

HAZARDOUS BREAKFAST WITH MADRAS BANKER

By Joe McGowan

There are many hazards in being a news correspondent in third world countries. There are revolutions, wars, unfriendly mobs, unsafe airplanes, plus chaotic street traffic.

But health hazards were something to keep in mind at all times. A colleague worked several years in Bogota, Colombia, without a major story. When a revolution finally happened, he was in the hospital with hepatitis.

As I returned from a visit to Sri Lanka, I stopped over in Madras, a seaport city on India's southeast coast.

Before leaving home base in New Delhi, I had seen an item in an Indian newspaper telling about a man who had started a banking operation in his home in a small village outside Madras. It sounded interesting, so I filed it away for future action.

Anyone who has ever seen photos of Indian village women knows they have gold bangles around their ankles—in addition to a diamond stud in a nostril and some gold chain around their necks.

This jewelry usually is the family's entire fortune. The largely illiterate villagers have traditionally distrusted banks. When there is a little money to spare, another bangle is purchased.

The banker near Madras had set up shop in his living room. He invited

villagers to come for tea. Eventually they came to trust him and put some money into savings. It was a first for India.

I called the banker and he invited me to come see his operation. I hired a car and driver and went to the village. I sat quietly in the living room while people came in, sat on cushions on the floor and had tea. Then they handed over their cash and received entries in savings passbooks.

Then, the banker invited me to join him for breakfast. Early next morning, my driver dropped me off at the banker's home. The cook brought in fried eggs and rice cakes, covered with curry sauce.

The first bite of the hottest curry I had ever eaten brought sheer agony. There was a glass of water on the table in front of me, but I knew it was tap water and I didn't dare touch it.

Somehow I made it through breakfast and thanked my host. I'm sure my voice was barely audible from my scorched throat. I got into the hired car and told the driver to race back to Madras. At my hotel, there was no purified water, but I found a cold Coca Cola and eventually put out the fire.

In those days, there was no purified water sold in Indian cities. One had to find soft drinks or cold bottled beer with which to brush your teeth and quench thirst while traveling away from home.

Late one evening, I developed a horrible toothache. I suffered through

the night and next morning drove to a dentist's home/office.

He told me I had an impacted molar and it had to come out. I watched as he prepared a hypodermic needle and told him I didn't want anesthetic. I knew from advice given by the U.S. Embassy that medical people seldom sterilized their needles.

The dentist shrugged and yanked the tooth. Yes, it was painful. But it felt so good to get rid of the offending tooth. The doctor filled a glass with tap water and told me to rinse. I realized tap water in an open wound would be dangerous.

I put the glass down, spit out the blood, paid him and left.

On my way to work, I stopped at a pharmacy and bought some antiseptic mouthwash. And life went on in India.

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