

March 1, 2008 – Rotary International President Wilf Wilkinson’s March message read as follows: “Gandhi once said, ‘If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.’ What Gandhi understood so well was simply this: that anger and hatred, arguments and differences, rivalries and quarrels are not inherited or innate. They are learned. Children who see hate, learn hate. But children who see sharing and love, learn sharing and love”.

Reading this was a serendipitous moment for me, having just returned from a wonderful Rotary Humanitarian visit to India, where the children, especially, captured my heart. Our journey began in February 2008, when, after cancellation of our flight out of Syracuse, and a five hour drive to JFK to catch a later connecting flight to India, my husband Earl and I flew into Delhi after an all night layover in the airport lounge in Bombay. When we stumbled zombie-like from the plane into the white marble wonderland of the India Air terminal in New Delhi, we were pleased to see our names on the sign of the driver from the Hyatt Regency in Delhi, there to drive us to our room.

HISTORY: The Republic of India, with a population of over 1 billion, is the seventh largest country by geographical area, the second most populous country, and the most populous democracy in the world. It is bounded by the Indian Ocean on the south, Arabian Sea on the west, and Bay of Bengal on the east. It borders Pakistan to the west; China and Nepal to the northeast, Bangladesh and Burma to the east. In the Indian Ocean, India is in the vicinity of Sri Lanka and Indonesia. India’s largest cities are Mumbai (formerly Bombay) their financial capital, Delhi, their seat of government, Chennai, Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), and Bangalore. Other important cities are Cochin, with the third safest port in the world, Ooty, high in the mountains and known for its teas, Coimbatore and Tirupur, known for their industry and manufacturing.

Four major world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism originated here, with Judaism, Christianity and Islam arriving in the first millennium, helping shape the diverse culture. A region of historic trade routes and vast empires, the subcontinent was identified with commercial and cultural wealth for much of its history. The British controlled Indian Empire, founded in 1858, lasted until India’s independence in 1947. The constitution of India came into force in 1950 with three branches of governance: Legislature, Executive, and Judiciary. The President of India, the official head of state, is elected by an electoral college for a five year term. The Prime Minister, appointed by the President, is the de facto head of government and exercises the most executive powers. Hindi is the official language of India, with English – the ‘subsidiary official language’ - used extensively in business and administration.

MY JOURNEY: I was given the chance to see India as a foreigner, through the eyes of several Rotarian friends. India today is a rich country full of both confidence and challenges. While it still suffers from high levels of poverty and environmental degradation, they are the fourth largest economy in the world with a GDP of nearly 7 percent, low inflation, and high reserves. The predictions are that by 2020 India will have outdone China and by 2050, it will be the topmost global player in the world’s economic scene. The world’s third largest economy in purchasing power, economic reforms have transformed it into the second fastest growing large economy.

There are people everywhere in India, with seemingly no place in this wonderful country that isn’t occupied. But the spirituality of India is a constant presence, making one feel at ease in the midst of the overcrowded occasional chaos. Much of India’s individuality comes from its interconnectedness of the arts, music, and dance to the cuisine and religion, each viewed as a part of the whole of one’s life, to be put in balance while striving for enlightenment. Among these spiritual disciplines, the Hindu philosophy, the practices of yoga, and the balancing of a healthy lifestyle, soon makes one okay with what may appear to a Westerner as an ‘unrhythmic rhythm’ of India’s spiritual essence.

When visiting India, one must be willing to readjust. It is a country that moves slowly: trains and buses are often late, roadways are always crowded, but with patience and tolerance one can experience the beauty and wonder of India's spiritual culture. Like other places in the world that have mystical traditions, it is an exotic and wondrous country where traveling can be both exciting and trying. Good food and water may not always be readily available, and transportation can often leave much to be desired. During their rush hours (which often seemed most of the time!) crowds hurtled through the streets, all seeming to be going somewhere, with a purpose. As more Indians become affluent, the problems of the developed west are apparent, with congested roads, smoke emissions, and traffic jams during which the use of cell phones abounds.

GANDHI: Mahatma Gandhi, born in 1869, assassinated in 1948, was a major political and spiritual leader of India who led nationwide campaigns for the alleviation of poverty, liberation of women, brotherhood amongst different religious and ethnic groups, an end to untouchability and caste discrimination, and for the economic self-sufficiency of the nation and independence of India from foreign domination. Practicing and advocating non-violence in all situations, he lived simply, made his own clothes, existed on a simple vegetarian diet, and underwent long fasts for self-purification and protest.

NIDS: One of Gandhi's famous quotes, which is framed in my office, is 'You must be the change you want to see in the world'. So off to India we went to take part in a Rotary journey with the country I chose to do our District's cultural exchange with. Our first experience was traveling with a friend, Rtn. Atul, to one of the poorest sections north of Delhi, where the challenge to eradicate polio is ongoing. Giving of polio drops is an incomparable moving experience. The sad eyes of some of the children still haunt me, but the smiles after hugging them bring joy that only the genuine touch of caring can convey. It reminded us of the important work Rotary does, not only in our local communities, but also worldwide, especially in the very important work of eradicating polio.

We then journeyed to another, more affluent area of Delhi where parents drove their children up for the polio drops. They are mandated by the Government in India to get the drops under the age of five. These National Immunization Days take place very three months. They paint a fingernail, whose color stays on for a week. During that week's time, Rotarians go door to door to make sure children got the drops. If not, they are told they must come to the next NIDS. (Rotarians gave me coconut milk, nutritious and tasty, and brought in their delicious afternoon tea and cookies!) Next was a drive to a Rotarians 'weekend farm' where one of the Delhi Rotary Clubs was hosting a picnic, featuring a large buffet of catered food and their form of Bingo. By the time I got a 'line' they were on to 'houses'! Great collegiate fun. We frequently spotted cows along the roadside. They are sacred in India and are everywhere, along with occasional monkeys.

The next day, we hired a car to tour Old and New Delhi. India is an amazing mix of great poverty, with the warmest of Rotarians involved in projects taking care of needs of the poor. A nation whose infrastructure desperately needs work, where pollution is a major problem, it is also a nation with an exciting emerging economy. One saw diverse worlds: worlds of extreme wealth, new airy apartment complexes and housing developments with helpers of all kinds and extended families not far away. And a very different world, rough and tough slum towns, inhabited by migrants, ramshackle mazes of narrow streets, open drains, tiny homes and thousands of people clustered in close proximity. On our Old Delhi tour, our driver deftly managed to turn around and get us out of a traffic jam.

The most amazing thing to me about India was that on a two-lane road - which bends and curves over potholes caused by the annual monsoons - travel includes bicycles, motorcycles, diesel cars, rickshaws, horse carts, tractors, buses, trucks, and cars all jockeying from one lane to another,

seemingly knowing their place in the chaos, braking and honking as needed as they maneuvered around slow crawling vehicles to get to where they needed to go. Driving in India is something I'll leave to the men there who do it so well!

TAJ MAHAL: The following day, the driver took us to Agra, a four hour journey one way over those same crowded roads, to view the Red Fort and the majestic Taj Mahal. At stoplights, children would press their faces up against the car window, cupping their hands to peer in, while trying to sell their wares. One Rotarian told me he carries bananas and apples with him, to hand to them, rather than money which might be squandered. The Taj Mahal was built by Shah Jahan as a memorial to his beloved young wife who died prematurely in childbirth. Completed in 1648, hundreds of walled acres surround it. Made of white shimmering marble 20 times harder than Italian marble, it took 20,000 people working for 22 years to build it.

Cited as 'the jewel of Muslim art in India, one of the universally admired masterpieces of the world's heritage', the Taj is a breathtaking example of India's architecture. The white domed marble and tile mausoleum is most familiar, but the focus of the Taj is the white marble tomb, which stands on a square base composed of a large, multi-chambered structure, with a vaulted hall walled on three sides, and an arch-shaped doorway, topped by a large dome. Set on a white marble platform 30 feet high, long sides and a massive vaulted archway frame the base with an arch-shaped balcony. The marble dome has four large towers on each corner. The Taj Mahal garden, with its reflecting pool, symbolizes the flowing rivers of Paradise.

OUR SISTER DISTRICT: Next, we flew to Coimbatore in the south of India, and were greeted by India's GSE Team Leader, Rtn. Mathavan [Maddy], who had been in our Central NYS Rotary District for our cultural exchange. I surprised and pleased them by also greeting them with Namaste, the general welcoming salutation, where both palms are placed together and raised below the face. They honored us with the traditional Tilak, a ritual mark on the forehead, usually made out of a red vermilion paste, and applied on the spot between the brows which is considered the seat of latent wisdom and mental concentration. Flower garlands were offered as a mark of respect and honour.

When it comes to nurturing guests, India has no equal. For the next two weeks, we were hosted, toasted, loved and made welcome in the very special way that only Indians have through drink, food, entertainment, and warm embraces. We became instant family - and we will remain family forever. We headed into a scrumptious lunch. The spicy foods of India suited Earl well, while my digestive system prefers a blander diet, which I never found lacking, anywhere we went.

COCHIN: After lunch at the Hotel Residency, and a special greeting by their Rotarian General Manager, we headed by car to Cochin, one of the principal seaports of India. The five hour drive, accompanied by the now familiar swaying and dodging over bumpy roads, was time spent catching up with our very special Rotary friend, Rtn. Maddy [who was the main coordinator of our visit schedule], and getting to know Rtn. Thamby, President of the Tirupur North Rotary Club, who would become my main driver and another close warm friend.

A vibrant city situated on the south-west coast of the Indian peninsula in a scenic and prosperous part of India, the roads in Cochin are better, and horn honking signals are gone! An old port city with an influx of centuries of cultures, it was one of the ports on the spice route. As this is a big Christian community, we didn't see any cows on the road so it didn't quite feel like India! Upon arrival at the Revira Suit, we were greeted by several Cochin Rotarians, and spent a lovely dinner with them. Among those who greeted us were our Coordinator for the Cochin Area, District 3200's District Rotary Foundation Chair, Rtn. A. S. Shenoy, a delightful gentleman, along with Rtn. Narayan, a Past President of the Cochin RC, and Renjini, the energetic Secretary of the Cochin Rotary Club.

After a restful night in a beautiful suite overlooking the seaport, and breakfast in our room, we were drive to a school for challenged children. As I entered the school, tears sprang to my eyes as I saw these many children seated on the floor, waiting for this strange lady who didn't look like them. We began with the participation in the ceremonial lighting of the wick candle. Oil filled wick lamps are an integral part of Indian culture, weaving their own magic. The poetic beauty of the flickering flame offers an intentional pause, signaling the unconscious mind to focus on spiritual forces, representing each person's ability to bring light into the world.

When it came my turn to present to the students and teachers, I asked the Principal if she would have them sing me a song first. The retired teacher and grandmother in me knew the children had been very polite through the ceremony and speeches and needed a bit of interaction. After taking part in the inauguration of a computer learning room, I was moved by a student who only had movement in her head, yet was able to communicate via the computer with her eyes. As I gently touched her cheek with the back of my hand, she turned to me with a huge grin, captured by a local newspaper photographer and featured in an article that next week.

While touring the other rooms, one young man spoke my name out loud, having read it off my Governor's badge. When I asked the Principal for clarification on what I thought I heard, he said it again. What was unique about this was this child was autistic, and autistic children don't often look at you when they do come out of their shell and speak, but he did – both times! Another young man loudly and proudly sang us a song. Everywhere, throughout our visits, there were smiles of gratitude. Next, we had an enjoyable lunch with several Rotarians and school personnel at a local restaurant.

Back at our hotel, I once again caught up on my email with my trusty laptop, and was interviewed by a reporter from a local large newspaper. Following this, Rtn. Narayan was kind enough to take us on a backwater cruise of Cochin Lake. The backwaters are a unique contribution, a network of lakes, canals, estuaries and delta's of rivers that flows into the Arabian Sea. These backwaters are a self-supporting eco-system teeming with aquatic life and connecting villages together. The serene and picturesque waterways and swaying coconut palm trees attract tourists from around the world.

That evening, after being gifted with traditional garb by Rtn. Narayan [which we put on] we attended the Rotary Club [RC] of Tripunithura meeting with Rtn's Shenoy, Narayan, and Renjini, where I had the privilege of being the program speaker. After the meeting and the viewing of great entertainment provided by local artists, we spent time over dinner with fellow Rotarians and families. As usual, a most enjoyable evening. Earl has become quite fond of Kingfisher beer, and I of Indian red wine!

The next morning, Rtn. Anil K Menon, PP of Cochin Harbour RC, drove us to a DeAddiction Center they sponsor, followed by a visit to the Cochin Harbour at Chellanam, a major natural harbour. It was fascinating viewing the huge and primitive Chinese fishing nets, along with the many stalls with vendors offering their wares to local residents and tourists alike. We got a picture of a large sailfish caught and heading to their marketplace! Cochin Port has several natural advantages and lies on the direct route to Australia and the far east. This port was given the status of a major Port in 1936.

After enjoying walking through the harbour marketplace, meeting other Rotarians and exchanging Club banners [I never cease to see how efficient they are with their cell phones, gathering Rotarians together rather quickly and effortlessly] and sipping on the delicious fresh water of a coconut, I enjoyed watching Rtn. Menon barter with a trader over the purchase of a peacock fan as a gift for me. I smile as I look up at it on my office wall. Rtn. Shenoy insisted we go to a gift shop across from the restaurant (crossing the traffic was yet another exciting challenge, yet we always felt safe with our Rotarian friends) where he wanted to treat us to some gifts for ourselves and our family. The traditional Indian items we brought back with us will surround we and our family with Indian love.

Returning to the hotel, we checked out and headed for the Cochin train station. No visit to India would be complete without the experience of traveling on Indian trains, negotiating busy Indian railway stations, watching the porters carry our luggage on their heads as we maneuvered up and down the many stairs to get to the platform. While efficient, Indian trains do run late. Our Rtn. Friends stayed with us until the train arrived, making sure we had bottles of water and were settled in our assigned seats. Attendants regularly pass down each car selling soft drinks, snacks, or Indian tea for a few rupees. A must is to remember to bring your own toilet paper for the squat toilet located at the end of the car. I worked through the 1,000's of pictures already download from our digital camera onto our laptop as we sped by the trees and farms, all of which were a feast for one's eyes.

COIMBATORE: When we arrived four hours later at Coimbatore Junction, we were pleasantly surprised to be warmly greeted by our Coordinators for the Tirupur Area, Maddy and Thamby and nearly a dozen Rotarians from the Coimbatore and Tirupur RC's. The familiar welcoming Namaste, traditional Tilak, and several flower garlands were offered once again as that ceremonial mark of respect and honour. You'll note in the pictures the broad smiles on all of our faces as we greeted one another. As we walked down the platform, I waved and smiled at the children who were staring at this lady who didn't look like them and had lots of flowers around her neck.

As we were getting ready to depart, Maddy got a cell phone call from District Governor L Narayanaswarny [LN], saying he was on his way to the train station to personally greet me. More smiles and hugs and garlands followed, as we caught up with each other for the first time in his country. DG LN, of Tirupur RC, and I, of Rotary eClub NY1, had first met at the January 2007 Rotary Int'l Governor's Training in California. Rotary District 3200 formed in 1991-92 as a multi-generation successor of District 89 (Afganistan, Burma, Ceylon and India) which was formed in 1937-38. At present, there are nearly 170 Clubs with a membership of nearly 6,000 Rotarians. Clubs are spread over part of the southern Indian states of Kerala and Tamilnadu. A warm and genuinely humble man, LN is a great Rotarian, and an inspiring and respected leader.

Leaving the train station, we arrived at the lovely home of Rtn. Chidambaram's sister, where we had another great conversation in their living room with all. A good night's sleep in the peaceful pleasant bedroom was followed by a delicious breakfast made by our hostess, consisting of fresh fruits and juices and pancakes with coconut milk. The next day she volunteered to go to the store to get me cereal and I said absolutely not, I can get that anytime in the U.S., I'm enjoying the Indian food, at least the bland kind! while Earl was eating everything placed before him, with no problem at all! It was great meeting their daughters and their parents. Like most Americans, the people of India are very family oriented, and were so eager and proud to introduce us to their families.

South Indian women traditionally wear the Sari while the men wear a type of sarong, which could be either a white pancha or colorful lungi with a western style shirt. The main spiritual traditions of South India include Shaivite and Vaishnavite branches of Hinduism. A prayer room [Booja?] was prominent in the Hindu homes I visited. There are also large Muslim communities in South India, with Christianity flourishing in coastal South India in Kerala, which is also home to one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world.

TIRUPUR: Everywhere we traveled in India, we saw colleges for Engineers and Information Technology. The growth of IT hubs have spurred economic growth and attracted foreign investments, with cellular and Internet services abounding. The increasing manufacturing in Tirupur has attracted job seekers from other parts of the country. Some of the best computer experts in the world are trained here, products of the dozen highly coveted prestigious ITT Schools. The very best computer specialists in these schools consistently come from the southern part of the country, where

mathematics continues to be taught the old-fashioned classical way. Tech support in America often comes from India!

The next morning, Rtn. Maddy, Rtn. Chidambaram, Rtn. Thamby, and several others arrived to take us to visit a low cost housing project of their Club. Arriving over the bumpy roads, children and adults were lined up to again ceremonially greet us. This time, it included firecrackers in the roads and loud whistles by the children! What I found particularly moving about this project is these are the people of India who used to be called 'the untouchables', yet Rotarians are caring for their basic needs. After hugging and touching of hands with several, I couldn't resist putting my fingers in my mouth, as though to whistle, setting off another merry round of whistles as we pulled away!

Our next stop was at a Crematorium, built and maintained by District 3200 Rotarians. A district project of DG LN, this Burial Ground and Cremation Yard was a district priority. The belief is when one leaves this world, friends and relatives wish to see them departing in a good environment. The Crematorium features an electric and gas chamber oven for the traditional burning of the bodies. In accordance with their Hindu faith, the cremation must take place within 24 hours of death. The family is brought in to witness the event. The body, wrapped in a white sheet, is placed on slabs of wood, and the cremation process begins, with the family viewing the process through a large glass window. We were privileged and moved to witness a cremation while there. Most enlightening and moving. The outside garden and plants contributed to the peaceful feeling. After lunch, we rested a bit and I caught up again with my email.

HINDUISM AND TEMPLES: Early evening, several Rotary friends arrived to take us to the Avinashi Temple. One of the world's oldest religions, Hinduism has about 336,000,000 followers, most of whom live in India. According to Hindu teaching Brahman is the Supreme World Soul, or Spirit. Hindus speak of Brahman as the one absolute, eternal, indescribable, neuter being. The religion teaches that Brahman forms the inmost essence of everything. Without it, nothing would exist. But Hinduism allows the worship of hundreds of gods as stepping stones to Brahman. The word Avinashi means that which is undestroyable. Dating back to the 12th century AD, this is the biggest temple in the Coimbatore district built by the Cholas.

The base of stone outside carries sculptures of the legend associated with this temple. Entering through huge doors, past many pillars, exquisite stone carvings and inscriptions, one realizes the sanctums are of significance, the shrines are held in reverence, and the offerings during the worship bring a sense of calm, wellness, and peacefulness. I'd taken a slight tumble earlier in the evening, landed on my bottom and hit my head on the slippery marble floor, so my 'loving Rotary bodyguards' were ever watchful of my every move, with an arm on each side of me and usually behind me! I'm sure many offerings were for me were given for my health during this special temple visit. Maddy had wanted to take me to a hospital, but I insisted I was fine and begged him to not change our schedule!

Upon leaving the temple, we witnessed a wedding taking place in the temple, with much gaiety and the unique Indian music which we'd grown to love hearing. Next, our two carloads of Rotarians drove to a big shopping mall warehouse of sorts. The streets were crowded with families out shopping for the week. Driving around to the back entrance, I stayed outside the car with Rtn's Maddy & Thamby while Earl climbed up six flights of stairs with Rtn Chidamariam and Rtn. Mani to the office of Rtn. Subramaniam, who owns a large garment factory. Several minutes later, down they came with armloads of shirts for Earl, myself, my children, and my grandchildren! Their gracious gift-giving leaves one feeling unbelievably and humbly cared for and appreciated.

We then drove to the beautiful Poppy's Hotel, where our Rotarian friends and colleagues had set up a special dinner outside under the moonlight in the spacious gardens. The temperature in the South of India was almost always in the mid-80's, much different from the freezing temperatures going on back home in Upstate NY! As Rotarians and their families, including the Rotarian GM of the hotel, gathered around the large u-shaped tables, we were joined by DG LN, dined on fresh seafood and all sorts of delicious food and drink, with the merriment and gift giving continuing until 11:00pm. Even then, it was difficult to say goodnight.

GURUKULUM: The next morning, after another delicious Indian breakfast, we were picked up by Rtns. Maddy & Thamby to head out for a most special event. Our two districts, District 3200 and 7150, had received a Matching Grant from the Rotary Foundation for a Vocational Training Center for Women & Children in Tirupur, India, which Maddy named 'Gurukulum'. The Club Rotarians had been busy for weeks, restoring an old building, and getting it ready for the opening. At 3:30am that morning, a ceremonial cleansing of the building took place, to replace any evil spirits with good sprits. As we stepped out of the car, DG LN was waiting for us, along with the press and media, dozens of Rotarians and Rotary Ann's [wives of Rotarians] from around the district.

The traditional blessing at the doorway was followed by the unveiling of the stunning inauguration plaque on the outside of the building, inscribed and engraved with both our DG names and Districts, our respective Clubs, and the date of the building Inauguration. The building tour showed one portion already set up and teaching women sewing and embroidery skills, so they can become gainfully employed in the factories and businesses of Rotarians in Tirupur. The other portion of the building will house our computers, where we will on weekdays teach women computer skills of database management, financial management, etc. so they can improve their earning status. On Saturday's, this center will be open to girls, teaching them computer skills.

We then entered another large room, where another welcoming ceremony took place. A beautiful huge inscribed mural containing the above information adorned one wall and will remain there as our collaborative Rotary projects continue into infinity and beyond. Listening to each of the speakers share their feelings about the project and our efforts, Governor LN and I would often share a squeeze of the hand over a warm smile of humanitarian gratitude for the relationship we've built and the projects we share. After LN and I spoke, they asked Earl to share some thoughts. Not much of a talker in public, he spoke sincerely on his enjoyment of our India journey. All of us involved in this wonderful collegiate Rotary project contemplated this accomplishment with a quiet joy.

A wonderful 'farewell for now to Tirupur lunch' was prepared by the Rotary Ann's at Rtn. Chidamaniam's home. We were privileged to meet his parents, who presented us with gifts of a sari for me and a wooden cart for my grandson, Sammy. We all then went up to the second floor level, where another amazing meal had been prepared for us. The women do most, if not all, the cooking for the family in India, cutting the fruits and vegetables lovingly and meticulously by hand as they sit in a circle on the floor. They had even prepared a special bland pasta dish for me, along with scrumptious other food items native to India. On special occasions, traditional dishes are prepared almost the same way as they were centuries ago, with preparations that call for elaborate and leisurely cooking, served in traditional style and ambience.

While I quickly got used to the 'spicy and not spicy', I couldn't get used to eating with the fingers, still preferring the easier spoon! My friends told me that eating this way channels more energy into the food. Their healthy and nutritious meals often consist of fresh fruits and vegetables, rice, legumes and lentils, with the distinct aroma and flavour achieved by the blending of spices. Getting enough to eat in India is never a problem, as they see it as a welcoming hospitality. Hosts will ensure the menu

includes a variety of dishes and guests are served many helpings, as it's not only satisfying one's hunger, it's feeding one's soul.

OOTY: By mid-afternoon, we had transferred our luggage and set out for the four and a half hour drive to Ooty, located in the mountainous range called the Nilgiris (Blue Mountains), 8,000 feet above sea level, with cooler weather (although I love warm weather!). Ooty's landscape is marked by rolling hills covered with dense vegetation, and plateaus covered with tea gardens and eucalyptus trees. Many portions of the hills are preserved as natural reserve forests, with the swarms of tourists it draws every year placing an enormous strain on the natural resources resulting in pollution (which we all struggle with) and road damage caused by the annual monsoons.

Originally ruled by the Brits, Ooty is a series of glorious montages: the sun lighting up one hill while others beside it remain shrouded in green velvet. While the road trip is quite scenic, we reached the hill city by traveling up a heavily forested winding road, with many sharp hair-pin beds. Not for the faint of heart, or for those who are prone to car sickness! That said, the monkeys along the way looked plenty peaceful, and our Rtn. Driver Thamby, and Rtn. Maddy, ensured a safe journey the whole way up the hill.

We arrived as the RC of Nilgiris West was just finishing their meeting, but we had a few minutes to meet their Club Officers before heading to the Hotel Monarch. Maddy had no sooner checked us in than two more Rotarians arrived to greet us: Rtn. Krishna Dev and our Coordinator for the Ooty Area, Rtn. Dr. Senthilnathan Siva. We had a sprightly conversation over a late light dinner, said a fond 'so long for now to Rtns. Maddy & Thamby and headed up to put our weary bodies in bed!

The next morning after a leisurely breakfast, Dr. Siva picked us up to take us to an elementary school his Rotary Club sponsors. We were greeted at the gate by several Rotarians, Inner Wheel members (Rotarian woman partners) and the headmistress. Rotarian Dr. Babu had heard about my 'spill' and asked would I please come into his office to be checked. Seems as if Maddy and my Rotarian friends were still concerned. I replied that I would if it could fit in-between my schedule, as I had people expecting me at various venues and I wasn't about to let them down. He smiled and said okay.

Touring each individual classroom, had I not been told, I would not have known these were poor children. Their uniforms, shoes, school supplies, and lunch are provided by these Rotarians. The initial stares of curiosity at this 'strange lady who doesn't look like us' soon turned to smiles as I smiled at them, waved with both hands, and said 'come...come' so as not to hold them at bay from a supposed dignitary, but to have them feel the warmth of a Rotarian lady Governor from America who cared.

Most heart-warming about this Rotary sponsored school for Kindergarten through Fifth Grade were three things: first, the fact that in the sewing room at one end of the school, several of the young women learning the trades there had been through this very school as children; second, one five year old boy asked if he could kiss me, and when I said 'sure' he didn't just kiss me on the cheek – he planted a kiss squarely on my lips!; third, one young boy in fifth grade, about the age of one of my grandsons, asked me 'Mum, do you think you could make the school bigger so I can come back next year?' This heart-tugging comment, and the entertainment provided by the students on their outdoor stage that followed, once again amazed me, as did the smiles and hugs upon departure.

As we left, Rtn. Siva swung by the Ooty Historic Library for me to meet his beautiful Inner Wheel wife, who gave Earl and I a tour of the library they were so proud of. From there, the four of us stopped by Rotarian Dr. Babu's office in the center of town. Climbing the stairs, we walked past the line of people waiting to see the good doctor, into his private office. He graciously examined me, and

said while I had a slight hematoma, medicine he could give me would ease the pain and I'd be fine in a couple of days.

That evening, as I spoke as what they called 'their Chief Guest' at the dinner meeting of the Ootacamund RC, I told those Rotarians and family members present that just hearing that young boy's request to come back to the Rotary school they sponsored for another year meant that they had been successful beyond what they had probably originally hoped. As I told Dr. Siva, you have a young boy's dream to try and fulfill, and I'll do what I can on my end to help you.

INTERACT: The next morning, after another leisurely breakfast in our hotel room, Dr. Siva once again picked us up, this time to travel to a public girls high school [in India, government schools are for the poor, while public schools are for the wealthier], St. Hilda's Girls School, where I would address their Interact Club. Walking into the auditorium of this beautiful school on the top of a mountain in India, I was once again struck by the numbers of young people there to greet me.

After the traditional ceremony and my presentation on "Future Leadership", I did a Q&A session. The questions were polite but intelligently probing. My direct answers brought praise from the school principal. I've always been a believer in honest communication, so this was an unexpected pleasant comment to hear. After the Q&A ended, I sat in a chair on the stage and shook the hand of the 200 young women as they crossed the stage to thank me for coming. Tears filled some of their eyes, as well as mine, as the impact of our meeting and sharing became apparent.

After we checked out of the hotel, Rtn. Dr. Siva drove us half way back down the mountain, to meet up again at Rtn. Krishna Dev's home in Coonoor. After the traditional tea and cookies and meeting Rtn. Dev's wife, Dr. Siva departed for home, and we headed over to lunch at the Country Club where their local Rotary Club meets. After another enjoyable Rotary get-together lunch, we headed down the rest of the hill to Coimbatore. Nearing the city, Rtn. Maddy called on his cell, asking us to meet him at the hospital.

HOSPITAL: Around noontime, we walked through the doors of gangahospital.com Ganga Hospital and Medical Center, into the waiting arms of our smiling Coordinator for the Coimbatore Area, Rtn. Dr. Balavenkat [Dr. Bala], the District 3200 GSE Chair and Trainer, along with our Rtn. Scheduler and guide, dear Maddy. This was our first face to face meeting with Dr. Bala, after over a year of email communication. What a welcome and heart-warming thrill that was. Walking us into a private waiting room, Dr. Bala, an Anesthesiologist and Consultant at Ganga Hospital, introduced us to Dr. Rajasekaran, Hospital Director and Head of the Department of Orthopedics. After an interesting discussion, they asked would I please have a scan done to make sure my head was okay.

Sensing too many wonderful Rotarians in India were still concerned, and wanting to alleviate that, I agreed, but said it would have to fit in with my schedule. After leaving the hospital, we were privileged to be invited to Dr. Bala's home to meet his parents. Once again, we were impressed with the spiritual presence in their homes, and the great respect they have for their elders. After a pleasant tea and cookies and fun conversation (of course, receiving another unexpected but lovely gift!) we proceeded to check in at the Hotel Heritage Inn to get a bit of a rest, catch up once again with email, and get ready to go take part with DG LN in the Chartering of a new Club that evening.

Late afternoon, we went back down to the lobby to meet Dr. Bala's wife and son. Shortly, DG LN showed up to greet us, and off we went with he and his driver to take part in the Chartering of a new Galaxy Rotary Club. The Charter reminded me once again of the great tradition Rotarians in India have as part of all their meetings and special events. The pride of India RC members to be Rotarians is so apparent. Everything is done with such wonderful precision, with many people taking part in

making it a most special event. After the meeting begins and the members and guests are seated, those who will sit at the head table are announced and escorted down the aisles. The traditional candle lighting ceremony and presentation of gifts are always moving ceremonial moments. It was great to see the enthusiasm with which DG LN addressed this new group, and an honor for me to be asked to do the same. After the ceremony concluded, we were driven back to our hotel.

The next morning, we were picked up Rtn. Sundharomoorthy, the Secretary of the Coimbatore RC, and driven out to another Rotary sponsored school. Everywhere we went for an event, it seemed as though every student and adult were out, lining the driveway's and the school yards, by the hundreds. Some with flowers, others with those wonderful scarf gifts, all with radiant smiles. The moment we would appear, they would erupt into applause. I never stopped tearing up, so overwhelmed were we by the amazing welcomes. An special moment for me, at this school, was when I learned that these students were from orphanages, or were children of prisoners, or were from needy families.

When you are in their presence, you sense these young people are grateful for the opportunity Rotary Clubs in India have given them to grow, in so many ways. When the opening ceremony and entertainment concluded, I was asked to once again present to them. My message to all children I was given the amazing opportunity to interact with was "keep using your head and your heart to keep growing and learning and using your God-given talents to make your world a better one." I always ended my presentations by asking them what questions they had of me.

One of the questions here which really touched my heart was when one young lady asked "Mum, could you get us some desks for us to sit at and learn?" It turns out they sit in circles, under trees Rotarians have planted to shield them from the hot sun, for their daily lessons. I'm going to work on helping to also make that wish a reality. As we left the school yard, we remembered we'd left our briefcase there. Pulling back into the driveway, our driver asked one of the students to please go get it for us. We rolled down the windows to wave goodbye and were overwhelmed with the hands reaching in the car windows to touch us once more. You don't forget memories such as this.

As promised to Dr. Bala, we then drove to the Ganga Hospital to have the scan taken. Would you believe Earl took pictures of the process? When done, the doctor said, 'good news, your brain is empty', to which I replied with mock indignation, 'my brain is empty?' This provoked a laugh from all, and a reply of 'it's full of great gray matter.' Dr. Bala then took us on a tour of this world-class hospital, showing us the floors where 'the have's' and 'the have-not's' are treated, both with the same level of care, just different rooms – the 'have's' in private rooms, and the 'have-not's' in wards, neither of which diminished the treatment they received.

This hospital is symbolic of the kind of health care coverage all countries should emulate, including the U.S. I saw accident victims whose severed limbs had been reattached, with new skin growing from a flap on their stomachs. I saw a little girl who was born with a crooked neck, now looking normal as could be. I saw a Rotarian's father, recuperating from hip surgery, feeling no pain, as they administered minimal pain medicine so he could heal more quickly and comfortably. A premier academic and clinical institution, started in 1978 with 17 beds, with nearly 5,000 beds today, offering 'Quality Treatment at Affordable Cost' and free treatment to the underprivileged due in part to their association with Rotary Clubs. Kudos to Dr. Rajasekaran, his family, and all involved in this most humanitarian of health care facilities, serving the people of India as well as international patients.

After lunch, Rtn. Sundharomoorthy picked us up and drove us to Ramakrishna College where I had the privilege of addressing a large group of Rotaracters on Youth Leadership. Once again, the ceremonial respect from and for their membership, and the learning of the wonderful projects they are involved in, was great to hear. And once again, the questions following my presentation were

gently probing, highly intelligent, and deeply caring. They asked could we come to their Engineering School to speak to them, but unfortunately there wasn't time in the schedule this trip.

That evening, Dr. Bala picked me up to take me to Jenny's Club, where I would be presenting on Rotary Leadership. Those attending were from eleven different Rotary Clubs in the District, as well as two of the GSE team members from India who had come to CNY to our District: Hema and Sonya. Hema, who brought her adorable daughter with her, is now a member of the Coimbatore Club, and Sonya is joining the Club soon. It was great to see them both again! After my presentation, a lively Q&A session followed, covering all sorts of issues of importance to them. Another great evening. We returned to our hotel room with more gifts, including banana chips!

The next morning, Rtn. Thamby picked us up to transport us to Hotel Poppy's in Tirupur, the headquarters hotel for their 3200 District Conference. After getting settled in, and having lunch, I again tackled email. After all, this first Lady Governor from an eClub needed to keep running her district from half way around the world! While globalization might be an over-used word, it's omnipresent in India. Almost every urban and rural family seems to have some foreign connection, be it to the U. S., Dubai, their neighboring countries in the Middle East, and the Far East. Either through work, trading and/or exporting, or through family or friends, everyone sees further than India. Many had family members working in America.

DISTRICT CONFERENCE: That evening, Rtn. Thamby picked us up to take us to the opening ceremony of District 3200's Annual District Conference. We sat in the front row before the stage, next to DG LN's son and wife, privileged to be part of the opening ceremonies and the dinner and entertainment that followed. After, we headed back once again to our hotel. The next day, we were once again transported by Rtn. Thamby – whom I forgot to tell you would play me the most beautiful Indian music on his car CD, and sing along to it. I miss that gentle beautifully spiritual voice.

It was so enjoyable to be a part of their District Conference, listening to their speakers, meeting up again with the Rotarians from Cochin, Ooty, and Coimbatore, and connecting with our D-7150 GSE Team, who we heard rave reviews about from everyone. Rtn. Maddy's lovingly prepared pre-conference schedule, and Rtn. George's & DG LN's conference schedule made us such a welcome part of the weekend. The setting of Tamilnadue College of Engineering in Coimbatore was a great site for the conference.

Saturday afternoon, I had the privilege of addressing the Conference attendees on "Women as Leaders". I shared not only some history of women leaders throughout history and in Rotary, I also shared some of the highlights of my amazing journey. At the end of my presentation, I brought the 15 Area Coordinators who had played such a part in our journey around the district, up onto the stage where Earl presented them with a special Rotary pin I had purchased for them. At the end of this, I presented DG LN with an autographed copy of my book. Small tokens for huge friendships. I also was honored to be on the stage when our GSE team did their amazing presentation.

Sunday morning, I addressed District 3200's Inner Wheel group. Another great experience. These women, partners of Rotarians, are doing amazing humanitarian work all over their district. After my presentation, I headed back over to the building where the Rotarians Conference was winding down. I stayed right through to the end. Again, the wonderful connecting up again, the flashbulbs of digital pictures taken [I told DG LN we were ready for the paparazzi!], the sharing of email address and phone number to stay in touch, and hopefully meet up with when they travel here.

We in the United States have a lot to learn from India in many things Rotary. Their 'collaring of Club President's' and District Governor, lighting of the Kuthuvilaku, presenting of flower garlands, ending

with felicitations and pleasantries, gives a heartfelt specialness to all their events. Throughout my journey, various Rotarians had referred to me as their 'elder sister' or 'Rotary mother', but the most touching moment was as I was leaving the conference site, and two different Rotarians quickly knelt down and touched my feet, saying a prayer as they did so. Rtn. Maddy & Thamby told me that touching the feet of elders is a sign of respect among Indians.

HEADING HOME: With a full heart, we drove back to the hotel to pack up and get ready to head to the airport for the long journey home. Several other Rotarians stopped by our room with additional gifts for us to take home and to offer their fond farewell. Two carloads of Rotarians headed to the airport in Coimbatore. We were driven by the ever-faithful Rtn. Thamby, while the ever-vigilant Rtn. Maddy was in the second car. After checking our luggage, we sat in the waiting area with our 'wonderful Rotary bodyguards', sharing last minute thoughts.

As I gave my 'so long for now' hugs to Thamby & Maddy, the tears flowed down my cheeks. I would miss them so. And then DG LN appeared at the airport, escorting R. I. President Wilf's representative. Another one of those quick sincere smiles and genuine warm hugs of LN's, accompanied by one last gift from him, and we were heading through the airport's security area, waving to our friends, a piece of our hearts left there with them. We boarded the plane for the flight to Mumbai [formerly Bombay].

Transferring between domestic and international terminals is a challenge. Once you get off your flight you go through immigration, collect your bags, get a number for the queue, then wait for a shuttle bus to transport you to the other terminal. Once there you check-in, go through security, and then finally board your flight, unless it's the next morning, as was our case, then you wait in the airport lounge. While the international airport has only 25 gates, it has a huge selection of international flights, the largest being Air India.

All the way home, on that long flight, I was going through my notes, looking at the over 3,000 pictures on the laptop which Earl and some fellow Rotarians had taken, reliving in my mind this amazing humanitarian journey, reliving in my heart the love and respect I had for and with my previous and new-found Rotary friends in India. At the immigration counter in New York, the officer asked me how long I'd been away and after a brief glance, promptly stamped my papers, handed me my passport, and said with a smile, 'Welcome home!'

An image flashed through my mind's eye of the wonderful friends I'd tearfully left behind at the airport in Coimbatore, the rushing humanity on the move, the honking vehicles, rickshaws, rundown buses, decorated trucks, cool cows swaggering through the traffic clogged streets, amazing Rotarians involved warmly and passionately in so many wonderful projects that are making such a difference for those who have less than they. Both the more ordered universe of America's deadlines and daily routines, and India's emotion, diversity, extended families, and deep connections, now seem like home to me.

This was a humanitarian journey that humbly portrayed President Wilf's reminder of what Gandhi said, "children who see sharing and love, learn sharing and love". It also aptly portrayed TRF Chair Bob's reminder that we Rotarians are making a difference in our world through our donations to The Rotary Foundation. Part of my heart remains in India, and my promise to stay connected runs deep and true. I arrived home to assume in person my Governor duties, my Museum responsibilities, the thrill of meeting grandchild #6 who just arrived, and to prepare for my eldest grandson's wedding this coming summer! I'm grateful for this life-changing opportunity and look forward to our humanitarian visit to Haiti the end of this month, and to continuing the projects with both countries.