The monsoon rains were wrecking the important salt pans on the Bay of Bengal coast and washing the roads away before our eyes, but still not providing the water to meet the people's needs.

If water were spread uniformly across the globe, everyone would have plenty. New Delhi gets only forty days of rain a year. The water table beneath Beijing has fallen 200 feet in the last twenty years. China has forty times the population of Canada, but less water. India has twenty percent of the world's population, but four percent of the world's water. Even in the biggest cities the poorest residents can spend hours in queues at standpipes or waiting for a tanker to arrive, in temperatures above one hundred degrees. To supplement these unreliable supplies a high proportion of household income goes on bottled water.

Government water specialists (we met them at the office of the Chief Water Engineer of Tamil Nadu in Madurai) say they are connecting big population centres first, but water supply in big cities

is so fragile that it will be years, maybe a generation, before remote villages are connected to piped pure drinking water. And maybe never. Tamil Nadu gets about the same rainfall each year as the United Kingdom, about 900mm each year.* While rainfall in Britain is fairly evenly distributed throughout the year, 90% of Tamil Nadu's rain falls from June to November, with the south-west and north-east monsoons. The countryside was vividly and sublimely green, my, and Hollywood's vision of paradise, sugar and banana plantations, cotton fields, eucalyptus and teak forests, mangoes, acacias, coconut groves, with extensive stretches of water covering the rice paddies and floodplains.

Some of this water is managed, to irrigate crops. Some is collected in reservoirs or 'tanks'. These tanks may be small domestic assets or as big as a football pitch. Where you find a temple you'll find a tank, since water is needed for ritual purification. Often there is a coconut grove as well, (a coconut, the tufty end on fire, is used as a temple offering) the temple, the water and the lofty coconut trees offering a golden photo opportunity.

Some of the water is harvested for drinking water. "That tank is pure water for drinking," local people will say proudly. (Their idea of drinking water is probably not yours or mine. At one spring-fed pond we watched local women using their saris, placed over the neck of their water bottles, to filter the in-rushing water, which was dusty, a little scummy, and contained plentiful insect life. There were cowpats and other evidence of animal life around the pond. In the dry season, they told us, it takes an hour or two to fill the water bottle, cupful by cupful.)

Many of the tanks are decayed, silted over, overgrown with vegetation, or hardly more than muddy pools. There was a

magnificent tank (and a temple) a couple of hundred metres from our hotel in Karaikudi. A carpet of lilies bloomed prolifically at the centre of the water, encircled by a carpet of garbage. It was a breeding ground for swarms of huge dragonflies and other less attractive creatures. Some tanks and wells, constructed under the Raj, have dried out. Nobody can quite say why. Maybe soil geology or chemistry has changed in a hundred years. Now these impressive stonewalled, square tanks provide homes for interesting but lethal snakes. Many villages have a concrete overhead tank (OHT) as a central feature. Originally it would have used mains electricity to pump water from a borewell up into the tank for community use. Now they are mostly useless. Either the water is saline, because the well was drilled in the wrong place, or the well is too shallow, due to corruption or incompetence. Or the electricity supply functions for only ten minutes each day, unpredictably, so one villager has to spend the whole watchful day beside the tap, and tries to fill as many vessels as possible when the water does flow.

The women of Africa, it has been estimated, spend 400 billion hours each year collecting water. (That is roughly equivalent to the number of hours, per year, that Europeans spend in the workplace.) There must be a similar figure for India. Americans consume roughly 500 litres of water per person per day. Europeans about half that. India's water engineers estimate the needs of the people of Tamil Nadu at 40 litres *per capita per diem*, (pcpd), but in the remote villages people are managing on a quarter of that.

I don't think I ever saw a man carrying water. It's the task of the women and children and we see them everywhere. Next time you have a little time on your hands fill a bucket with 18 or 20 litres of water and carry it on your head for a mile or two. 20 litres of water weighs an astonishing (and to me exhausting) 44 pounds. Some

women told us that they spend two hours a day collecting drinking water, *walking 2km or more each way*, to and from a reliable source. Some said three or four hours each day. And this is just the time spent on drinking/cooking water. Each family may need an additional 60 or 100 litres of poorer quality water each day, drawn from a closer source, for washing themselves and their clothes and for animals. (When they are not gathering water the women and children gather wood for fuel, huge bundles carried, for miles, like water, on their heads.)

In two weeks we covered 2,500 miles between Kovelpatti and Tiruchirappali, between Madurai and the east coast, mostly in the districts of Sivaganga and Pudukottai. We inspected the five wells already constructed and talked to the women about the change that the new wells brought. Now, the women say, the installation of a Kamla Foundation borewell a few yards from their front door means that only a few minutes are spent each day fetching pure, safe drinking water. (In fact the last, fifth, well, at Naraikudi was not yet in use. The well has been bored out, the rig still present, but the heavy rains in the second week turned the site to bright red liquid mud, and delayed the laying of the concrete base. So we paddled around in the mud, and shared the pleasure of anticipation with the local villagers, but not the inauguration ceremony.)

And we scouted for ten new wells, to be installed this year, talking to village councils and local community workers, and trying, in the midst of so much desperate need, to use a rational formula to install the new wells where they will benefit the most people. I did a back of envelope calculation. The five Kamla Foundation wells installed since 2010 serving about 5000 families, will, at a conservative estimate, save 1,000,000 hours of women's time and

labour, *in their first year of operation*. An immense amount of energy preserved for childcare, education, or productive work. And how many lives preserved? Globally, there have been more deaths from completely preventable waterborne diseases than from war, since 1945.

"The trouble with India," said my new friend, "is that we have no drains." He was a young teacher of mathematics, who stopped off at Kumar's Coffee Shop And Bakery, just around the corner from the hotel, every evening on his way home from work. He also owned the cybercafé on the second floor across the road. We were sitting in Kumar's watching the rain come down, and the main road, a four-lane highway, disappearing under 10 inches of bright red water. The next morning the bath-sized potholes in the road were still full of red water. We are all aware of India Shining, the world's biggest democracy, the astonishing technological development and economic growth, but India is also a collapsed civilisation, a failed state, and not only for the poor. Even in the major northern cities in middle class neighbourhoods water supply can be intermittent and undrinkable. The Romans built their Empire on drains and aqueducts. India is still reliant on the plastic bottle. But there are a growing number of villages in Tamil Nadu, where the drinking water is assured. I've seen them.

* But Wales gets twice as much. 1800mm falls in the Elan and Claerwen valleys. Almost exactly a hundred years ago the first stage of the massive engineering project to supply Birmingham with 600 million litres of drinking water per day was completed, the

water flowing by force of gravity 120kms into the reservoirs on the west side of the city.

WATER WARS

Film lovers everywhere remember the saga of *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*. It is the story of a battle for water, and one small farmer's cruelty to another in the harsh hot Provencal hills. It's a French film of course. Our English words *rival* has the same root as the French word *rive* meaning a river bank (as in *rive gauche* in Paris. The French have a word for everything.) And even further back, from the Latin *rivalis*, meaning someone who drew their water from the same river as you, *and is therefore a potential threat*. You'll also remember the film *Chinatown*, which is about the murderous struggle for control of the water supply of Los Angeles in the 1940s. In Britain, where it rains (almost) every day it is hard to believe that water is a precious commodity that is sometimes worth stealing, worth killing for.

In his marvellous book, *Everybody Loves A Good Drought*, Palagummi Sainath (1999) describes the effects of water shortages on the lives of the people of Tamil Nadu. He remembers arriving in Pudukkotai (one of our stamping grounds) by train at 2.30 in the morning, thieves swarming aboard, and stealing in a couple of minutes, *the water from the train's toilet tanks*. He describes in Tulakampatti the evacuation of entire villages during the droughts, when the monsoons fail. Thousands of people move hundreds of miles to districts where the water supply is more secure, and back again a few months later. But in the meantime the kids are missing out on their education. "Whole sections of the young ones will not only miss the net of the literacy drive, but may never see the inside of a school." He also describes how the richer farmers and landowners (*thaneer adipathy* – water lords) sink private borewells, not for community use, but to sell the water to smaller, poorer

farmers, often entrapping them in endless debt or forcing them to sell their land.

“lack of water touches every aspect of life in Pudukkottai. From health and education to industry, the literacy drive, debt repayment and land - all feel its effects.”

Sainath records how in Kutku, Bihar State, Baidyanath Singh, was murdered for leading resistance to the Kutku Dam. 14,000 villagers were evacuated to make way for the dam, which in 1996 was still ‘under construction’ after 20 years of work. Of course everything in India is on a grander scale. Every day for two weeks in November we followed the story of *Dam 999* in the pages of the two English language newspapers, *The New Indian Express*, which was available in the lobby of the hotel and *The Hindu*, which we read in Kumar’s Coffee Shop.

It’s all pretty complicated, but in essence *Dam 999* is a brand new, Anglo-Indian film, directed by Sohan Roy, filmed in Kerala and Hyderabad, which implies that the collapse of a major dam is due to its construction from inferior materials, owing to the corruption of local politicians. It can be inferred that the film points a finger in particular at the Mullaperiyar Dam which is just across the border in Kerala. If it collapsed, thousands, perhaps millions of citizens of Tamil Nadu would be endangered. (In China in 1975, 250,000 drowned when the Banqiao Dam collapsed. There are a worryingly large number of ageing dams in India and China, commissioned thirty or forty years ago by er....corrupt politicians.)

J Jayalalitha the serially corrupt Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu immediately imposed a ban on the screening of the film in the state, on the grounds that its showing would threaten cordial relations between Tamil Nadu and Kerala and would induce a *national psychosis*. Local people reacted with 'token fasts' (not a concept that Gandhi would have approved of) commodity boycotts, demonstrations and closed borders between the two enraged states. I don't think any one has died, but the case is proceeding through the courts. The film has been shown elsewhere in India and the Middle East to a mixed reception. James Cameron, of *Titanic* and *Avatar* fame, is said to have a new drama in production, about the impact of big dams on indigenous peoples in the Third World, inspired by *Dam 999*. You read it here first.

"Educate A Girl, and You'll Have Trouble For The Rest Of Your Life"

Some encounters with the women of Tamil Nadu.

No, not my own opinion, but a maxim we heard expressed several times in Tamil Nadu in November. I was told that many of the rural people are officially classified by social scientists and the government as belonging to the 'backward classes'. (I thought this was a pretty brutal categorisation, and said that although most people in Britain belong to the 'backward classes' we are far too polite to mention it.) Some of the backwardness in Tamil Nadu is certainly evident in attitudes to women, though I guess these attitudes were not uncommon in the UK only a generation or two back. Bringing change for the women of India and Tamil Nadu is central to the Kamla Foundation's vision of the future. Here are a few snapshots of some of the women we encountered in November.

The Village Hall

One of our earliest meetings, on the dusty cement floor of a rural community hall, a breeze block construction, painted lemon yellow, without doors or windows, the model one sees everywhere in remote villages, was with a dozen teenage girls who belong to one of Vinnarasi's girls' groups. Actually we first met a group of small children who were using the hall for their after school homework club. Some were working on arithmetic problems; others were studying aged and ragged English primers, and read poems, in English, out loud for us, to my delight.

It was dark by the time the teenage girls arrived. They had walked or cycled several miles through unlit muddy lanes to meet us, yet appeared fresh as daisies, smiling and shy and courteous and brilliantly arrayed in crisp colourful saris. Only one of them, I think, was still in education. The rest were typical of the groups of girls we met in the rural areas. Their parents were willing for them to attend school until they were fifteen or so, and then it was time to abandon education and get married, get to work in the fields, collecting water, collecting fuel, cooking and washing; this was to be their lives, like their mothers and grandmothers and great-great-grandmothers before them. (Only one or two girls, I think, out of the hundreds we met, actually said they left school of their own volition, out of boredom.)

I said, "Well, you have to be rebellious." I used that word several times. "Otherwise nothing will change. It's your lives. You are not your parents' prisoners. In the modern world everyone, every woman, needs to be educated. So even if it is hard you have to fight for your futures. You have to work together, as a group, and fight for your education and a better future." Stuff like that. Vinnarasi translated. A lizard climbed up the wall above the girls. The small kids looked on, bemused. "If your lives don't change," I said, "then their lives won't change," pointing to the little kids.

Afterwards, driving back in the blackness down bumpy twisting tracks, Bhupendra told me that I had been ill-advised, shall we say, to encourage the girls to be 'rebellious'. "Life is harsh here for girls," he said. "Rebellious girls get knocked about, or worse. We'll be getting on a plane in a couple of weeks, but out here in these remote villages there is no law and the men have the power. Think about it." We talked about it often. I still think that change only

comes from tension and conflict, but of course that's easy for me to say.

The Ford Trust

A group of middle-aged women that we talked to a couple of days later, in the meeting room at the Ford Trust, were in some ways more optimistic for the future. We asked them how their lives were different from their mothers' and their daughters' lives.

"Oh," they said, "in the next generation, everyone will be educated. The cities will cover the whole countryside, but everyone will lead better lives."

"And yet," said one woman, "we are not as healthy as our parents, because we eat what we buy instead of what we grow."

Yes, life is better now," said another woman, "but we have to run all the time to keep up."

Most of the women in the group had just a few years of schooling, but one, probably the youngest, admitted that *she had a degree in physics* from the university in Madurai. And what did she do for a living? we asked. Was she a teacher? No, no, she was...well, as we would say, a housewife. Wouldn't she have liked a professional career, maybe as a scientist? Well yes she said, her parents would have been happy for her to make a career for herself, and her husband, but when she married, well, her parents-in-law didn't want her to work. So there we are.

The Murderer.

A few days later, on a hot afternoon, we visited a remote village that was rather distinctive. It wasn't smart, but it was almost organised. Not the usual straggle of ancient huts with woven

banana leaf roofs, but rows of very small, but fairly recent grey cubic breeze block houses, a couple of hundred in a tight pattern. This, we were told, was a village in which ex-prisoners were resettled, with their families, when they had completed their sentences. Strange but true. Although it was fairly modern, there was of course no piped water supply, and we discussed with the village elders the siting of a new borewell. As we talked a very pretty girl in a blue sari came down the lane, carrying in her arms, a baby goat. There is a photograph of her I'm rather proud of on the website.

And she, we were told, is actually attending university. She is the only girl in the village who has gone on to higher education.

Her father was a friendly, snaggle-toothed citizen, and I congratulated him on his daughter's achievements. "You must be very proud," I said, father to father, as you do, and he nodded and smiled and said yes, the whole family was very proud and we all smiled and took more photographs and shook hands.

Back in the Chevy, as we drove away, Bhupendra, who'd had the full story from Paul, put me in the picture.

"You haven't quite understood why the girl is going to university," he said. "Her dad has only just come out of prison. "Fifteen years ago he murdered twelve relatives in a family feud. He's only just got out of gaol. *So he hasn't been around all these years to prevent his daughter from getting an education.* That's how come she's going to university. You have just shaken hands with a mass murderer."

The Sewing Class

We made several visits to workshops funded by the Kamla Foundation to train young women as seamstresses. It's a skill that is achievable by barely educated young women, gives them an income and a degree of independence and frees them from the only alternative life of brutal manual labour in the fields. Literally hundreds of young women each year are training on manual sewing machines provided by the Kamla Foundation. Several of them said that it was their ambition to acquire their own machine, which would enable them to establish a small business.

We talked about the repair of these old machines. There is a workshop in Karaikudi that supplies components and services these sturdy old machines when required.

What they needed, the women said, was a couple more manual machines in each centre, and also a modern electric machine, and a machine for embroidery work, that would enable them to train to make products of higher value. Even though the power supply is unreliable, the electric sewing machines will enhance the productivity of the women enormously. Bhupendra and Paul made notes and plans accordingly.

A week later on my stroll around town I encountered three women working at three old manual sewing machines in a cabin beside a main road fifty yards from a temple. Could I take a picture? Of course I could, but I couldn't get them to sit at their machines naturally. They grouped together, straight-backed, and adopted the funeral-solemn expressions that people often do, for a photo, in Tamil Nadu. No, they didn't like that picture, take another one. Yes, that's better.

So how many days a week do you work? Six days.

All day?

No, not all day, maybe half the

day.

And how much do you earn?

R1,000 per month

Each?

Yes, of course each.

Stupid man

R1,000 is just about exactly £13.00 per month. A sobering thought.

(A teacher earns only five times as much.)

But working at a sewing machine in a dry cabin is a gentler occupation for a woman, than working in the fields, as we often saw them, hundreds of yards from the road, tilling the ground, in bright saris, in the brutal monsoon rains. Or collecting water for hours each day. Or foraging for sticks for fuel all day. Or tending the goats. In temperatures over a hundred degrees. Endlessly, endlessly, like their mothers and their mothers before them. A sewing machine is definitely an engine of progress.

The Tourist Officer.

By the beginning of the second week, overwhelmed with impressions that came faster than I could record, I needed a lie-in and a lazy day in my own company. I let Bhupendra and Karpagam and Paul go off for the day in the Chevy while I had a stroll around Karaikudi. We had been so busy out in the countryside from dawn to dusk we had seen very little of the town itself. It was hard even to say how big it was or to estimate the size of the population.

After breakfast I headed south, past some street traders, and took myself into the court house. The whole place was wide open but nothing was going on. I had always imagined that in hot countries people start work very early and knock off in the middle of the day,

but although shops open earlier, public business doesn't start until 10.00am in Tamil Nadu.

So I sauntered further on and found at the next major junction, set back from the road a huge Tourist Office. That's what the sign said, but on closer inspection it seemed to be the local town hall. Completely empty. Not quite empty. There was a ceremonial hall, with a huge marble dance floor that was being watered with hose pipes by two very small cleaning ladies.

The Tourist Office? I asked and they squealed. A visitor!

Fortunately the Tourist Office, a small room opposite the staircase was just opening for business. The Tourist Officer was very polite, petite, and spoke very good English.

Did she have a map of Karaikudi? I asked when we were both seated.

She put her head on one side, had a think. No, there isn't a map of the town.

Could she tell me the size of the population of Karaikudi? Er...no.

She ferreted in a cupboard and produced for me a sheaf of leaflets covering notable tourist spots in Tamil Nadu. Rameswaram, Tanjore, Madurai, Ooty, Mamallapuram, Pondicherry. But not Karaikudi.

She also gave me a beautiful poster of the famously stunning tropical beach at Kanniyakumari, the southernmost tip on the subcontinent, where the Arabian Sea meets the Indian Ocean. She had half a dozen more posters in her collection, depicting temples and palaces and sculptures and nature reserves.

Could I have another poster? No, she said firmly, only one, and placed them out of my reach.

But she did put the visitor's book in front of me and invited me to write an entry.

Thank for you for your very helpful service and introduction to your beautiful city, I wrote. I leafed through the previous pages. The Tourist Office had received just 15 visitors in the last two years. All were from Indian families apart from one from Israel.

I worry about that girl. Does she still go to her little lonely office every day, in that big empty building, and sit at her desk, with nothing to do, hoping that a tourist might arrive, this month or next month or the month after? I think so.

The courthouse was humming when I called in again. I joined the throng of gawpers at the door. A couple of young miscreants (a favourite newspaper term) in handcuffs were being arraigned before a court official. Bored, in a short-sleeved white shirt, he jotted into his paperwork, while half a dozen police officers, looking more like air force generals than cops, in immaculate khakis, guarded the prisoners. The formalities completed, the miscreants were led away. They didn't look happy.

For the record, we had several estimates of the population of Karaikudi. 50,000 said Vasu, the hotel manager. One lakh, (100,000) said a caller at Kumar's Bakery and Coffee Shop, one evening. Two or three lakhs, said Paul, and that seems to be right. Karaikudi is not mentioned in the *Rough Guide to Southern India*, but for the record, it is worth a visit, if only to visit Muneeswaran Kovil Street. That is where you will find 30 or 40 huge antique shops, (they go on forever, courtyards, galleries, storey after storey, candle-lit in power-outs) containing every imaginable artefact from Moghul sculpture and paintings to Cadbury's chocolate tins from the era of the Raj. If you do go, pop into the Tourist Office and sign the visitor's book, and say hello.

The Child Slaves

We never met them; the little boy was aged nine and called Mirthika and the girl, Meena was twelve. All I can tell you is that Paul and Vinnarasi took a call, in the middle of the day and we had to revise our schedule and get back to town as soon as possible so that they could attend an emergency meeting. As well as being NGO leaders, Paul and Vinnarasi have some sort of recognised quasi-legal role. The two children had to be taken into care. Paul and Vinnarasi had been called in by the police.

The full story came out the next day. The parents, still quite young, in their mid-thirties, had separated, and both had found other partners. Neither of them wanted the responsibility of looking after their children, so a buyer had been found. The children were to be sold, for R20,000, about £250, as servants to another family, for life. In other words, *sold into slavery*. But the crime was detected, the police made their arrests, the children were taken into care and (I have heard from Paul) are now living with an affectionate foster family, and are attending school. The parents and the buyers are being prosecuted. These sort of stories are not uncommon in the Indian press.

When I opened my bedroom window each morning to inhale the scented, spicy air of Tamil Nadu, I looked down into the walled garden of a big grey square house next to the hotel. The acre of garden was thickly overgrown, home perhaps to a family of black snakes, and canopied by a couple of glorious sixty-foot coconut trees. I don't think the house was in occupation, but every morning, an elderly maid would sweep the front porch and paint a *rangoli* in the dirt in front of the house, especially after heavy rain. Meanwhile at the far end of the rear garden, a young maid, who seemed to live

in a lean-to built against the end wall, would sit on the grass under a mango tree, and wash a stack of dishes in a metal tub. The scene was calm, wordless. It seemed to me that many of these big houses, set back behind high walls and lush overgrown gardens might easily hide other sinister stories like those of Meena and Mirthika. Or maybe I have an overactive imagination.

The Final Stage

The Widow's Home was actually our starting point, our first meeting on the afternoon of our arrival. I am sure the itinerary said 'rest period', but in the Mistry universe rest is for wimps. Before we had unpacked we met up with Paul and Karpagam and Vinnarasi and went off to visit the Widow's Home, which Vinnarasi manages and which has received a major grant from the Kamla Foundation. A quiet green lane, a small courtyard, a big house set back from the road, rented from the local temple. A kitchen and office, and then the first room, in which eight or ten women were sitting and talking, greeting us with palms pressed together and welcoming smiles. In the second room the women were older, quieter. Some of them were resting or sleeping. In the third room the women were older, in fact very old, tiny, toothless, shrivelled, some rocking, or sleeping, or floating in some other world. The final stage. They lay on mats on the floor, because frankly they are easier to keep clean that way. Vinnarasi and her colleagues fed them morsels of food, helped them to sips of water, stroked, wiped, murmured words of comfort. Families, governments, religious bodies and NGOs make barely any provision for widows in Indian society. There are one or two care institutions in each city, but they fail to meet local needs. If they had not found protection and dignity in Vinnarasi's Widow's Home, these women would have been living, begging and dying on the streets.

Parliamentary Report

Maybe change is on the way for the women of India. There is, as we speak a bill before Parliament reserving one third of all seats at future elections for women. The bad news is that this bill has been before Parliament for ten years, doggedly delayed and obstructed, particularly by MPs representing constituencies of 'backward' classes and castes. The good news is that many observers think that the prospects for this bill passing into law this year are very good, and offer the possibility of a massive shift in power.

Trains or Drains?

One of the most sublime moments in Indian cinema, indeed in all cinema, comes in the monumental 1955 film, by Satyajit Ray, *Pather Panchali*. Apu and his sister are miles from home, running across sunlit open fields, through tall vegetation, when they reach an incline, a railway embankment, and wow, from nowhere a huge metallic steam-breathing locomotive roars onto the screen and across their landscape. They watch it recede with awestruck wonder.

Modernity!

I have myself experienced such a moment. Well, almost. Bhupendra and I, and Paul and Karpagam, were miles from anywhere, about thirty miles north of Kovelpatti, (I couldn't find the exact spot on the map now) inspecting a dried-up well in a remote hamlet. There was a cluster of primitive houses, an acre or two of vegetables under cultivation, a few chickens. We didn't know the railway line was only a hundred metres away. The locomotive appeared from behind a grove of trees, drawing hundreds of rust-coloured freight wagons from horizon to horizon, one of those enduring images of India.

"How much railway track has been built since independence?" I asked one afternoon, watching a passenger train slowly crossing a silvery-grey watery landscape.

"Very little," was the reply.

Well that may be about to change. According to the *Guardian*, 31st December 2011, a bill is about to be steered through the Indian Parliament to allocate funding and commission studies for the construction of half a dozen high speed corridors for 200mph bullet trains. One route will connect Delhi, Agra, Varanasi and Kolkata. Another will link Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Pune. Some transport experts doubt that such a project is achievable, or would be value for money. Britain's HS2 scheme, a miniature project by comparison, will cost £33bn. The distances in India are so great, the terrain so difficult in places, the costs will be astronomical. Indian trains are presently among the slowest in the world. Twenty years ago average speed was 35mph. Today it is 45mph. Some experts argue for measures to improve on these speeds without going to the expense that decades of work on new track for bullet trains will require. Proponents of the scheme point to the shiny new Metro in Delhi, and the high-speed network under construction in China.

"There is no reason why we can't do what China has done," said Dr Varadharajan Sridar, a railway expert from Bangalore.

A recent book by Sudhir Kumar, *Bankruptcy To Billions: How Indian Railways Were Transformed*, describes the modernisation of the railway network in recent years. It is now a profitable enterprise with an annual revenue of £13bn, carrying 25 million passengers each day. The Indian railway ministry is reputed to be the second biggest public sector employer in the world (if you count the Chinese Army) with 1.25 million staff. It is also, according to a leader in the New Indian Express in November, the *most corrupt and maladministered* arm of government. There were three rail crashes in the two weeks we were in India, due to poor maintenance, according to the paper.

And of course the rail network is competing for funding with other infrastructure projects. Desperately needed roads, power stations, canals and bridges and sewage treatment plants. Water supply isn't even mentioned. Indian politicians are not very excited by water supply, according to weary engineers quoted in Michael Specter's* survey of strategic water shortages in India, published five years ago. Politicians like to be associated with flashier projects, iconic skyscraper buildings, bridges, or, perhaps high speed trains. (A skyscraper is defined as a building exceeding 240 metres. India has only two, but has fourteen under construction, including the Tower of India, in Mumbai, which will soon be the second tallest building in the world.**) We certainly met villagers in remote hamlets in November who had been promised connection to piped water supplies by candidates touring the rural areas before the last election, but since the election neither the politicians nor the water have appeared.

We discussed these issues with Professor N Manimekalai at Bharathidasan University in Tiruchirappalli (Trichy to you.) The professor is an economist who for the last five years has headed up the new Gender Studies department at the university, bravely publicising issues that politicians would rather not talk about; basic health, hygiene and sanitation programmes for schoolgirls and young women., and pioneering new services. During our meeting Kamla Foundation formalised an agreement with her department to study the impact of Kamla's investments in rural communities, particularly on women and girls. Even in urban areas poor sanitation means that streets can be flooded with sewage by monsoon rains, spreading disease.

"Sometimes I fear that we shall never have public toilets in Tamil Nadu," said the professor, "simply because we have to spend so

much money repairing the roads every year, after the monsoons." Ironically, as we spoke, the thunder rolled, the sky darkened and buckets were set out in corridors and stairwells to collect the water dripping through the roof. The late rain was welcomed by local farmers, but the heavy monsoon's certainly inflict terrible damage on the state's infrastructure each year.

Budgets are limited and politicians can be apathetic but before we become too pessimistic about the future of water supply in India, we could remind ourselves of great and encouraging achievements in other spheres. Last year there was only one case of polio in the whole of India.*** Due to a massive vaccination programme, involving a million volunteers, private philanthropy, international health bodies and coordination by local authorities, the disease is on the point of eradication. Globally deaths from malaria have fallen by 25% in the last ten years, but even so there were 655,000 deaths from malaria in 2010, and other waterborne diseases are equally lethal. The problems are immense but so is the potential. One day it perhaps won't be necessary to choose between trains and drains. But until then, every well that Kamla Foundation can install will improve thousands of lives.

* Michael Specter, *The Last Drop*, New Yorker, 23rd October 2006.

** *Skyscraper Craze Shows Chinese May Be Heading For A Fall*.

Guardian 12th Jan 2012

*** Jason Burke, *Eradicating Polio Drop By Drop: India On Track To Win War*

Against Crippling Disease. Guardian 3rd Jan 2012.

Welcome to Aakash

The Indian media sometimes boasts that there are half a billion new consumers in the country, a vast new educated middle class driving an extraordinary social, technological and political revolution of the sort that we have never seen before on the planet. Maybe so, but a quarter of Indians are unable to read or write, and another quarter have very limited literacy. R150 (£2) per day is a common wage. Only a little over 100 million Indians have access to the Internet, about 10%, compared with 95% in USA and Europe. But the government estimates that 600 million Indians will be using the Internet within five years, a new breathtaking advance in Indian society.

This new revolution may be driven by the Aakash, (Aakash is a Hindi word meaning sky, space, heaven, firmament) essentially an Indian Ipad, which is being developed by a team at Rajasthan Institute of Technology, Jodhpur. Already 100,000 of these tablets are being manufactured and within a few weeks a new version will come on stream which will allow hundreds of millions of Indians in remote rural areas to connect to the internet via local mobile phone networks. Priced at £35, they will be cheap enough, just, to be within reach of the poorest communities.

There are one or two snags to overcome. A system of icons that will make Aakash useable even by the illiterate. A solar charger to power up the tablet. Observers say that small farmers will soon be checking irrigation levels, seed suppliers, market prices via the Aakash, while children will be learning online, and women will be accessing health or education applications. "This is empowerment

on a global scale," says Professor Prem Kalra, who is heading up production.

I hope he is right. Vinnarasi in Karaikudi and Karpagam, in Pillayapatti, supported by the Kamla Foundation, spend much of their working lives bringing girls and women together into social, educational and consciousness-raising networks. They hold seminars, public events, campaigns on topics that are *unspeakable* in Tamil Nadu's conservative society; HIV/AIDS, violence against women and girls, domestic abuse, sanitation, discrimination against the lower castes, the plight of the elderly and widowed. There is a huge file of press cuttings recording political and media attention to their causes. The communities are so thinly scattered it takes several hours journey, in darkness, for them to reach a girls' group in a small community, a lonely and dangerous occupation for a woman. Vinnarasi travels on her motor bike, but Karpagam uses her push-bike or local buses. They are heroes (ok, heroines) holding women and girls in relationship, building relationship and community, teaching, advising, enabling women to struggle for education, public services and equality.

Paul Mason's new book, *Why It's All Kicking Off Everywhere*, (Verso 2012) attributes the Arab Spring and the present wave of social revolutions all over the globe to the empowerment of the young and disenfranchised through the new digital social media. Even the most authoritarian and conservative regimes are vulnerable to active citizens who can communicate and coordinate action. Let's hope that the Aakash, in the hands of the women of the rural areas in the decades ahead has an equally positive effect on the reorganisation of power and gender equality, in Tamil Nadu, and across Indian society. The sky is the limit, wouldn't you say?

The Wells of Tamil Nadu



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