

FRIENDS OF METTUPALAYAM TRUST

REGISTERED CHARITY NO 1054673

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Adele Eldridge
The Coach House
Bainbridge
LEYBURN
DL8 3EE
01969 650618
adeleeldridge@gmail.com

Francis and Rosie Muncaster
The Rowans
Exelby
BEDALE
DL8 2HF
01677 425961
fmuncaster@hotmail.com

Hugo and Jean Welsh
16 The Avenue
Haxby
York
YO32 3EQ
01904 769248
hugo.welsh30@gmail.com

Pongol



Each January, the people of Tamil Nadu celebrate the festival of Pongol. It is a thanksgiving harvest festival, but with a difference! It takes place over four days, with each day having its own particular focus. Day one starts very early with bonfires and the burning of old things like clothes and old or unused belongings. It is a time for clearing out. Day two is about renewal, spring cleaning, new clothes and the sharing of food, in particular Pongol rice, a sweet milk-based mix. Day three known as Mattu Pongol, focuses on cattle and cows, so revered in India. Amongst other celebrations, this involves the painting of bullocks' horns in bright colours (a perilous job). Day four is a day of fun, music and entertainment, with a particular highlight being the chasing and catching of bullocks by young men and boys (even more perilous). It is also tradition that older people provide gifts to the younger generation on this day.

This year, with something of a link to the harvest festival, we are pleased to report some very positive developments around the farm at Mettupalayam. Due to very low monsoon rainfall, Venkat has focused away from paddy growing (which requires a lot of irrigation) and in conjunction with government support, has helped to establish a local farmer cooperative, with the installation of a nut-oil pressing unit next to our farm. Two litres of ground nuts provides one litre of oil and the oil provides a much-improved return for each farmer. They are also able to get a further income from the "cake" residue, which is used for animal feed. Profits are shared amongst the cooperative, which numbers 1000 farmers from over 30 surrounding villages. Our farm area is also producing pickle plants (gherkins) for a local company that is bottling these. The trick apparently is to pick them at finger size, when they are worth more. The ones in this photo look great, but some will demand a lower price as they were left a few days too long before picking. Venkat



tells us that the government also proposes to support a seed production unit in the same area, with the potential of a small farm-shop supermarket to sell produce. We are so lucky that Venkat has the energy and local networking skills to bring these initiatives together. All these efforts provide employment, income and nutrition for the local people, as well as sharing the benefits and economies of scale amongst the wider local farming community in a group that works to support each other.

School News

As we reported in our last newsletter, Venkat's daughter Ramya is now married and has moved with her husband to Singapore where he currently works. Venkat has been making various alternative arrangements at the project to cover the work Ramya did in the school.

He tells us that transition is going well, but we are keeping in close contact to try to ensure he does not take on too much himself. He has made one short visit to Singapore to support his daughter and was impressed with the city, which he says is very clean, efficient and safe. However, one quality which he did not admire was that most of the people there were "like robots, with their heads constantly in their cell-phones not interacting with each other". Hmmm, that sounds familiar and a warning for us too!



Our schools at Mettupalayam and at Nambikki (at the Bay of Bengal coast) both continue to provide high quality education to primary age children, some of whom would either not attend school at all (particularly so in the case of the gypsy families) or may have to travel very long distances to attend a government school. Our schools also benefit greatly from the support, ideas and diversity in curriculum that come from friends from the UK – people like Karen who makes regular visits and has helped to build up the supply and use of crafts by the children; and Lee who has brought science and the fun of his music teaching skills into the classrooms; or Martin and Susan with their amazing energy and Susan's incredible art classes.

Our Website at irdt.co.uk

And still on the Pongol subject of renewal and spring-cleaning...we have decided that it is time for us to renew our Friends of Mettupalayam website, which has been in its present guise for a couple of decades now, has served us well, but is in need of a refresh. We are starting work with a very generous and supportive website developer to create something that we hope will be attractive to supporters and useful to all friends. We want a place that will have easy access to relevant information and policies, and that will also provide ways for friends to help and share. Any costs involved will be specifically raised and not taken from standard donations and if you have any ideas or suggestions we would love to receive them.



Your ongoing friendship and support in everything that we do helps the team in Tamil Nadu to achieve the aims of our charity in relieving hardship, poverty and ill-health. You make a real positive difference. Thank you.