



India is a colourful experience in every way. Every sense is continually being challenged with new impressions

Tamil Nadu – a carpet bombardment of mixed impressions

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The first visit to India can be a heady experience as it was for the writer, who visited Tamil Nadu where the state offered both strong sensory impressions as well as violent self-torture

THE SWEET scent of jasmine dominates as I push past yet another of the countless small florists' stalls lying side by side in the extremely narrow lane.

There are otherwise enough impressions clamouring for the attention of my senses. Explosions of bright colours everywhere I look; the heavy, damp warmth, the salty pearls of sweat running down my forehead and the flies buzzing around my head.

But first and foremost, there

is the constant hum of the mass of humanity around me. Here, people are wheeling and dealing, laughing and arguing in Tamil, Hindi and English with a pronounced Indian accent. I'm in the middle of almost 9 million locals in the city of Chennai – previously known as Madras – on the south coast of India in the state of Tamil Nadu.

Two metres further on the picture changes completely. Here, it smells of curry, garlic and bananas. A scooter squeezes through with its horn blaring at full volume and the masses part in a sort of synchronised movement, opening for the motorcyclist like a school of small fish avoiding a shark. The unwritten rules are new to me, and I get an extra honk before I realise that it is now that I need to jump out of the way. An elderly, almost toothless woman in a colourful green sari shouts something at me. I smile at her

and her angry expression immediately changes into something more accommodating.

It's Sunday morning and even though the majority of Indians are Hindus, they have long ago adopted the Christian tradition of keeping Sundays free. The day of rest does not count, though, for this wholesale market for vegetables and flowers, which is busy all the time. The temples are never closed and the masses of flowers people take with them to pray are always fresh. Garland-makers come to the market to buy flower heads to plait the traditional garlands that are so important in everyday Indian life. They use the garlands in the temple, for weddings and not least in their hair, as a natural sweet-smelling alternative to a deodorant or an evening bath.

The guide assures me that there are a lot more people here on a weekday. I believe him, but think to myself that the current density

of the crowd is actually more than enough to give me a clear impression of the atmosphere.

A fascinating anthill

THIS IS my first visit to this populous country. At a rough estimate there are around 1.3 billion people living here. You notice the crowds everywhere; not least because the population density is three times as large as that of Denmark. Here, there are people everywhere. But it is not at all as claustrophobic as I had feared. Probably mostly because Indians – or at least those we run into – are friendly, interested and extremely hospitable people.

I'm on a guided tour of Tamil Nadu. The programme is tight. The minibus is driven by an experienced local Indian driver. The traffic is – for want of a better word – spectacular. In fact, it is almost frightening. Here, they drive on the left and four lane roads often have at least six

or seven improvised lanes comprised of a chaotic mix of cars, tuk-tuks, lorries, ox carts and different types of motorcycle, the majority of which we would class as scooters. Loose cows and dogs cross the road as they feel like it. A contempt for death is a clear prerequisite for getting along. There are simply no gaps in the traffic, and road-users place a blind trust in their brakes and horns, that echo around the streetscape in a ceaseless honking concert. On one of the more trafficked streets in Chennai I counted 125 honks per minute – on a Sunday afternoon.

HOW TO GET THERE

Air India flies directly from Copenhagen to New Delhi, from where you can take domestic flights to all the corners of India. The time-difference is a modest 3.5 hours.



ERIK SCHON

Flowers play an important part in Indian culture

The sight of numerous scooters transporting entire families with children balanced on a knife edge provokes an initial panic attack that, however, subsides after a few hours in the maelstrom. After a day or two the traffic experience becomes rather fascinating. It is perhaps not so surprising that Chennai is the city in the world that has the highest mortality rate from traffic. It's also not surprising that by far the majority of the victims are motorcyclists or pedestrians. Here, 93 percent of all vehicles are motorcycles and only a minuscule number of people use crash-helmets. India is not really suited to 'drive yourself' holidays. There, it's been said. As a tourist in a minibus you temporarily feel pretty safe. It's actually extremely rare that there is any possibility for any of the many road-users to reach high speeds.

Pain and happiness

ON THE way to the next sight, we pass a procession in the street in front of one of Chennai's poorer areas. We stop the bus and jump out. The sight that greets us is not for the faint-hearted. A large group of

people are taking part in a religious procession that is meant to demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their faith. The means is pain. Self-torture. Deep body piercings without anaesthetic. In front of the procession is a middle-aged woman. She is dragging a large bundle of fresh green coconuts behind her on two ropes, that with coarse fish-hooks are fastened to the skin on her back. Her expression is understandably tight-lipped but also focused and determined.

In her wake, the parade is dominated by men, women and children with heavy metal spikes driven through their cheeks. The sight is surreal. A number of the adults look happy and proud. Several of the children appear brave but frightened and some look exactly as I would do in the same situation: frightened, tortured and unhappy ... People attach banknotes to the spikes. The collection goes to the temple and the penitents hope that their agonising sacrifice will grant them the favour of the gods. It is actually painful to witness this tradition and I have to remind myself that I am a guest in a completely foreign cultural

circle. We are witnesses to an age-old ritual that primarily has only survived until the present day in this part of India. When I get back into the comfortable air-conditioned bus, I cross my fingers that the poor people really get the fair wind in their lives that they are hoping for ...

A few hours later, the picture changes completely. We are invited in to a Hindu Indian wedding. Broad white smiles light up everywhere you look. Everyone is decorated with long flower garlands. The women are wearing beautiful silk saris and gold jewellery. A traditional Indian band fills the room with foreign-sounding tones at full blast. It's a great honour for the bride and groom that we have come in, and they insist that we eat with them and are photographed together with the happy couple.

The contrast between this and what we experienced a few hours ago is enormous. You're thrown between impressions of extreme poverty and unimaginable wealth. Smiles and laughter here. Blood and tears there. The scent of the flowers is replaced by the smell of fish. Or spices, or traffic, or tasty food. India is

an explosion of cultural impressions. Chaos and order. Modern and deeply traditional. It is exciting, intense, all-encompassing and exotic. But wherever we turn, we are met with open arms. Indians are generally positive, curious and tolerant. People will gladly pose for a photo and expect nothing in return ... and a lot of local selfies are taken with the pale-skinned visitors. Tamil Nadu is obviously not a place that has been overrun by tourists – even though in reality, there is a lot to recommend it.

A rich past

ON THE fourth day we reach Thanjavur, where we are to visit 'The Great Temple' or the Brihadisvara Temple as it is really called. During the tour we've already seen quite a few temples, castles, memorials and museums. If I'm really honest, most of them look pretty much alike. But don't misunderstand me: it is extremely interesting to visit an active Hindu temple – definitely an experience that shouldn't be missed – but they often look very similar so





Like a human hedgehog – with the difference that the spines are turned inwards – this proud Hindu takes part in a street procession that is all about getting closer to the gods through pain

temples number three, four and five during a period of a few days easily bring even the most enthusiastic temple visitor to the verge of a cultural overdose ... So I didn't really have great expectations when the minibus headed out on the day's temple visit.

When we got out in the mid-day heat, I realised immediately that my modest expectations would soon be put to shame. This temple stood out markedly from everything we'd seen before. Brihadisvara was built around 1,000 years ago. About 130,000 tons of granite were used to build it and all the enormous stone blocks were transported from a quarry more than 50 kilometres away from the building site. The temple tower itself shoots up almost 70 metres over the earth's surface and the great dome on the top is a single massive granite stone weighing around 80 tons. Even nowadays it would be considered an engineering challenge to hoist this into place ...

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Travel with a guide and driver. You won't come out of the Indian traffic alive on your own.
- Avoid 'travellers tummy'. Only eat boiled or roast food. Drink only bottled water
- Get out and about in Indian life. Markets, temples, local restaurants. Here was where I had the greatest experiences on my trip.

Every surface is carved with figures and symbols from the rich Hindu spirit world, supplemented with dozens of scenes of local daily life from 1,000 years ago. They seemed to have lived well in those days. Thousands of figures dance round the facade and stare at the visitors. The gigantic scale of the construction, the ancient feat of engineering and the unmistakable feeling of being part of the filming of an 'Indiana Jones' film almost takes my breath away. It takes a few minutes before I realise exactly what I'm in the middle of: a wonder of the ancient world on a par with the pyramids – just a lot more complex. Nonetheless, the whole thing was built in nine years – with primitive tools, artistic talent and an awful lot of raw muscle.

An hour into the guided tour, the guide draws my attention to one of the many mysteries of the place. One of the granite reliefs on the side of the tower stands out. An obviously different person – who both in dress and facial expression appears more European than Indian – surveys the scene from something that looks like a window. Nobody can explain why there is a well-nourished European with a soft hat lurking amongst hordes of typical Hindu gods. What the devil is he doing there? He was carved in granite almost 300 years before Marco Polo, as the first westerner, visited the King of Thanjavur. I admit that I share the unknown figure's fascination

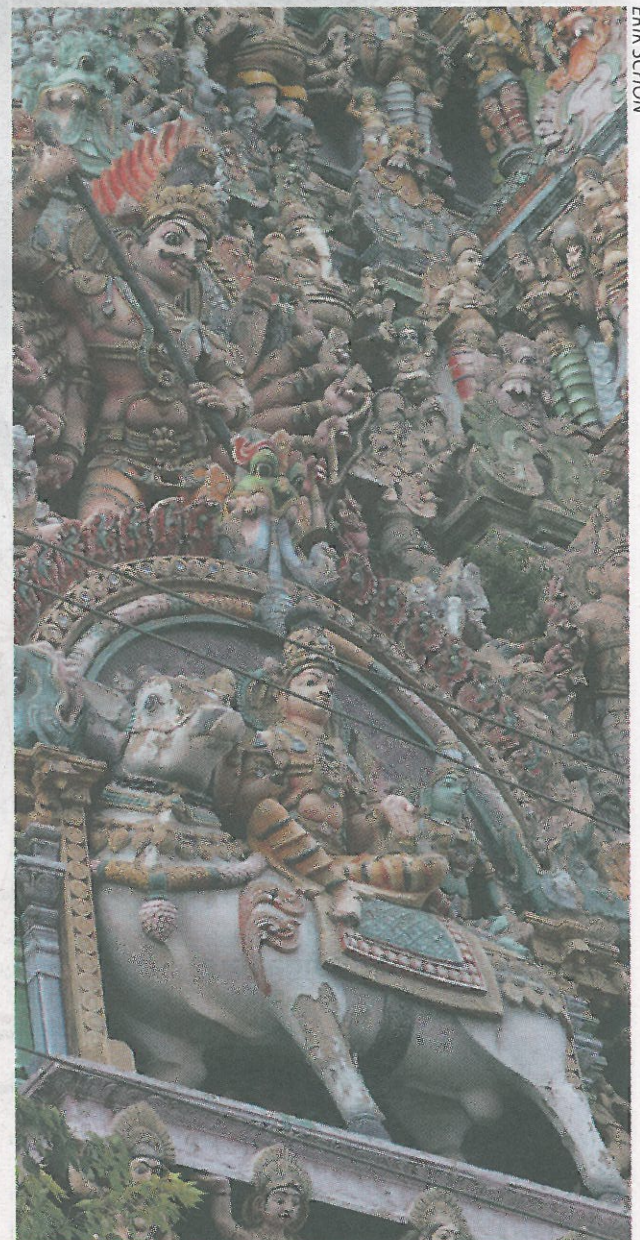
with this place and could easily spend a couple of days here. But the sun is on its way down and we leave the historic building just as it is looking its best in the evening light ...

A foretaste

I DON'T know exactly what I'd expected when I sat down on the plane to India. But I do know that the experience was markedly different to anything that I've previously experienced.

India is a cultural, ethnic and religious melting-pot. A multi-cultural society, where differences – and toleration of things foreign – has been a completely natural part of everyday life for centuries. It is certainly one of the underlying reasons that Hindus are as open and curious towards strangers as they are. In a whole week's travelling – often through extremely poor areas – our party of eight didn't come across a single threatening or hostile Indian. Despite squeezing through the tightly-packed masses every single day, nobody had lost as much as a trouser button to thieves.

I've rarely had so many different impressions in such a short time. Mahatma Gandhi spent two years travelling round India sucking in experiences before he felt ready to represent the entire population in the Indian campaign for freedom. I've spent six days in one corner of the country. This was an appetiser that cries out for more. Much more.



Most Indian temples make the rainbow look pale in comparison