

DILIP D'SOUZA ('76 EEE)

# FROM DILIP'S CORNER



*Dilip D'Souza is a prolific writer for Rediff and India Together, but apparently he has more to say than they have to publish. When he is not risking his life in Kashmir, he is immersed in his new found passion – blogging. In this section we present to you two interesting blogs where he talks about Srinagar and Adopting a child, both issues on which he shares his personal experiences and thoughts. For many more musings visit <http://dcubed.blogspot.com/>*

## SRINAGAR

### September 26, 2004: Careful (or maybe not) in Srinagar

Being in Srinagar is a strange feeling, or perhaps I should say a strange mix of feelings.

On the one hand, there's the very visible presence of the Army, or the alphabet of armed forces (CRPF, BSF, RR, whatever). You see soldiers everywhere, all with guns, you see barbed wire and bunkers with tiny slits (check the one on Court Road



off Lal Chowk) and you see something I've not seen elsewhere -- armored cars right out of Damnation Alley ('70s movie; you young sprouts, never mind), all with interesting names painted on the side. On the road out of the airport you pass a Maruti Gypsy rigged up as a machine-gun vehicle, with three or four men sitting on its ides and one standing, manning the gun. There do seem to be fewer soldiers about than I remember

seeing on my last (and first) visit, last April; perhaps that has something to do with elections that were on at that time. But still, there are enough visible even now that you wonder two things: one, what is it like to live under this constant armed presence? And two, what is it like to be a soldier in these circumstances?

You can puzzle out answers to those.

On the other hand, everyday life carries on. Buses run, their operators shouting the same unintelligible syllables I think I heard them

shouting when I used to wait for buses to Pilani. Different destinations, same incomprehensible shouts. The football tournament at the U of Kashmir is on, with teams from Nainital, Delhi, Patiala, Chandigarh, Lucknow and elsewhere. Lal Chowk is buzzing. Blue darting kingfishers flit along the Dal, as do ponderous herons and elegant egrets.

Before everyone who hears I'm

going to Srinagar raises an eyebrow, as if to say, 'you sure it's safe?' a friend I called in Delhi says to find out if it's possible and safe, to make a trip here with a bunch of academic friends, as they did to Lahore. Yet if they went to Lahore and loved it, why should they worry about Srinagar? I feel no different here than I have done in Alang, or Jammu, or Bhopal, or anywhere, despite the armed men. And maybe that's the key. Come here and find out how much the same this place is to everywhere else you might go, and that's the key to normalcy.

Aside: trip to Madagascar in 1991, in the middle of a nationwide uprising against Dictator Didier Ratsiraka. Same thing: raised eyebrows, you sure it's safe? But once there, I felt fine, never a moment to worry about. I did run into an American woman who had a hunted look in her eyes, clutched her bag to her chest, and kept gesturing to all around to stay away. Nothing had happened to her, but she behaved this way as she roamed the country, which only fed her fears some more.

You could be such a clutching, hunted person here in Srinagar too, and I'm pretty sure you'd go back home and tell all, Srinagar is a frightening place. You also could just roam around like anyone else, anywhere else, and go home to report that it's no more frightening than anywhere else.

Yet I did mention a mix of feelings. The last time I was here, my host Amir had another guest, Kamal, visiting from Delhi. Kamal is a short, wiry dude with long hair. Seems this was enough for someone among the

neighbors to report to the authorities that Amir had a suspicious guest. You know, perhaps a militant or something. (This happened after I left, while Kamal stayed on, so we're pretty sure that it wasn't me who was reported suspicious. Not that I'm crowing about it). Late one night, some of these authorities showed up at Amir's door, asking loud and rude questions, issuing threats. It all died down, but not before leaving Amir's already fragile temperament somewhat more frayed. So when I arrived yesterday, Amir said simply, be careful. How, he left to me.

So I'm careful as I stroll the city. As I watch the kingfishers. As I stop at the little dhaba I used to frequent the last time ("How's Bombay?" asks the owner as he recognizes me and flashes a huge smile). As I stop to watch Patiala knock Delhi out of the tournament, 5-3 in a penalty shootout. As I write a postcard to my son.

I'm careful. I have no idea how, really. Is that a key too?

### ADOPTION

#### October 9, 2004: The Nose and the Toes

There's something just slightly bizarre about it. The other day, we walked into a building at one end of the suburb of Chembur, signed four different cheques, and walked out half an hour later with a tiny human being. Just like that.

OK, it wasn't "just like that". The process has been grinding away for nearly a year. The tiny thing first made our

acquaintance about two months ago, and subsequent visits got her used to our faces. And then we walked in, last Tuesday, chequebook at the ready. But still... to think the actual exchange amounted to cheques handed over, tiny one handed over, is something to get used to.

Adoption, of course. We're now three days into the experience, and we already have tales to tell, the oddity of the cheques being just one.

There's the neighbor from the building. We've just driven home from the orphanage, brought home the little girl for the first time and finally, and we're walking into the lobby downstairs. The neighbor, a still-young mother of two college-age boys, stops and asks about the baby. "She's ours", we say (hey, those cheques...) "we adopted her." "You're joking, right?" says the woman. "Not at all, we really have adopted her!"

Whereupon she wrinkles her nose -- really -- and asks "Why?". Almost as if we've brought home a tarantula.

There's the orphanage itself. On one of our visits, we meet a few of the over 50 kids in here. One 8-year-old is all long legs and awkwardness, walking around in panties and a T-shirt. Another bright boy has just returned from some kind of party, so he's in fancy clothes and bubbling over with smiling stories of the evening. Smiles and cheeks everywhere.

We want to take the whole lot

home. All 50 plus. Wouldn't you?

When we first signed up at the adoption agency, the woman there told us about a little girl they were trying to place. The man who brought her in had found her as a newborn, abandoned. In a garbage dump. She didn't have two of her toes. They had been chewed off by rats.



I've met this girl -- she has since been adopted by a couple who also adopted their first daughter -- and as pretty and bright-eyed as she is, those missing toes are never far from my mind.

And you know, I write this here, and at some level I know there's a world out there I will never experience, and it is filled both with rats munching on little abandoned garbage dump girls' toes and with stylish women who wrinkle pert noses at the idea of adopting a child ... and nevertheless I wonder. What would drive a woman - - or a man, who knows? -- To fling her newborn onto a pile of trash?

Whatever the answer, I know this much: it has a lot to do with the thoughts we think when people ask why we adopted. Pert wrinkled noses be damned. ♦

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