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**In The Heart Of Lotus Country  
Simultaneous Visions**



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Cover: Lotus in bloom  
Photograph: Nihal Mathur

Next month ...  
OUR ANNUAL ISSUE ON FOOD

## PLACE

6

### In the Heart of Lotus Country



The area around Nagercoil has countless pools, some big, some small, where the lotus grows wild. **Nihal Mathur** records his impression of lotus country

## EXHIBITION

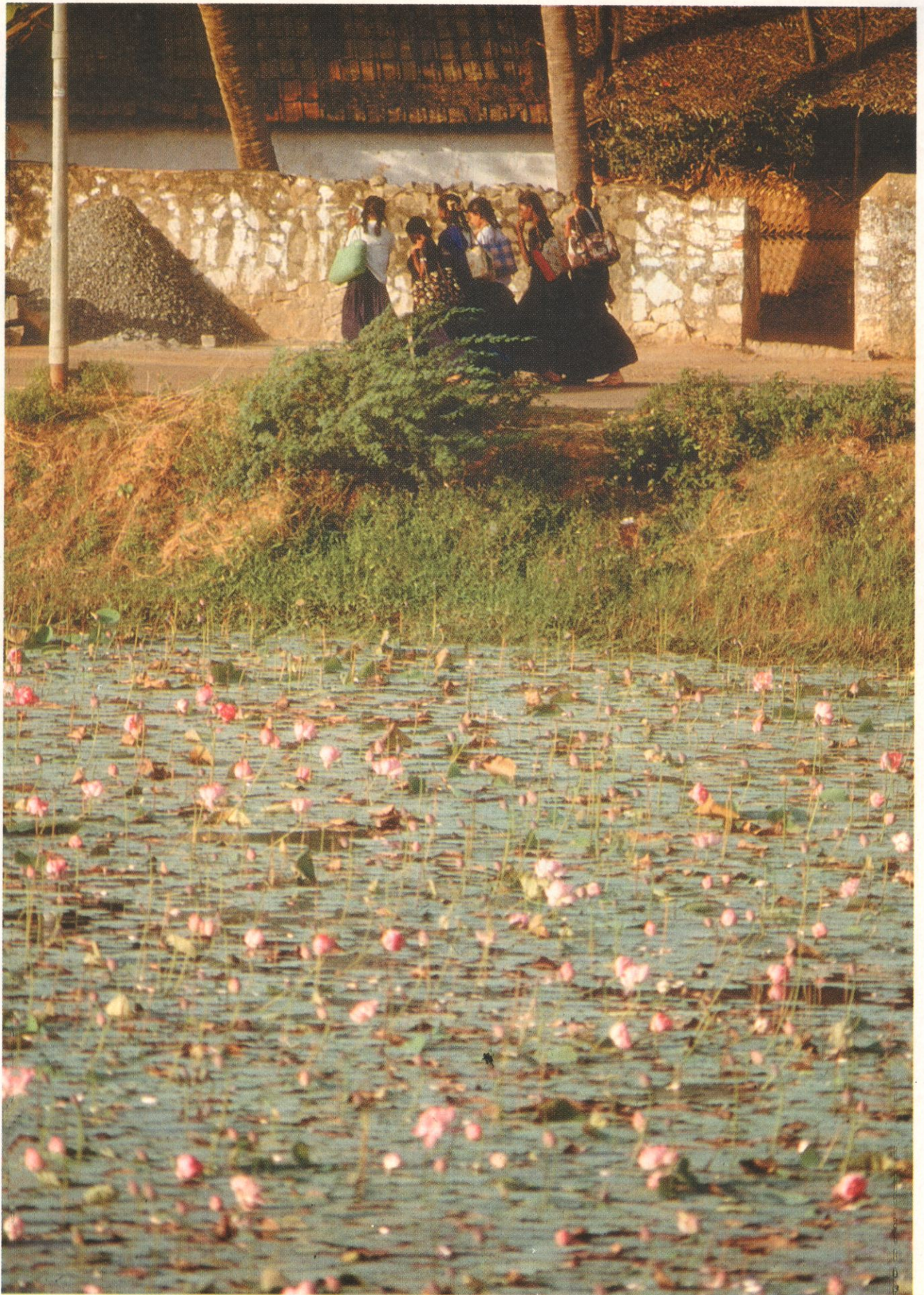
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### The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India



The most comprehensive exhibition of Jain art even organised opens this month at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. **Pratapaditya Pal** describes how he, as curator, conceived and executed the show









*PLACE*

# In the Heart of Lotus Country

The area around Nagercoil has countless pools, some big, some small, where the lotus grows wild. Nihal Mathur records his impression of lotus country





**A**s the express bus sped through the countryside, somewhere between Trivandrum and Kanyakumari, all I could see for miles on end, were lotus in full bloom. I marvelled at the vista of pond after pond, teeming with blooming lotus. I had never seen so many flowers before.

The lotus, as the national flower, has a very significant place in our culture. Associated with the deities of the Hindu,

Buddhist and Jain pantheons, the lotus symbolises many qualities. But the lotus is closely connected with Vishnu, from whose navel emerges the stalk of the lotus, bearing Brahma the Creator of the Cosmos. In Trivandrum, there is the famous Vishnu temple of Padmanabhaswamy or literally Lotus-Navel-Lord, the presiding deity of the erstwhile rulers of the former Travancore state. In fact, their older capital, on the way to Kanyakumari, was called Padmanabhapuram or the Lotus-Navel-City. Perhaps, this reverence to Lord

*Previous page left and right: A lotus laden pond. The sheer size and intensity of the flowers took my breath away*





Vishnu, stimulated the natural and abundant growth of the lotus in this region.

Murugesan, a wholesale flower dealer I met at Nagercoil, told me that within a radius of nearly ten kilometers around Nagercoil, there were countless large and small ponds where the lotus grew wild. Villages like Veerani, Aloor, Chunkankadai, Villukerri and Thuckalai were known for their lotus laden ponds with the largest concentration in and around the village of Thottiyodu. As long as he could

remember, these villages harvested lotus and supplied them to Vishnu worshippers at nearby Trivandrum.

One September morning, I decided to leisurely meander through the heart of lotus country with George, the autorickshaw driver, as my guide and interpreter. Weaving in and out of narrow country roads in a three-wheeler, we drove through lush green landscapes of paddy fields, coconut and banana plantations, dotted with small hamlets and random scatterings of lotus ponds — some the size of

*Above left and right: Mutthu, the lotus picker, manoeuvres his way through the tangle of lotus growth*





swimming pools, others as large as lakes, like the one at Aloor, where the sheer size and intensity of the flowers took my breath away.

I sat down to savour the scene of pink and white blooms gently swaying in the breeze. Merging with the colours of the murky waters and vegetation, I noticed jacanas, moorhens and wagtails walking on the leafy surfaces of large lotus leaves, as they snapped at insects buzzing among the flowers. A flight of egrets flew overhead. But, more endearing was the fact that this scene of sheer beauty formed the backdrop the saga of human life. In the distance were men bathing while women washed clothes. Nearby, the cattle had arrived for watering. Elsewhere I saw children swimming.

George introduced me to Mr Pillai, a lotus pond owner.

These were government or panchayat properties, he told me, which were annually tendered for the farming and collection of lotus and fish. For his huge pond, I reckon the size of an Olympic stadium, the rate was ten thousand rupees. Since the lotus grew wild effortlessly, his job was merely to harvest the flowers for which he employed flower pickers.

At first, I could not see the lotus picker, lost in the vastness of the pond. With George's help, I finally located Mutthu, floating in a roundish tub. He sat smugly in his iron contraption which he paddled with his bare hands, swiftly making his way through the tangle of the lotus growth.

Mutthu said that March and April were the months when the tamara or lotus, were in full bloom. But I was impressed

*Above: Rising above the murky waters, the pink and white blooms sway in the gentle breeze*









by the spectacle even in the late monsoon when I was told, the flowers decline considerably. To show me how things look during the lean period, he took me to see another pond, completely picked clean! There I saw another picker collecting lotus leaves which Mutthu explained, were used as packing material in the flower industry.

Few days later, Murugesan took me to Thovla, the local flower market. He said that in this region other flowers grew as well which, unlike the wild lotus, were carefully cultivated in small holdings, not large enough for paddy. The market was busy with many men and women buying and selling mounds of fragrant jasmine, tuberose and local varieties called pitchi, kanagambaram and kolunthu. Murugesan said that although there were larger flower markets in Coimbatore, Trichy, Madras and Madurai, Thovla had the

distinction of being the only open flower market in India where no middleman was involved. Besides, although Thovla was now in Tamil Nadu, it supplied flowers to Trivandrum and other cities in Kerala, since once it was a part of the former Travancore state and continued to maintain its old traditional market links.

In Thovla, I discovered that the entire village was dependent on the flower economy where as Murugesan said, more than 20,000 people were involved in some way or the other. There were whole families whose livelihood depended on the business of flowers — whether it was in production, sale, distribution or in flower decoration.

No social function in Tamil Nadu is complete without floral decorations. Flowers are offered to the deities in temples,

*Above: I marvelled at the vista of pond after pond teeming with lotus in full bloom*





they are worn by women in their hair as adornment, in fact from birth to death, all the rites of passage are celebrated with flowers. Truly, the Tamilians have a special way of saying it with flowers.

As I walked through the village, I saw women in every house, sitting in the doorway, weaving tuberose buds into garlands or doing other flower decorations. I visited Shri Madaswamy Pandaram who I was told received the National Award for Excellence in the Art of Flower Decoration in 1988. Past seventy, with a flowing white beard, Pandaram welcomed me to his home and showed me photographs of some of his works. He was born into a family of traditional flower decoration makers and had learnt the craft from his father from the age of eight onwards. Today, Pandaram said

that he was happy that he had passed on this tradition to his son and grandchild.

On the way back I bought a bunch of lotus flowers and placed them in a jug of water in my hotel room window which overlooked Vivekananda Rock and the Indian Ocean. The beauty of the flowers and the awesome seascape overwhelmed me. I reflected on the meaning of life that was most dear to my heart. Just as the lotus grows in murky waters and rises above it, I too live in this 'unclean' world and yet remain, untouched by it. On the third day the flowers began to wilt and I could not help but wonder about the fragility of the flower, for although the flower may perish, the symbol remains immortal... 🌿

**Left: Business as usual at Thovla, the local flower market. Men and women buy and sell mounds of fragrant jasmine, tuberose and roses.**