Room for a view

On pepper spray and civil disobedience

The ancient city of Madurai in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, has two main attractions that contrast starkly in atmosphere and effect. The extravagant Sri Meenakshi Temple, in the heart of the old city, houses a vibrant bazaar of colours, fragrances and sounds, more reminiscent of a carnival than of a temple. Entering, you are simultaneously greeted by vendors, blessed by elephants and adorned by the nimble fingers of sweet women who lace strings of jasmine through your hair; these tickle your neck and swish perfume each time you turn your head to take in the confectionary of multicoloured statues that decorate every nook and cranny of the festive building. In contrast, the Gandhi museum, located on the outskirts of the city, a fair taxi ride away in the tranquil palace of Rani Mangammal, is more reminiscent of a temple than of a museum, offering solitude and instilling reverence. It houses an account of India’s struggle for independence and exhibits Mahatma Gandhi’s contributions to this effort, culminating with a display of the garment he was wearing when assassinated and a transcript of his utterance to God in that moment when he realized that his fate, and In-...