

MERRY CHRISTMAS

FRIENDS OF METTUPALAYAM TRUST

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As another year draws to a close, it is appropriate to spend time reviewing progress, before considering the challenges and opportunities that 2007 will bring. When mentioning events which occurred during the year, it is always difficult to prioritise as the impact on individuals helped by our work in Tamil Nadu is so significant to them and their families. A few examples - freeing two more Irula tribal families who were debt slaves to a quarry owner (Thank you again Balbir and Ken). Providing Dharani with a specially designed wheelchair (see photo above). Providing education, nutrition and healthcare support to two more classes at our Nambikki School (thanks for commitment to long term funding by Bedale High School and Caedmon School, Whitby). The list could go on- and of course, this is all made possible by the efforts of Venkat and the girls in both Mettupalayam and Nambikki areas. Whenever our UK trustees visit, we make sure that they receive thanks, and recognition for the work that they do. They often work 7 days a week, and for many hours each day. We always feel very humble in the face of such devotion.

Healthcare and disability support has been a continuing theme again this year. Following a survey of the Mettupalayam area for example, Venkat now has a note of around 300 disabled adults and children who were receiving little help. Initial work has started and once Uma, Mahalakshmi and Sarasu return in January from their year's physiotherapy and disability training at APD in Bangalore we will be able to have far more impact. Much of the work organised by Venkat acts as a beacon to others in the area- for instance, the success of our village latrine programme. This has been recognised by the local council who have asked Venkat to oversee and promote the campaign to another 200 villages. Funding will be provided jointly by government, through soft bank loans and the villagers themselves. Similarly, we received official recognition of our senior social worker, Gomathi's work with sangams (women's groups) where around 200 groups have been organised, trained and supported. In passing, we are delighted that she has recently been elected to the local Panchayat, or council, and will therefore be able to have even more influence on local issues.

We are often asked whether Venkat receives support and finance from people in India and from Indian based charities. This is very much the case- for example during the year, the local Lions Club in Utherimerur have donated time and resources to co-organising a large health camp, and a recently retired Lions Club doctor member now runs a free weekly surgery in Mettupalayam. Health training, including AIDS awareness, is an ongoing feature. Even the local pawn-broker has donated school uniforms!

So, looking to the year ahead, what are our priorities? We expect to complete the second school building at the Nambikki School and see the numbers of pupils increase to around 75. We also hope to build an ice-plant, enabling the fishing community to sell their catches much farther inland and so obtain premium prices throughout the year. Disability support will continue to increase, and we will be further developing our links with APD. Following another good monsoon, our semi organic farm should become even more productive, helped by the vermiculture compost from both our own large composter, and from individual family sized units planned for Mettupalayam. Economic support through training and motivating sangams will continue to show benefits, both to individual families and to the community. Longer term, we need to consider rebuilding Mettupalayam School. The original school building is now over 20 years old, and inadequate by modern standards. Whilst we can continue to utilise the old school for other purposes, we need a new school, built on our own rather than government land, accessible to children and adults with special needs, and also available for community use (we already have 5 disabled children at the Nambikki School). This would also facilitate expansion to include some secondary education at a later date if this need was confirmed.

All the above, indeed all of the work of IRDT in both Mettupalayam and Nambikki areas, is dependant on the support of many, many people and organisations, both here and in India. It would be invidious to publicly thank donors, and indeed, many wish their support to remain anonymous. It is perhaps appropriate however, to mention North Yorkshire County Council and in particular, the education department. Through their Village of Hope Tsunami Appeal support, and subsequent continuing involvement and encouragement by many N Yorks schools, we are able to achieve so much more than would otherwise be the case. We endeavour to visit as many schools as possible, and offer educational support with powerpoint talks about village life in India, and we also speak to many other local groups during the year. Please continue to let us know if you would like us to be involved in any way in future.

The next scheduled visit by trustees to India is booked for January, and a full annual report and newsletter will be sent out in February. Meantime, enjoy the festive season, take pleasure and some satisfaction from your involvement with this very worthwhile and effective work, and let's all look forward a successful 2007.

