

# ICWA LETTERS

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SOUTH ASIA

## Kerala: The Beauty Is Skin-Deep

BY BACETE BWOGO

Kerala, India

4 June 1995

Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter,

I was completely amazed by the beauty of the land of Kerala when I arrived Trivandrum on June 3, 1995, for the first time.

"One legend, and there are a multitude, is that Kerala was formed when the God Parasu Rama threw a chuckram, or ax, as fast as he could across the sea, and the waters receded from where it fell. The Kerala left in legend, and in reality today, is one of India's most beautiful regions, a land of rice paddies and canals, miles of beaches and rolling plantations of tea bushes.

"Situated along the country's southwest coast, Kerala is alone among India's states in having almost total literacy, a result of 20th century Catholic missionaries, Marxist politicians and the determination of Keralans themselves. Water is a central part of life, from the monsoons that sweep through first in early summer, and then in a less vigorous form in November and December, to the seas that yield the freshest seafood in India, to the canals crisscrossing the paddy fields that spread like mirrors across the State." (*New York Times*, Sunday, March 6, 1994)

This is the idealized view of Kerala. But the natural beauty of the land is one thing and maintaining past achievements in education, health and other social services is another. As I traveled through Kerala, I observed that some of the past achievements were getting eroded. And some Keralans could already see that Kerala was falling from grace. This fall from grace was exposed very clearly in an article in one of the leading national magazines, *India Today*, November 15, 1994:

"Kerala, once a model for the country, seems to have begun sliding downhill. The praise that is showered on Kerala for its achievement should not divert attention from its present crises. There is need to draw up a new agenda. These words were spoken by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the state's first chief minister, who was among the original champions of the Kerala development model. But the former model supporters are now disowning it in droves. The model has failed to rescue the state, Welfare without growth is neither sustainable nor replicable.

"The miracle is well documented. Because of its 95 percent

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literacy, population control, high life expectancy, the status of women or the low infant mortality, Kerala's record is not only the best in India or in the Third World but even comparable to the developed countries.

"The 'Kerala model' had become a showpiece for economists and sociologists. But now the underbelly has started to show: the highest unemployment rate in the country, a pitiful per capita income, low industrial and agricultural growth and a mounting public debt, all giving rise to social ills usually associated with the West. The state has the highest suicide rate in India, a record crime rate, excessive consumption of alcohol and increasing disruption of family life. Every year in Kerala, 24 people per lakh [1,000,000] of the population commit suicide, against a national average of eight. 20-25 percent are those of whole families committing suicide and almost 44 percent of those who commit suicide are between 18 and 30 years of age. A few years ago almost all alcoholics on rehabilitation were above the age of 40. Today, half are between 20 and 30.

"A major increase in organized crime, rape and burglary reflects the change in the values of society. Women, despite their emancipation, are increasingly becoming the victims. The society most affected is the family, as is evident from the high incidence of divorce. Trivandrum family court, which handles cases from only two districts, gets about 260 divorce requests each month. Alcohol is the major villain breaking up marriages. As for suicide, factors such as the disappearance of large families, alcoholism, and economic uncertainty have all played a part in the rise in suicide rates. And the state's funded programs have bred a welfare dependency culture, leaving the Keralite unable to cope with even minor crises. While the old order has been challenged, nothing new has filled its place."

When I was visiting in Munnar, one university graduate who works as a waiter told me jokingly that "in Kerala we have 100 percent literacy and 100 percent unemployment." Many educated people appear to have a dream of going to work in the oil-rich Gulf countries.

Those persons wanting to work in the Gulf countries have borrowed substantial amounts of money, from 30 to 50 thousand rupees, to pay for visas and employment. The money is given to agents who look for jobs for their clients in the Gulf. There is no guarantee that all those who get visas will be employed in jobs which they applied for. Some people end up as domestic servants after they reach the Gulf countries, even if they have the qualification for other jobs. If they complain that this was not the job promised them, they are asked to take it or leave it and risk the loss of the money they borrowed to find a job visa. I am told that some women job-seekers end up with bad luck too. Some are mistreated and kept in homes as domestics, though Kerala nurses are respected for

the good service they provide in hospitals there.

## HEALTH CARE IN KERALA

Kerala health indicators are impressive, but what I saw in health centers and public hospitals suggest something else.

In Ambullappuza district, one concerned community health doctor invited me to attend a clinic where some tribal women were having their body weights measured. He handed me a list to read through: a woman 35 years of age weighed 35 kilograms and another 50 years old weighed 38 kilograms. These were not sick women. I saw them walking around and chatting with friends. I was told they were healthy. But by international standards, their body weights were too small for their ages. Many of the women looked short and thin, even when compared to the fellow women who were measuring their weights. You could complete a circle if you put your hands around the waists of some of these underweight women.

The Medical College Hospital in Alleppey has about 900 beds, but the congestion is unbelievable. Some people in the casualty ward lie on the ground. Some general medicine wards are so large that the place looks like a garage. In the obstetric ward women who had just given birth shared common beds or doubled up. The pay wards are better. For 50 rupees a patient has a private room and bath, and an additional place for a relative to stay. Other pay wards charge 30 rupees for a room. The rooms are clean, though not as comfortable as the 50-rupee rooms. Most patients buy their medicines from private pharmacies, but some of the medicines are administered by the hospital nurses.

There are general complaints that doctors do not give good attention to patients at public hospitals and that interaction is usually impersonal. You will be better cared for if money is given (illegally) to the doctor, I have been told, though doctors are expected to provide free services to patients at public hospitals. Now even many poor people seek medical care in expensive private clinics — called Nursing homes — or in private hospitals where fees for consultation are about 25-50 rupees, an amount too expensive for the poor to afford. I have observed that many doctors are involved in private practice because government salaries can not meet their needs.

In rural areas, primary health centers, once a good system for health care in rural Kerala, are now faced with the problem of a lack of doctors and other health personnel to work in them.

There are exceptions. In Tirur, in Malapuram district, I found a medical doctor working in a small village. This was because the village was his birth place, and he had returned there to work among his people. Some doctors in the public health system operate small pri-

vate clinics in their homes after official working hours. This helps them earn additional income and prevents them from going private full-time.

Although there are many Ayurvedic (traditional Hindu medicine, involving, yoga, herbs, oil massages and special diets) clinics in Kerala, I have been told that people use these clinics only for chronic illnesses that require long-term treatment. For acute illnesses they prefer to see a Western-type medical doctor. Some Ayurveda-trained graduates practice in Ayurveda hospitals — public or private. Around Trivandrum, you will find many pharmacies selling Ayurvedic medicines only.

## TRAVELING & AROUND INDIA

You have to travel by bus, train or on foot to see the 'real' India. This may not be fun, but it will bring home some realities about what life is like. As the train goes through Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the landscape changes as you head north to the state of Andhra Pradesh. There are fewer trees and arid land begins to emerge. Along the railway tracks you will see peoples' dwelling places and wells near standing pools of stagnant dirty water, where water-buffaloes rest in the hot day. Also you see young children defecating around the houses in the open air. These scenes occur again and again, all the way up to up to Delhi, and from Calcutta to Surat.

In Madras, some rivers have been converted literally into sewers and I would be surprised if fish still survive in them at all. On the way to the Hotel Ambassador Pallava (where I stayed a few nights), you cross the river Cooum. The water in it is dark and smells foul. At first I thought it might be an open sewer system, but when I looked at my city map, it was a river in fact! The beach front just behind the Saint Thome church is littered with human feces, which make swimming a risky affair and even walking a skipping exercise. In November, during

one cyclone, streets were water-logged and cars, humans and cows had to wade through the muddle of mud and dirt. Despite the rain and mud, the fruit and flower market was worth a visit.

When I walked around the beach near Saint Thome church, I heard children (and sometimes adults too) calling, "negro, negro" and sometimes I felt some small pieces of stone fall in front or behind me. Someone may have been teasing me, or trying to strike up a conversation in a strange way. It is not uncommon to be called "*kali*," or black, in Delhi too.

During rush hours, the Ana Salai or Mount Road becomes congested, with many cars polluting the atmosphere.

However, there are also interesting things to see in Madras. I visited a Hindu temple, the first time I had seen one. The architecture is amazing. In Tamil Nadu, non-Hindus are allowed to enter Hindu temples; in Kerala, they are not. My impression was that Madras was a cleaner and nicer place than Bombay or Delhi, and of course, than Calcutta, which seems to sum up all of India's problems.

## CONCLUSION

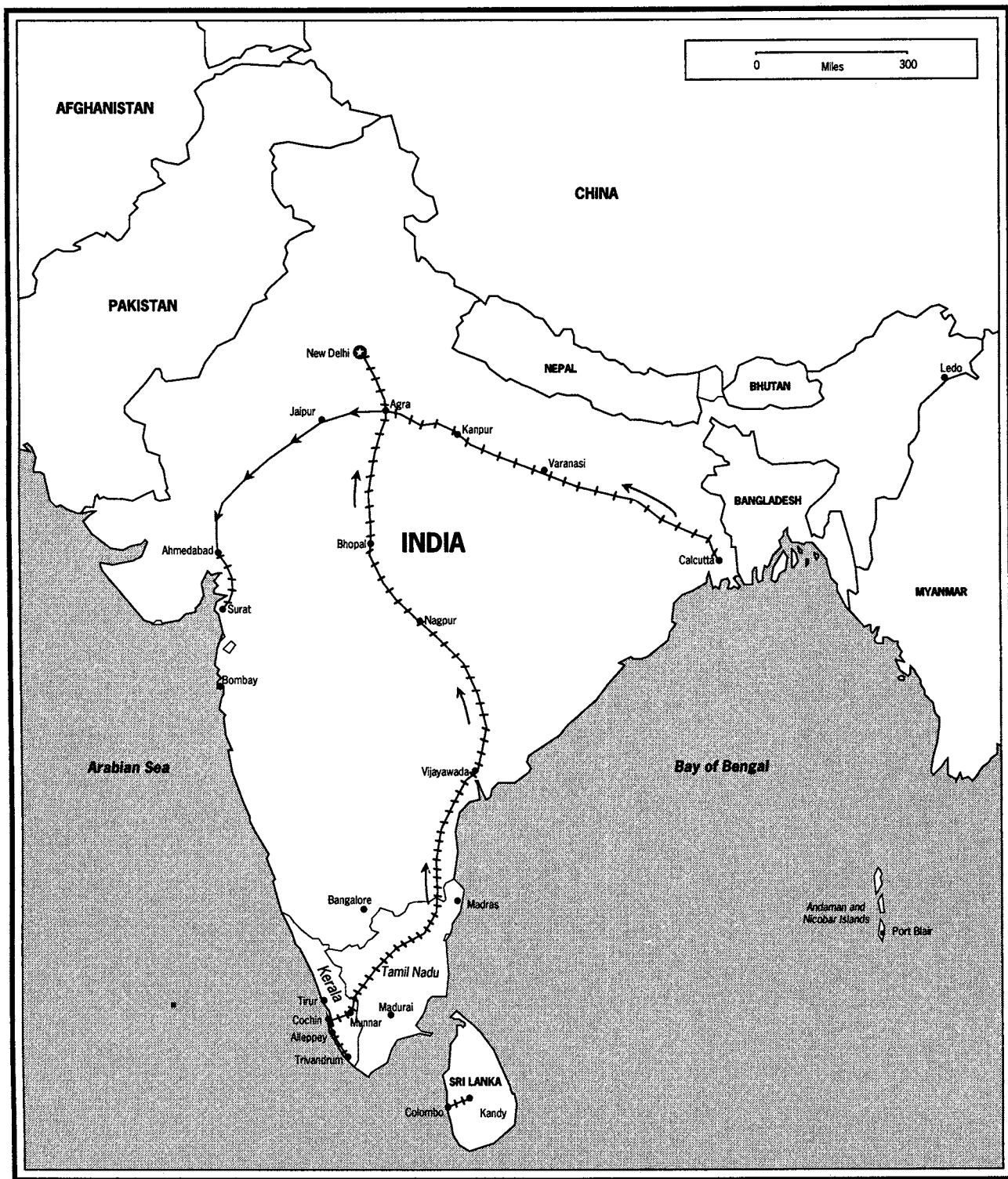
Before leaving India, I visited the "Taj Mahal," which is truly a world wonder, and Gandhi's magnificent Ashram in Ahmedabad. It was rewarding being in the same place where the great Mahatma Gandhi had once taught peace, love and dignity for all mankind. I felt peace in my heart and I feel I am a 'new man' — a creation of the Institute of Current World Affairs. My sincerest thanks to all the Trustees of the I.C.W.A. And to you, Peter Martin, *que Dios le bendigas*.

Yours *para siempre*,

*Bacete*

TRAVEL SCHEDULE IN INDIA (MAY 28, 1994 TO FEBRUARY 27, 1995)

May	28 ———>	Arrive Delhi (from Cairo, Egypt)
June	03 ———>	Trivandrum
June	11 ———>	Delhi
July	17 ———>	Trivandrum
August	02 ———>	Bombay
August	09 ———>	Trivandrum
August	26 ———>	Delhi
October	02 ———>	Trivandrum
October	17 ———>	Cochin
October	19 ———>	Tirur
October	24 ———>	Cochin
October	25 ———>	Alleppey
October	30 ———>	Trivandrum
October	31 ———>	Madras
November	03 ———>	Bangalore
November	05 ———>	Trivandrum
November	16 ———>	Cochin
November	28 ———>	Munnar
December	01 ———>	Cochin
December	07 ———>	Trivandrum
December	14 ———>	Madras
December	16 ———>	Colombo
December	19 ———>	Kandy
December	21 ———>	Nuwara Eliya
December	23 ———>	Nuwara Eliya
December	27 ———>	Colombo
December	30 ———>	Delhi
January	12 ———>	Trivandrum
January	24 ———>	Madras
January	28 ———>	Trivandrum
February	15 ———>	Delhi
February	17 ———>	Calcutta
February	20 ———>	Agra
February	21 ———>	Jaipur
February	22 ———>	Ahmedabad
February	22 ———>	Surat
February	23 ———>	Ahmedabad
February	24 ———>	Delhi
February	27 ———>	Arrive Cairo (from Delhi, India)
March	05 ———>	Arrive New York (from Cairo, Egypt)





## Current Fellows & Their Activities

**Bacete Bwogo.** A Sudanese from the Shilluk tribe of southern Sudan, Bacete is a physician spending two and one-half years studying health-delivery systems in Costa Rica, Cuba, Kerala State (India) and the Bronx, U.S.A. Bacete did his undergraduate work at the University of Juba and received his M.D. from the University of Alexandria in Egypt. He served as a public-health officer in Port Sudan until 1990, when he moved to England to take advantage of scholarships at the London School of Economics and Oxford University. [THE AMERICAS]

**Cheng Li.** An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life by earning a Medical Degree from Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992. [EAST ASIA]

**Adam Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Cynthia Caron.** With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environment, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

**Hisham Ahmed.** Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

**Sharon Griffin.** A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

**Pramila Jayapal.** Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

**William F. Foote.** Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the Buenos Aires Herald from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

**Teresa C. Yates.** A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

## NOTES

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