

# Holiday Greetings!

Yes, I confess it, have become a foot soldier in the “War on Christmas™.” I have joined the armies of evil who would umm, well, erhh.....actually, I’m not sure what evil thing it is that we are doing, except wishing people “Happy Holidays” this time of year! In a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious society, it would seem to be the polite thing to do. I have friends who celebrate Eid, Hanukah, and Solstice, as well as Christmas. Some may celebrate Kwanzaa, too—I haven’t asked. But, in Bush’s America™, being polite is apparently evil.

For, you see, some zealots on the Right have decided that they, Christians<sup>1</sup>, are an oppressed minority. And how are they oppressed? By not being able to force their religious practices onto everyone else! It’s not fair! I mean, why do those “un-American” types insist on having their own silly religions? Everyone knows that the US is a Christian nation, and that Jesus himself guides all of W’s actions. We should just get rid of that pesky First Amendment (I mean, who really needs freedom of speech, or assembly except traitors?) and declare a Christian theocracy. And then everyone would be much happier, really.

As Xmas<sup>2</sup> approaches, it is clear that many in the administration who claim to be followers of the Prince of Peace may actually be working for the opposition. Or else they’ve never actually read anything Christ had to say. Blessed are the peacemakers, not the war makers. So He said. They will be called the sons of God. Attacking nations that do us no harm is good, they say. Torturing is good, they say. Killing the innocents is just the price we pay, they say. Civil liberties are no longer necessary, they say. Some days I no longer recognize my nation.

But America is beginning to awaken from this long, national nightmare. As casualties mount in Iraq, we have begun to ask why. As the administration talks of progress made, we ask where. And as we are asked to sacrifice more and more, our young, our fortunes, and our future, so that Halliburton and the richest of the rich can further prosper, we begin to rebel.

There may yet be hope for America.

I’ve been doing my small part to get the word out, to speak truth to power. I e-mail, I blog, and I speak of my beliefs. I find more and more people agreeing with me, and more and more having the courage to say so aloud<sup>3</sup>. It has been evolutionary, not revolutionary, change, but it is happening.

But enough of politics. One page suffices for now<sup>4</sup>.

My family has been doing well this year. Everyone remains reasonably healthy, and we gained a new member—**Devan** Petrusha, son of my cousin Alex and his wife Wendy. He is a big baby, fairly content, but with a tendency to regurgitate a lot—all who hold him get little reminders of this. Dmitria and Lucas seem to accept his existence, but don’t seem particularly excited by it. Maybe when he gets big enough to play with them.....

My brother had an addition to his family this spring, too. After months of begging and cajoling, a new puppy joined the William Petrusha household. Kalyna, the prime mover, had spent months looking through web sites for a puppy, and found one at the Humane Society, a black bundle of seemingly endless energy named **Smoochie**. “Belle”, as she was renamed (although I refer to her only by her birth name, as it seems more appropriate), is part lab and several parts something else. She is smaller than her predecessor, Whitney, and seems to chew and dig much, much more. She was not a stand-out at puppy school—well, not in a POSITIVE way—but the kids all love her, and even clean up her poop. And Smoochie loves snow and winter—she cavorts in the snow, and loves eating any ice she can find. If we could just get her to stop jumping on people. Down, Smoochie. Down! DOWN!!!! Good girl!

**Kalyna**, my goddaughter, continues to excel in school, which she loves more than just about anything in the world.

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1. Christians comprise 76.5% of the population, according to recent statistics. Other major religious groups include Jewish (1.3%), Muslim/Islam(0.5%), and Buddhist (0.5%). Other religions practiced in the USA (<.5 and >.3%) are Hindu, Unitarian Universalist, Pagan, Wiccan, Spiritualist, Native American, Baha’I, New Age, Sikh, Scientologist, Taoist, Deity, Druid, Eckankar, Santaria, Rastafarian. 14.1% of Americans are not religious (i.e. atheist or agnostic).
  2. **Xmas**: This abbreviation for Christmas is of Greek origin. The word for Christ in Greek is Xristos. During the 16th century, Europeans began using the first initial of Christ’s name, “X” in place of the word Christ in Christmas as a shorthand form of the word. Although the early Christians understood that X stood for Christ’s name, later Christians who did not understand the Greek language mistook “Xmas” as a sign of disrespect.
  3. The Right has been very good at branding anyone who dares disagree with the administration as a traitor. Kerry, decorated war veteran? Traitor! Jimmy Carter, Nobel Peace Laureate? Traitor! John Paul II, pope? Trai.....err, interfering foreigner! Their logic—it is treason to disagree with your country or President at a time of war. Which war? The War on Terror! When will it end? Never! Remember, we are at war with East Asia. We’ve ALWAYS been at war with East Asia.....
  4. If you want more, either read my blog <http://lubaluba.blogspot.com> or get on my e-mail list (send me an e-mail at [lubamail@earthlink.net](mailto:lubamail@earthlink.net)).

She is in middle school now, and is a real, live TEENAGER, having turned 13 in October. I was there for her birthday (an unusual event, she reminds me), and she noted that she didn't really feel like a teenager yet. She does have a bit of attitude, but is not as surly as some, and can be quite helpful when she wants to. She baby-sits her brother and sister, but is too young to drive—the ideal age, says my brother. Kalyna plays soccer, reads a lot of books, studies, studies, and plays with Smoochie.

**Nick**, Mr. Friendly, continues to play sports—lots of them—and attend school. He is a fifth grader, and goes to some sort of 5th-6th grade upper elementary school. He has strict teachers, knows all his state capitals, and has lots of friends. He is as gregarious as his Papa. Nick is involved in several sports, including flag football, baseball and basketball. He appreciates a good snow day, a good doughnut, and all the finer things in life.

**Maria**, aka "Fuzz", continues in her own determined way. Recently turned eight<sup>5</sup>, she takes life seriously. She plays hard (soccer especially), he works hard (and loves school almost as much as Kalyna), and has a rich fantasy life. Her small family of dolls and stuffed animals keeps expanding, and she's begun home schooling them. Petrusa Elementary School is quite busy; there are many after school clubs (art, fashion, reading, games) and intramural sports (soccer, basketball), and a full class schedule. Miss Maria is assisted by Miss Kalyna, and their helper Mary Maguire. There are handouts, quizzes, and lots of homework. This year they even had a yearbook<sup>6</sup>!

The kids traveled out west this year. They flew into Las Vegas (tawdry), and then spent a week exploring northern Arizona with their parents. They stayed a few nights at the grand Canyon, and visited Hoover Dam, Montezuma's Castle, and Sedona. They quite enjoyed it.



My parents continue in good health, well into their 70s. They work in their garden, in my garden, and spend time with their grandchildren. My Dad continues with his carpentry, building furniture for Bill, Laurie and me. My mother still embroiders, although mostly in the winter, and has set out to make an embroidered pillow for each member of the younger generation. She's well on her way. They traveled a bit this year, visiting with friends in upstate New York, and even having lunch in Cooperstown<sup>7</sup>.

I was busy this year, too. You would think that, being part-time (only some forty hours a week, forty weeks a year), I would have lots of free time to read and keep the house organized. But tasks seem to expand to fill all available time, and the more time you have, the more tasks you to take on, or so it seems. UCARE has kept me busy. I'm on the board of directors, and got talked into being recording secretary at our annual Board meeting in May (organizing and typing those notes was a lot of work!) I also became webmaster, and have been learning html<sup>8</sup> and how to use the templates on the UCARE web site (<http://www.ucareinc.org>). I've expanded the site from barely six pages to 32 (with more to come), and update it frequently. I've gotten better at it, but it's still a lot of work.

Our big project this year was "Hearts for Art." Several of our members traveled to Ukraine last May, and visited six

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5. Since she is being raised sort of Catholic, Maria had her first communion this year. She got to wear a small version of a wedding dress, and then had some sort of church ceremony. I really don't know what it all means, but seeing her in a frilly dress (well, in the photos) made the entire ordeal seem worthwhile. And she got presents.....
  6. It was quite a nice production, too. Kalyna and Mary took photos and printed out a proper yearbook. I have tried to recreate it on Maria's section of my website.
  7. They had intended to visit the Baseball hall of Fame, but got there too late. It's not that either of them has a particular interest in the history of baseball, just that my Mom thought it might a good place to buy souvenirs for the grandkids.
  8. "hypertext mark-up language", in case you were wondering

orphanages. They made stuffed heart-shaped pillows with the kids (“Hearts”) and helped them paint pictures (“Art”). The kids had a wonderful time, let their imaginations soar, and created over a thousand works of art—acrylic and watercolor—for us. They also received education about AIDS (still a major scourge in Ukraine) and human trafficking (ditto). The children kept the pillows, but the art was brought back to the USA, where we have mounted several gallery shows. The response has been fantastic, and all the funds raised will go back into the orphanages and into scholarship programs for the kids.

I’m still working at Huron Valley Sinai Hospital, and continue to dwell in Union Lake. My gardens thrive, thanks to the loving care given them by my parents, as I have been away for a good bit of the growing season these past few years. I still put in many, many flats of annuals (alyssum, dusty miller, pinks and blue salvia predominating, but lots of other plants thrown in at my whim), but my perennials have filled in and now require mostly maintenance. This summer was an odd one, with my neighborhood somehow escaping the drought that predominated in the area. Last year we had NO ACORNS; this year there was a bumper crop. My fruit trees grow bigger and produce enough fruit to actually pick, but the tomatoes and peppers wasted away (damn that wilt fungus!). And, as always, the squirrels ate all the hazelnuts before they were ripe, to the disgust of my mother.

I spent a lot more time than usual on my pysanky this year; it’s something I’ve always enjoyed doing, but have, in the past, only done for a few weeks before Easter. This year I continued making them throughout summer, and into fall and winter. I worked on traditional patterns over the summer, and then made “Jack-o-Lantern” pysanky for Halloween and snowflake pysanky for Christmas. I’ve photographed many of them and put them on my website, if you should wish to take a look.

Which bring me back to the web. The internet has grown to take up more and more of my time. I bought a digital camera several years ago, and so take lots and lots of photos<sup>9</sup>. I post many of them (the better ones) on my website. It is a great way to share them with everyone; much better than the old system of putting them in envelopes and storing them in boxes and drawers, and forgetting about them. I have photos of my friends and family, of my house and my travels on my site, as well as photos of church events, UCARE activities and my pysanky. Have a look sometime—just wander about the site:

**<http://homepage.mac.com/lubap>**

I also try and post regularly to my blog, where I comment on various topics (politics, friends and family) and post photos and interesting things I’ve found on the web. Have a look there, too, if you want:

**<http://lupaluba.blogspot.com>**

And, if you do drop by, leave me a comment or drop me a line!

I’ve traveled a bit this year, as usual, but it’s been mostly revisiting old places rather than seeing brand new ones. Still, it was a lot of fun, as I got to range about the globe, add lots of miles to my frequent fliers accounts, add lots of new stamps to my passport, and add new names to my list of friends. Many of my trips were working vacations, but it was enjoyable work, and it is always possible to find a bit of time for just plain fun!

## INDIA

On my last trip to India, in 2000, I had a chance to spend some time with my friend Sara Bhattacharji. She is Community Health specialist, and had recently taken over the Low Cost Effective Care Unit<sup>10</sup> of CMCH (Christian

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9. Digital photography is brilliant! It allows so much more creativity than film photography. I was initially hesitant about switching over—I’d been shooting with my Olympus SLR since 1978, and knew everything there was to know about using it. And at first my fears were confirmed—a new Japanese camera with way too many buttons and options left me shooting on “Auto” for the first few months. But, eventually, with a bit of tutoring from a photographer friend, I begin to get the hang of it, and began using the many features. I now switch between f-stops and ISOs without even thinking.

The main advantages of digital photography are the ability to see the photos immediately and reshoot if necessary, and the ability to edit afterwards. I can crop, adjust color, and even straighten my photos. I can lighten and darken improperly exposed photos. I can get red-eye out, but, unfortunately, still haven’t found a way to open closed eyes, or get rid of Nick’s goofy grimaces.

10. CMC was founded in 1900 by Ida Scudder, an American missionary doctor. She had seen too many Indian women die in childbirth, and wanted to provide a hospital where they could deliver safely. Over the years the hospital grew and expanded, and, by the 1950s, had become a huge, multi-specialty referral center for much of South Asia. The LCECU was created, a small hospital within the CMCH, to continue Ida’s original mission of providing care to the poor women (and men)

Medical College Hospital). As she was showing me around, she spoke of her plans to build an addition, and of her desire to open a Labor Unit that would serve the poor women of Vellore. I promised her that, when she was ready, I would come to India and help her do it. Sara raised funds, drew up plans, and got to building. Last summer (2004) she let me know that the building was complete, so I bought my ticket and returned to Vellore.

And so I spent the month of February in hot, dusty Vellore. Sara had provided the infrastructure—a beautiful, clean labor ward with two beds, and a postpartum ward with many more. A previous volunteer had painted lovely designs on the walls, and the beds all had new, colorful rugs on them. Nurses, midwives and community health workers had been recruited, and had gotten some practical training. An antepartum clinic had been established.

So what was left to do? Protocols had to be written, chart forms created, and practical education in the use of both given. That was my job. Luckily, Mathew Matthai, one of my friends at the main hospital, had helped the WHO write up a set of guidelines for the provision of obstetric care in third world countries. Using his guidelines, my experience (in the US, Ukraine and India), Sara's experience, and with a lot of guidance from Jiji (another OB friend from Vellore), we were able to get organized.

It had been decided that the obstetric unit would be midwife run, with physician back-up. The patients would all be low risk, as we would not be doing any instrumental deliveries (forceps or cesarian). The main hospital had agreed to accept transfer of any patients who became high-risk during the course of their pregnancy or labor. Our patients would all be from the local community, which was generally quite poor; antenatal care was free for those who qualified<sup>11</sup>, and the cost of delivery and postpartum care was set at Rs. 500 (about \$10 US), similar to what they would pay at the "free"<sup>12</sup> government hospital.

We developed checklists that were to be used at the initial clinic interview to screen out potential problem patients, and those that were to be used at subsequent visits to make sure the pregnancy was proceeding normally. Any patients who deviated from the norms were immediately seen by a doctor at the clinic for further evaluation; those who developed problems were referred to the high risk clinic at CMC. I spent many hours in the antenatal clinic, measuring uterine funduses and listening for fetal heart tones<sup>13</sup>, and helping fill out antenatal forms.

I also gave weekly talks to the midwives. We learned how to use a partogram<sup>14</sup>, how to use the new forms that had been developed, how to use EDC calculators<sup>15</sup>, how to listen for fetal heart tone, and how to manage obstetric emergencies (fits, bleeding, fever, etc.). It was all very hands-on, practical training. The most interesting was teaching the nurse midwives how to measure cervical dilation. Sara and I had to first create a large board, from styrofoam, with holes in it ranging from 1 to 10 centimeters; we then had the midwives, with eyes closed, put their fingers in the holes and guess the measurement.

Things came together well, and Sara and I were looking forward to doing the first delivery in our new unit. The curtains were hung, forms printed out, beds properly arranged, and I was given a tour. Then the nursing staff informed Sara that she needed sweepers (cleaners), and the unit couldn't open until they were hired. New hires had to go through the entire hospital bureaucracy, and didn't get taken care of until well after I'd left at the end of February<sup>16</sup>.

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of Vellore.

11. Anyone who lived in our cachment area and had a ration card qualified for free care. Medications and lab tests had to be paid for, but doctor visits were free. As it was a local tradition for women to return home to their mothers for the birth of their first child, allowances were made for this.
12. The government hospital is technically free, but "gifts" and "tips" to the staff (which are not allowed at CMC) were invariably necessary to obtain care.
13. My senses have atrophied, I suspect, as I can no longer hear heart tones with just a stethoscope. But the clinic was noisy, and FHTs are notoriously difficult to hear in early pregnancy. I ended up buying an electronic monitor for the LCECU, which didn't arrive before I'd left for home. I'll get to see it when I next return to Vellore.
14. Here in the US we call these graphs "Friedman curves", after the doctor who developed and popularized them. Cervical dilation and station are charted on the y-axis and length of labor is charted on the x-axis. The WHO partogram is initiated when a patient enters active labor, and has "alert" and "action" lines; when the latter is crossed, patients are transferred to the main hospital for further management (usually pitocin or caesarian).
15. These are also known as "OB wheels" or "gestational wheels". When the due date or last menstrual period is entered, the other can be calculated, as can gestational age on any day of the pregnancy. These wheels are given away free by drug and formula companies in the USA, and are extremely rare in most third world nations. When I first visited India, I was surprised to find that the CMCH antenatal clinic had a daily computer printout, several pages long, which listed the gestational age for any given EDC (due date), on that particular clinic day. At smaller hospitals, the doctors would do quick paper and pencil calculations for each patient to determine gestational age.
16. Sara wrote to let me know when they had their first delivery; it went well.



One of the things I miss about India is the ever-present "chai". Several times a day I would be served a small cup of Indian tea, made with sugar, milk and cardamom, and steaming hot. Chai (or coffee) breaks are common throughout the day; it gives everyone a chance to sit and just chat. We would also have chai served at the end of any meeting or presentation; any visiting guest would immediately be served chai. Our twice weekly meetings with the staff of our unit weren't just educational—they were also social. Anyone who was getting married, or had a birthday, or some other important life event, would have it celebrated with colleagues. Small gifts were usually given. On my last day, to my surprise, there was a small meeting in my honor; chai and sweets were served, and I was given lovely gift—quite flashy necklace and earrings. I treasure them still, and will have to take them with me to wear next time I visit.

One of the other things I got to do while in Vellore was to finally meet some of the members of my Women of Vellore Yahoo group. I'd been corresponding with them for several years, since Mary Ganguli<sup>17</sup> had invited me to join. Since a bunch of us were to be in Vellore in Early February, we had a girls' night out at Sara's house with a potluck (the food was great—all Indian women seem to be marvelous cooks) and lots of gossiping and catching up. I finally got to put faces to many of the names on the list.

While in Vellore, I stayed with my old friends Jiji and Prasad<sup>18</sup>. They took wonderful care of me, and we had fun together. Avinash, their older son, has gotten a lot older (eight), and is still quite the Gameboy and computer game maniac. He has acquired a great knowledge of past empires and tyrants from these activities. Tarun, the baby, had been born since I'd last seen Jiji and Prasad; he was mobile (scooting and walking by hanging on to furniture) and demanding. I played with him a few times, and it was hard to keep him occupied!



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17. Mary and I had been on another Vellore list together before it had been dissolved. We'd become pen pals and realized we shared political views and were involved in similar political activities (I in Michigan, she in Pennsylvania). It was lovely to finally meet in person.
  18. I'd met Jiji the very first time I came to Vellore, in 1998, and we got to know each other well when I spent 2 months in 1999 working in OB/GYN 3 with her. Jiji took pity on me, and would take me home for lunch every day. We also decided to attend a medical conference together in Madras, and, while there, I met her and Prasad's parents. When I returned in 2000, the centenary year, all the usual housing was full up, and Jiji took me in—Prasad was in Australia, and we kept each other company, went shopping and traded recipes. I stayed with them briefly in Adelaide in 2002; I'm hoping they can come stay with me when they finally get around to visiting the US!

I had a chance to visit with both Jiji's and Prasad's parents, as they came to visit while we were there. I particularly spent a lot of time with Amachi, Jiji's mother, as we traveled to Kerala together. Jiji's cousin was getting married, and Prasad decided we should all<sup>19</sup> drive out there. It was an epic journey, although not a long one. We drove from Vellore in Tamil Nadu state to Kumarakom in Kerala state; it was only 670 kilometers (418 miles), but ended up being one of the most arduous drives I've ever taken. Why? Many reasons. Much of the road in TN was a construction zone, with many diversions. There are many level train crossings, and many trains, so one is invariably stopped for long periods of time<sup>20</sup>. And, quite importantly, driving is a blood sport in India, not for the faint of heart<sup>21</sup>.

Being a passenger is not so bad, though. I got to see quite a bit of the Indian landscape<sup>22</sup>, and Amachi had packed lots of yummy snacks. We stopped for several meals at nice restaurants (butter chicken, yum!), and I learned the futility of

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19. In the end it was Prasad, Avinash, Amachi and me; Jiji came down with hepatitis G, so she and the baby stayed home.
20. The Indian approach to trains is much like the Indian approach to driving in general—might makes right, the pushy guy has the right of way. It's a bit like being a Republican, I suppose. Logic and reason play no part at all. When the crossing gates go down, which can be a long time before the train actually comes, the vendors start wandering among the cars, with snacks and drinks. Some people get out and stand around; others sit in the car (where it is much less dusty).

At some point, the "Republicans" arrive, and decide they "ain't waiting in no stinking line," and pass the waiting vehicles on the right and drive right up to the gate. Their game plan is, as soon as the gate goes up, to push across and beat the waiting cars into the empty left lane. This might work if only the guys on our side of the train had this brilliant idea. Unfortunately, there are fools on the other side of the gate, too. And once the train has passed, and the gates finally rise, you have a stalemate—two lanes of traffic facing each other, with no empty lanes on either side. How they sort it out, I'm not sure, but eventually it is sorted out, and the pushy ones get through ahead of the others, but probably no sooner than they would have had everyone waited in a single row and then gone when the gate went up.

21. Driving itself is a bit of a blood sport in India, not for the faint of heart. Turn signals are never used, though I'm not sure why—perhaps the bulbs have burned out, or maybe they have atrophied away through disuse. Or perhaps drivers don't want others to know what they are about to do, afraid they might take evasive action and thwart their plans. Turns are often accomplished by swinging into the oncoming lane, and slowly merging, as though you were on an off ramp on a highway.

The horn is used, frequently and vociferously, to signal one's intentions. You "horn" if you're about to pass a car, to warn oncoming traffic. You "horn" to tell oncoming cars not to even think about passing in your lane. You "horn" to let the vehicle you are passing know you are passing it, so it doesn't pull out into you to try and pass itself (looking before you pass is not as common a practice as it perhaps should be in India). You "horn" to warn pedestrians not to cross in front of you. You "horn" to let small vehicles ahead of you, such as motorbikes and motor rickshaws, know you are behind them and want them to move out of your way. You "horn" to let the bullock cart driver—well, there's not point in horning him, as he can't move any faster, and can't even really move around to the side. You "horn" to shoo the goats or cows or dogs or chickens off the pavement. (Cows wander the roadways with a certain air of entitlement, especially in the more Hindu parts of India, as it is especially bad karma to hit or hurt or even.....gasp, shudder.....HIT a cow. They have come to realize that most vehicles will stop or get out of their way, and they are almost always right. Traffic comes to a screeching halt, even in the big cities, when cars decide to wander along or across the thoroughfares.)

Passing ("overtaking") is mandatory, if you hope to travel more than 5 km. per hour. This is because any moving vehicle, even if it is moving at a pace perceptible only in geological time, feels the right and duty to travel on any and all of India's motorways. (The only exception to this rule is the Toll Road, which the three wheelers and bullock carts seem to avoid.) As you drive along, you will encounter bullock carts, men pushing carts, bicycles, pedal rickshaws, motor rickshaws, motor rickshaws that have been modified into little trucks, slow heavy trucks, exceptionally slow heavy trucks, very tall precarious slow trucks, slow buses (stop every twenty meters), express buses (stop every 100 meters), slow old cars (wee ones and Ambassadors), peppy modern cars, and fast expensive modern cars driven by maniacs. Driving becomes a very tiring task, because you spend huge stretches of time—and pavement—passing long rows of slow vehicles, one at a time, like playing vehicular leap frog.

You also have to keep an eye out for objects suddenly darting out in front of you. Most often these will be pedestrians darting out from in front of a stopped vehicle, with no warning. They seem to have never learned the "look both ways before you cross" rule in school. Some walk out deliberately, confidently holding out a hand to stop traffic; others wander out nonchalantly, as if they are out for a stroll with no care in the world; yet others seem to perch behind obstructions, and jump out just as you approach. That is why, Prasad tells, me, you must always look for legs below the stationery vehicles you are approaching.

The darting objects can also be animals—chickens are quite common in the towns, along with dogs (and you see many dead dogs along the road, but never any cats, which I think pretty much settles the "which is smarter" debate). Cows will slowly meander out, especially in Tamil Nadu (although less so in Kerala, where there are many Christians and Muslims, and beef is a popular dish). There are also lots of small donkeys and goats, but these usually keep to the verges except in the case of the latter, when they are being herded across a side road or major highway.

22. The Deccan plateau, which we crossed, is not very scenic, especially in the dry season, which lasts six to nine months. Much of its surface is covered by thorn scrub forest interspersed with (very) small areas of deciduous broadleaf forest. The term "Deccan" comes from the Sanskrit word dakshina, meaning "the south." Once we got to the Western Ghats, there were some nice hills, and Kerala was quite green and lovely.

trying to drive using maps<sup>23</sup> in India.

Kerala was as different from TN as it could be. TN seemed to be mostly scrubby vegetation and dust; Kerala was green and lush, with canals and bridges everywhere. We had driven through large, empty desert stretches in TN; in Kerala I never did see a bit of bare ground. Everywhere there were houses, shops, farm fields, people. Kerala has the highest literacy rate in all of India (>90%), and one of the few (intermittently) elected Communist governments<sup>24</sup> in the world. Its people are found all over the world, working and sending money home, much of which is spent to build the beautiful new houses I saw everywhere.

We stayed in Kumarakom, at the Paradise Resort, and were treated as guests of honor, as the owner was an uncle of Prasad's. There were big bungalows, each with what was, easily, the largest bathroom I have ever seen in my life. The bungalows were arranged along a canal, in which Avinash tried to fish, and the property fronted on Vembanad Lake. There were palm trees and hammocks; during the day fishing boats, tour boats, and big houseboats would go by; in the afternoon there were cooling breezes off of the lake.

Our first morning we visited the nearby bird sanctuary. Shem, Prasad's cousin who ran the hotel, tried talking me out of going, telling me it was just a long walk with nothing to see, but I persisted. So in the morning Prasad, Shem and I left at 0530, still dark, and drove to the entrance of the refuge. We walked two Kilometers, by flashlight, along a path, past a tree full of fruit bats, to the lake. By now it was getting light out, and we got to see cormorants (2), anhingas, high herons, purple herons, egrets, all quite well. There were waves of bats and night herons coming in to roost for the day. But it got hot fast, and the birds settled in; as we were leaving, the tourists were arriving, to see—well, not much. Both Shem and Prasad were quite impressed, and Shem admitted that he'd never been here before, but just assumed there would be nothing to see.

We also had a nice excursion on the lake, on our own small tour boat. Although it was tempting, we were not allowed to sit on the top, as four tourists had drowned doing just that the previous week (although, it must be added, there was a lot of toddy and Johnny Walker Black label involved). We slowly cruised to the northern reach of the lake, and then back south to the island of Pathiramanal. Along the way we saw lots of coconut palms lining the shore, and rice paddies enclosed by dikes<sup>25</sup>. We stopped for toddy<sup>26</sup> and curry in one settlement, and then cooled off by drinking coconut water (and ate Amachi's snacks) as we slowly chugged around the lake. There were fishermen in their small boats, toddy tappers in the trees, and big houseboats<sup>27</sup> floating by. It was the hot, sleepy time of day, and a few of us

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23. All the maps I've ever used in India have been out-of date or simply missing a lot of data. I bought road atlases of TN and Kerala at a book fair just before we left. The TN atlas was reasonably accurate—towns and cities were in the right places, and roads more or less where they should be. We were following the new highway, which was under construction, so there were lots of detours and lane switching. Because the highway wasn't done yet, most of the road still went through city centers, instead of around them, causing much of the slowness we encountered.

In Kerala it was a matter of missing information. The maps made it look rather simple to get from point A to point B. In reality, rather than the one road pictured, there would be ten or twenty. Signposting was rare, with canals, bridges and construction detours everywhere. We spent a lot of time asking directions, looking for signs (my job), and going around in circles.

24. Kerala gained the distinction, in 1957, of having democratically elected a Communist government, one of few anywhere in the world. Kerala has a reputation as one of the most left-wing states in India. The people of Kerala are very politically aware and are more active participants in the political process than those in the rest of the country. The communist/left alliance is currently out of power.

25. Much of Kumarakom, like Holland, is reclaimed land. In this case, it has been reclaimed from Vembanad lake, India's largest, which is really a lagoon at the end of the several rivers. It is separated from the sea by a spit of land, and there are sea gates at Cochin to regulate the water level. Vembanad is slowly being filled in; a dike is built, and then infilled with soil, to create rice paddies or even dry land. Every year the lake grows a bit smaller.

There is a problem with getting potable water, though. Despite the many canals, rivers, ponds and other bodies of water in this veritable Venice, the water is briny enough so as to not be drinkable. The government sends water trucks out on regular runs, and people line up with pots and jugs to collect their share.

26. Toddy is a liquor fermented from coconut and palm saps. It is tapped by a toddy tapper either from coconut or palm tree. The initial white liquid that is collected tends to be very sweet and is not fermented enough to be alcoholic. After letting the liquid settle and ferment, the drink becomes alcoholic in nature. In Kerala, Toddy is usually available at a "Toddy shop", which translates to "Kallu Shap" in the regional language of Malayalam. In TN, for some reason, it is banned!

The toddy we drank was fairly fresh and low in alcohol. As we had been cruising the lake, we had seen toddy tappers in action in the palm trees. And when we went driving in Kerala, I noticed that of toddy shops all around. It is a bit like Peru and the chicha shops—once you started looking, you found them (marked by a certain colored flag) absolutely everywhere.

27. The houseboats are part of the modern tourist industry in Kerala, which includes many big, expensive world-class resorts. They are modelled on the traditional Malayali thatched-roof boats, but are bigger, have all the mod cons, and even solar arrays! They looked lovely going by.

dozed a bit.



Amachi enjoys her toddy!

Pathiramanal island was desolate; I am told that it was once a lovely park receiving many visitors. Some paths remain, but not much else, except the gate at the boat dock. The guidebook says it is an important place for waterbirds, but, that time of day, there was nothing moving. (I was told there is a move to privatize and develop the island into yet another resort, but so far the government has resisted.)

That was the sum total of our official tourist activities; the rest of what we involved visiting relatives and the wedding. For me it was all exciting, as I had never been to Kerala before, even getting stuck waiting for the water truck to move (I got some lovely photos!). Jiji's cousin Anu was getting married, and Amachi was acting the role of mother of the bride, as Anu's mother had died. We had a nice tea at Anu's father's house the evening before the wedding, stopping along the way to visit Amachi's mother's old house. It was classic Malayali style, with lots of shutters and windows, antique furniture<sup>28</sup> and an old dowry chest, in the hills of a rubber plantation.

The following day was the wedding. In the morning I went with Prasad to visit his uncle, who owns a small hospital not far from Kottayam. Prasad knew the roads well in the area, as he had lived here in his youth, and owned a motorbike. I liked watching the scenery go by—rivers, canals, towns. There were lots and lots of churches and chapels; Christianity is an indigenous, not introduced, religion here<sup>29</sup>. We tried to visit another uncle, who owns the house written about in the God of Small Things, but he was away.

We arrived just a bit late to the wedding. It was in an old church with high, dark ceilings and ineffectual ceiling fans. The service was Orthodox—bearded, robed priests performing a centuries old ritual. The bride wore a lacy white silk sari; the groom wore a dark suit with a red tie. The church was packed, and I could see row upon row of jewel-colored saris.

Jiji had asked me to take photos, but I was hesitant to do so at first, not wanting to be conspicuous<sup>30</sup> or get in the way. But Amachi and others urged me to, and I got to snapping away from a seat of honor at the front. There was a video team filming parts of the ceremony with very bright lights, and I took advantage of their lighting to photograph without an annoying flash.

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28. Among the things I found most interesting were an old doctor's box/kit, and traditional lounging chair, with extra long armrests, on which you would rest your legs as well. I guess it is a cooling way to sit.

29. The Christian community in Kerala is not a homogenous entity. However, most Kerala Christian groups follow certain common practices derived from local cultural influences such as wedding customs, and use of Malayalam language in liturgy. Most groups also believe in the St. Thomas tradition.

The origin of Kerala's Christians dates back to 52 AD, when St. Thomas came to the region landing near Cochin. He visited different parts of Kerala and converted local inhabitants. It is also believed that St. Thomas established churches in seven places in Kerala. The present Christian population have descended from these early groups. They are popularly referred to as Syrian Christians because of the Syrian Liturgy which they continued to use in church services.

Added growth of the Church took place when a group of about 400 people migrated from Syria in 345 AD and joined the then existing Kerala Church. The leader of this group was another Thomas, Thomas of Kana. They stayed on in the region. The descendants of this group even today maintain their separate identity, and are known as Kananites.

30. As if a large, blonde white woman in a salwar kamiz could avoid being noticed. I found that, far from being considered an intruder, I was welcomed as a guest of honor most places I went, and people went out of their way to show me around or explain things to me. I wonder if we, here in the US, would treat an obvious foreigner the same way? Or would Homeland Security be quietly called and the visitor whisked away?



Radiant couple and priest

The ceremony was familiar in some ways, long<sup>31</sup> and full of chanting. At the point where, in our church, crowns would be held over the heads of the young couple, chains were placed over their heads and then around their necks. The bride didn't have a veil, but covered her head with the end of her sari. Once married, she put colorful silk over her head instead. In the end, there was a signing of papers and many congratulations.

The festivities then began. The bride and groom were greeted by children with garlands and bouquets of flowers outside the church, and then there was a reception in the church hall. While we ate, the couple, up on a stage, drank with two straws from one pineapple, cut and fed each other a wedding cake, and then lit candles together. Several older men then talked at length (in Malayalam, which I blessedly did not understand) while the couple stood there and looked nice. Our meal<sup>32</sup> was tasty, and not as quick as some<sup>33</sup>, but the entire reception was over fairly quickly, and it was still early afternoon!

We had time left, it seemed, to fulfill Prasad's quest—finding an old victrola with a big horn. He had glimpsed a few, and decided her really, really wanted one. We had seen one in an antique shop near our hotel, and went to have a

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31. In the Ukrainian orthodox church, the ceremony lasts two hours or longer.
32. Eating in India is a much simpler matter than in the west, although cooking is not. Most foods are fairly complex in preparation, with various blends of spices, and meals have multiple courses. All the e India women I have met have been fabulous cooks, and recipes are handed down within families. When a woman marries, she is expected to learn the recipes of her new family.

Fingers are used instead of cutlery, and a banana leaf makes a good plate. All restaurants have sinks available for washing before and after eating. And eating with one's fingers is not as simple as it sounds. The food is first mixed with ones fingers—Indians tell me that the texture is an important part of the enjoyment of food, one that we in the West miss out on. A small amount of food is grabbed with ones fingers, worked into a small ball, and then flicked off the ends of ones fingers into the mouth.

33. Earlier in the month, in Vellore, I had attended another wedding. It was the wedding reception of the daughter of one of the attendants (sort of like a secretary) from OG3 (my old unit at CMCH). Jiji had been invited, and brought me along. We arrived a bit early, and spent a long time sitting in white plastic lawn chairs in the wedding hall, listening to the band warm up. Other colleagues showed up, and we chatted and caught up on old times.

Finally the bride and groom arrived, and took their places on the stage. They bowed to the audience, and then sat on the fancy red sofa set among fake palm trees. Then there followed a multitude of ministers, each endeavoring to out-talk the previous one (or so it seemed to me). The final one was a Very Important Minister from out of town; he not sonly spoke at length, but gave the couple a blessing.

The cake was brought out (a very small one, it should be noted, meant for ceremony and not for feeding the crowd). The bride and groom, with the assistance of the VIM, cut the cake. Photos were taken. They then feed each other (but not the VIM) cake.

Once these ceremonies were complete, everyone lined up to go on stage and greet the bride and groom ( and hand them gifts). The line was quite long; people would proceed in family groups, and more photos would be taken. Our group was especially honored, as we were mostly doctors from CMC.

All honors being done, it was time to go into the reception hall for the wedding meal. Since it was a small hall, the eating was done in shifts. A group would be seated, and fresh banana leaves placed for them. Servers came out and ladled various dishes onto the banana leaf—biryani, vegetable, curd (yogurt), pickle. Other servers poured drinks. The meal was quickly consumed, with little chatter, and then the revelers departed. The banana leaves were swept up, and a new group would be seated.

look. It was still there—quite dusty, as was everything in this roadside shop. It was a "His Master's Voice" model, which was made in India long after they had gone out of style in the West:



Prasad bargained and the saleswoman demonstrated the victrola, while I poked around, finding wooden cow heads and old plates (also very dusty). We each ended up buying that which fascinated us.

Before I knew it, my time in India was over. Jiji and the children came with me, via car with driver, to Madras, where we stayed with her parents. They had once had a nice home<sup>34</sup> with a beautiful garden in a quiet part of the city. Since my last visit, they had exchanged their property for a modern apartment in a new building—on the same lot. Jiji and I spent my last day in India shopping, she acting as my guide. I was in search of souvenirs—Vellore, despite having many foreign visitors, is not really a tourist destination, and does not have a tourist<sup>35</sup> infrastructure. We first walked to a bangle shop near the house, and I bought gorgeous bangles for all the young girls in my life, and then we set out in the car looking for silk scarves.

I would have been happy going to Sri Kumaran's, as I usually do, and stocking up on scarves, but Jiji decided we should explore all the possibilities. We went to every high end sari shop and boutique, several "state" stores<sup>36</sup>, Victoria Technical Institute, and even Cane and Bamboo. I found not only a plethora of scarves, but carvings, metal items, and all sorts of marvelous handcrafts. Where I had despaired of finding anything to take home, I was now worried that my suitcases would be too heavy.....and ended up leaving some items behind.

No problem, Jiji told me. I could pick them up on my next visit.

Goodbyes aren't as sad when you know you'll soon be back.

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34. Building sites are at a premium in Madras, especially in nice, centrally located neighborhoods such as this one. Developers buy up old, small homes and replace them with several story tall apartment buildings. Jiji's parent had moved to Vellore while the building was going on, and had only recently moved back in. The apartment they now have is worth much more than their home was, and it cost them nothing.

35. Finding souvenirs of India in Vellore is a pointless task. Some interesting gewgaws can be found—glass bangles or children's' outfits, perhaps—and there are good shops for medical books, but not much else. A friend of Jiji's has opened a lovely boutique, and I did go there and buy up a lot of items. Too many were large and beautiful though, meant for adorning a home in India rather than shipment (via suitcase) abroad.

36. Government shops meant to hawk the wares of neighboring states.