



In Touch South India

Headlines from the U.S. Consulate General Chennai



June—July 2008

Volume: V, Issue: 3

<http://chennai.usconsulate.gov>

The People's Right to Know

A popular Government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.

For James Madison, fourth President of the United States, who made the above statement in 1822, an informed citizenry was an essential element of democratic governance. Yet the U.S. Constitution, which Madison was instrumental in drafting, does not require the government to disclose its records or give up its secrets. It was only in 1966, after more than a decade of congressional hearings and debate, that America's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was enacted to, in the words of the U.S. Supreme Court, "check against corruption and hold the governors accountable to the governed."



Dr. Jayaprakash Narayan, one of the drafters of RTI, and NGO activists meet with Mr. Susman in Hyderabad

When President Lyndon Johnson signed FOIA, he said it was "with a deep sense of pride that the United States is an open society in which the people's right to know is cherished and guarded." We know now, however, thanks to papers obtained ironically under FOIA, that President Johnson had deep reservations about the law, worrying that it might force disclosure of damaging governmental secrets. Over time it became clear that

the law did not endanger national security, and in 1974 Congress amended the act to make it more user-friendly.

From April 25 to 29, 2008, Thomas M. Susman, who in the 1970s worked on FOIA amendments as a U.S. Senate lawyer, visited India to discuss the American law and compare it with India's Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005. Mr. Susman in Chennai met with the Madras High Court, the Tamil Nadu Dr. Ambedkar Law University, and the Citizen Consumer & Civic Action Group; and in Hyderabad with the Centre for Good Governance and United Forum for RTI Campaign-A.P., among others.

In his lectures and discussions, Mr. Susman noted that a constant of any government is a resistance to outside scrutiny, i.e., a reluctance to have its decisions second-guessed or its wrongs discovered. It is for this reason that FOIA and RTI are necessary. Mr. Susman said that FOIA has become a popular and effective tool of inquiry in the United States for the press, scholars, businesses,

consumer activists and private individuals. In fact, any individual or corporation, regardless of citizenship, may request, without giving a reason, executive branch records on any topic. Certain categories of information, however, such as information properly classified for national defense, are specifically exempted from FOIA's rule of disclosure.

(Continued on page 2)

Get In Touch

Consulate main web link:

<http://chennai.usconsulate.gov>

Other links:

<http://americanlibrary.in.library.net>

<http://www.unitedstatesvisas.gov>

<http://buyusa.gov/india>

Consulate Phone Number:

044-2857-4000

Consulate Fax Number:

044-2811-2020



In July, I will complete my three-year assignment to Chennai and depart for another posting, so this will be my final contribution to *In Touch South India*, at least in my current capacity. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time in South India. It has been an honor to represent my own country, and it has been thrilling to play a small role in the flourishing relationship between India and the United States. Significant milestones of my three-year tenure include President Bush's March 2006 visit to Hyderabad, the July 2007 port call of USS Nimitz in Chennai, our success in streamlining the visa application process, and the soon-to-be realized effort to open a new U.S. Consulate in Hyderabad. Equally if not more memorable, however, were hundreds of opportunities to meet and to get to know the people of South India. U.S.-India relations are built on the strong foundation of people-to-people ties, and thanks to those strong ties I have nothing but optimism about the future of our relationship. I thank the Consulate staff for their hard work and patient guidance, and I thank all I have met here for your warm welcome.

-David T. Hopper, Consul General

Dr. K. Lakshminarayana Honored



Dr. Lakshminarayana receiving the award from Ms. Rajani Badlani, American Embassy, New Delhi (left) and Ms. Sandy Briggs, President, TESOL (right)

On April 2, 2008, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL) presented the TESOL Global Advocacy Leadership Recognition to Dr. K. Lakshminarayana, IAS, Commissioner of Collegiate Education for the Government of Andhra Pradesh, for his work with the Consulate General-Chennai and Regional English Language Office-New Delhi in establishing the Andhra Pradesh English Lecturers Retraining Program.

(Continued from page 1)

Mr. Susman found that RTI had many advantages over FOIA from the requester's point of view: RTI has a wider reach, applying to all public authorities, even some nongovernmental organizations; it establishes Information Commissioners to facilitate disclosure; it allows exemptions to be overridden "if public interest in disclosure outweighs the harm to protected interests;" and it imposes penalties on public authorities that obstruct or delay the furnishing of information.

Mr. Susman and his Indian interlocutors agreed that the most effective way to ensure the people's right to know and at the same time reduce the burden on government to search for records is for agencies to proactively disseminate information on Web sites. The more citizens can access information on their own, the less need for them to resort to FOIA or RTI.

World Press Freedom Day

Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States, famously declared that because the informed "opinion of the people" was the basis of democratic government, he would prefer newspapers without government over government without newspapers. Unfortunately, more than 200 years after Jefferson made that statement, freedom of the press remains under threat in many parts of the world.

The United Nations General Assembly in 1993 proclaimed an annual World Press Freedom Day on May 3. The purpose is "to evaluate press freedom, to defend the media from attacks on their independence, and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the line of duty."

The Consulate General and the Department of Media Services, Anna University, marked World Press Freedom Day 2008 with a digital video conference with Professor Judith Matloff of the Columbia School of Journalism in New York. Participants in Chennai included Dr. V. Krishna Ananth, Associate Professor at the Asian College of Journalism, and Mr. K.P. Sunil, Vice President of Jaya TV News. Others in attendance were journalists, journalism students, activists and concerned citizens.

Information Officer Wesley Robertson opened the proceedings by noting that the media can function as a watchdog for the public only if the lives and well-being of those who work in the media are safeguarded. "A strong and independent media is the best guarantor of liberty," he said.

Positive Images



Ms. Katrina Francis answering questions at a mock press conference during Take Your Child to Work Day on April 14, 2008



American Library patrons enjoying the Library's 60th anniversary celebration



Eminent agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan welcomes U.S. Ambassador to India David C. Mulford to his Chennai-based research foundation on May 19, 2008

Rumi: A Unifying Force

The 13th century Sufi poet/philosopher Moulana Jalaluddin Rumi is widely admired in India and the United States for the beauty of his poetry, the universality and timelessness of his themes, and the wisdom of his teachings. On April 10, via a digital video conference, the Consulate brought together three scholars – Dr. P. Nisar Ahmed, Head of the Department of Arabic, Persian and Urdu at the University of Madras; Mr. P.K. Abdul Rahiman, Lecturer at the Centre for Islamic Studies of the University of Madras; and Mr. Christopher Merrill, Director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa – to discuss Rumi’s relevance today, and throughout the world. About 60 readers of Rumi came to the Consulate to participate in the discussion.



At the table, from left to right, Mr. Rahiman, Prof. Ahmed, Public Affairs Officer Fred Kaplan. Mr. Merrill, lower right, via video from Iowa

Professor Ahmed noted that Rumi envisioned a world in which all humans of all religions lived together harmoniously. Rumi said, “The lamps are different, but the light is the same.” Mr. Rahiman added that Rumi, in the Sufi tradition, believed in “the possibility of some truth in every creed” and that one should “celebrate the commonality of all faiths.” Reflecting on Rumi’s revelations on the nature of existence, Mr. Merrill said: *“It is no secret that pain can lock up our emotions. This is an enduring poetic theme. And no one understood that better than Rumi, who is still forging links between the East and West, particularly in the United States, preparing us to walk purposefully through the same gate.”*

Consular Corner:

Student Visa Dos and Don’ts

The summer is our busiest season at the Consulate General. During this period we especially see an increase in student visa applications as students prepare to travel to the United States to begin the fall semester. We encourage prospective student applicants to keep a few helpful tips in mind when preparing for their visa interview.

Dos

-**Do** schedule your appointment well in advance of your school’s reporting date. You can schedule a visa appointment at: <http://www.vfs-usa.co.in>. Remember that you can apply up to 120 days before your reporting date, and you may enter the U.S. up to 30 days before your reporting date.

-**Do** review the Consulate’s website at: <http://chennai.usconsulate.gov> and the U.S. Department of State website at: <http://www.travel.state.gov/> for important information and resources to help you prepare for your interview.

-**Do** be yourself in your interview. Each interview is a unique opportunity for a student to clearly articulate academic goals, financial resources and previous academic experience.

Don’ts

-**Do not** jeopardize the opportunity to study in the United States by presenting fake documents of any kind. Presenting fraudulent documentation can lead to permanent and lifetime U.S. visa ineligibility for the prospective student.

-**Do not** rely on the information of others to prepare for your interview. There is no predetermined list of questions and answers to rehearse. The best way to prepare for your interview is to assemble the required documents.

-**Do not** forget to pay your Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) fee before your interview and to bring the receipt to your interview. See <http://www.ice.gov/sevis/index.htm> for more information.

-**Do not** answer a question you do not understand in an interview. Tell the consular officer you do not understand the question and ask them to repeat it.

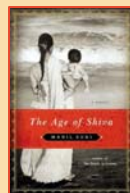
We look forward to seeing you at the Consulate soon!

What We Read

Juliana K. Ballard
Management Officer

The Age of Shiva
by Manil Suri

The Age of Shiva is both the story of a mother’s love for her son and a historical perspective on Partition, Indira Gandhi’s time in office, and Bombay from the 1950s to 1980s. The book tells the story of Meera, from the time when she seduced her sister’s boyfriend through her marriage to the same man, who turns out to be a well-meaning but useless drunkard, to the birth and childhood of Ashvin, her son, who becomes her whole world. On the way, we learn about the traditional roles of women and political turmoil in a new independent India.



Paul A. Hinshaw
Vice Consul

The Silent Raga
by Ameen Merchant

Two decades ago, musical protégé Janaki left a note to her little sister Mallika and walked away from a tyrannical father and home forever – or so she thought. “The Silent Raga,” a novel by Canadian-Indian Ameen Merchant, is the story of how a young woman found the strength to follow her own dreams and break with Tamil Brahmin tradition dictating another path for her entirely. Set mainly in Chennai, the novel evokes images familiar to the city’s residents as Janaki’s story unfolds and family secrets are revealed.



Donald Camp's Enduring Ties to Tamil Nadu

Some Americans, and not only those of Indian origin, have especially deep and enduring ties to South India. One such example is senior American diplomat Donald Camp who as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia visited Chennai April 16-18, 2008. Unlike many of his diplomatic colleagues promoting the growing relationship between India and the United States, Mr. Camp benefits from first-hand knowledge of village life and many years of experience in the region.

Mr. Camp first came to India and Tamil Nadu as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1970. He undertook intensive agricultural training and worked in a program to introduce new strains of rice during the early years of the "Green Revolution." Living in a small village in the Thanjavur district, the young Mr. Camp learned Tamil and made many friends that he has kept to this day.

Although Mr. Camp left India in 1972, he has come back to visit many times since then and has noticed the remarkable

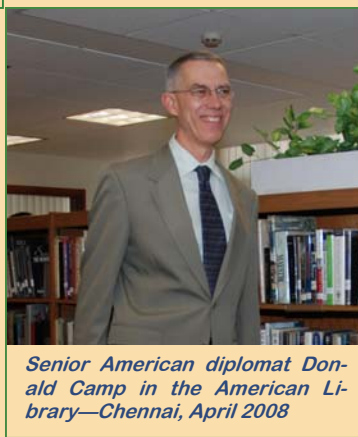


Peace Corp volunteer Donald Camp with friends in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, in the early 1970s

changes that have taken place. He said: "Now people have much more contact with the rest of the world and are much more aware of what is going on. There is also increased contact between India and the United States. American companies like Ford Motors and Dell Computers are investing here. While much of this transformation is apparent in urban areas, I am confident this is spreading. There is a real need to increase development of rural industries,

and I know the government here has focused a lot on that."

Mr. Camp had the opportunity to meet with Chief Minister Karunanidhi during his recent visit, and he noted that Dr. Karunanidhi was also Chief Minister when Mr. Camp lived in the state 38 years ago. Mr. Camp also interacted with entry-level American diplomats from all over South and Central Asia who chose Chennai for a conference to brush up their skills.



Senior American diplomat Donald Camp in the American Library—Chennai, April 2008

Journalist, Poet, Consulate Spouse

The Consulate community is multi-talented and multinational, and it does not include only employees. Many family members while in Chennai are achieving great things, and in this issue of "In Touch South India" we feature one of them.

Richard Major, spouse of Vice Consul Kris Fresonke, can normally be found at home in Chennai, working as a freelance journalist. But last month, Dr. Major traveled five thousand miles to London to hear the musical setting of his powerful and evocative poem, "The Mountain and the Sea," performed at Westminster Abbey by the renowned Abbey choir. Members of the British Royal Family also attended the April 25 world premiere.



The Dean of Westminster, Dr. John Hall, presents Dr. Major (right) to Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester

The occasion was ANZAC Day, the memorial day for the military contribution of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps during World War I, particularly at Gallipoli, Turkey. Dr. Major is a native New Zealander, a former Rhodes scholar to Oxford, and an accomplished writer. He wrote the text to a choral anthem which was then set by Australian composer Huw Belling.

Australian and New Zealand valor during WWI was in the face of heavy casualties. (The 1981 feature film "Gallipoli" depicts some of the more brutal aspects of trench warfare.) Both nations still remember their service with considerable pride. Westminster Abbey in London holds the largest annual ANZAC Day service in the world. Members of the Royal Family, along with the High Commissioners of Australia and New Zealand, the Turkish Ambassador, and diplomats from the United States and Europe, stood among the thousands. "This service is a lament for the carnage of all modern wars," observed Dr. Major, "a hope for forgiveness for such wars, and reconciliation even after such wars."

Although Major and Belling had never met before April 25, their long-distance collaboration had a powerful impact on its listeners. "There was silence for about twenty seconds after the anthem finished," said Dr. Major about the performance. "That was gratifying."

Dr. Major and Dr. Fresonke met in Oxford in 1991, and moved to Chennai last summer with their two children Matilda and Oscar. Dr. Major is currently working on a book about nineteenth-century New York social history.