



Oru Paanai- *One pot*

'Oru Paanai'¹ - Feeding the Hungry

The Background

The scarcity of food

We have recently heard of the escalating food prices and scarcity in Sri Lanka and the Jaffna peninsula in particular. The problem in Jaffna has been caused by the restriction to fishing and agriculture in the peninsula by the declaration and maintenance of high security zones covering the coastline and also vast areas of fertile land.

The closure of the A9 has crippled the economy in the Jaffna peninsula. Business men and the middle class are moving away. The closure has prevented the transport of rice and coconuts from the Vanni district and also the transport of essential items and fertiliser from Colombo. The vegetables and fruits that are produced in the peninsula cannot access the markets in the South, leading to heavy losses for many farmers. The residents of the peninsula are now dependent on unreliable and limited transport of essential food and commodities by ship from the south. The recent escalation of world food prices will no doubt also affect the situation.

Overall, this has left the population of Jaffna impoverished in many ways.

It is likely that in other parts of Sri Lanka too, vulnerable communities face similar crises.

Hunger, Starvation and Chronic Malnourishment

It is often very proudly recalled that when rice was scarce in the early 1970s, the people of Jaffna never suffered because the local farmers had the resources to enable them to work hard and produce sufficient grain for the local people.

It is not so now.

For the first time in recent history the children and the elderly in Jaffna are facing hunger and malnourishment, if not starvation. The elderly are dependent on their children. Some are destitute and depend on the benevolence of the temple and alms. The state handout is 100 rupees a month and rations of rice, lentils flour and sugar. This is hardly sufficient for a week or two.

Children are growing up with poor weight and stature. After weaning, infants fall off the weight centile charts maintained meticulously by the Child Health Workers. Principals have

reported that children attend school without breakfast and that some older teenagers faint during the day.

Our Aim

Our aim is to share the resources that we have and help feed the hungry school children in Jaffna in the first instance. Having done so, we hope to replicate the project in the rest of Sri Lanka to help feed hungry children.

The schools provide a mid day meal of Rice and lentils. This is funded by the World Food programme [WFP] via the Government Agent of Jaffna. The mid day meal is provided for children between the ages of 5 and 15. Students of the O- level and A-level classes are not given the mid day meal. There is no funding for vegetables and the schools have to raise the funds from parents. The schools that attract children from poor communities are unable to raise these extra funds to buy vegetables.

By supplementing the resource provided by the WFP we could provide a wholesome mid day meal for all the children of the school including those senior students in Year 10 and above.

Our initial response

At Periyapulam Maha Vidyalayam [PP M/V], the principal Mr Ramalingam informs us that the rice and lentil supplied by the GA is sufficient to feed all the children of the school including the older students, if we can provide sufficient vegetables. We have funded the school since May 2008 and we can report that the programme has been very successful. All of the children now eat and relish the food and come in for second helpings. The principal and teachers are very happy and satisfied. It cost us about 10,000 Srilankan rupees a month. The funds are deposited in a Bank account held by the principal and a teacher of the school. The Principal provides us with a monthly statement of accounts and a brief report.

Our future plans

We were told that there are other schools in the Jaffna peninsula that serve poor communities with similar problems. We have identified 6 other schools. The principals and a teacher from these schools will visit PP M/V to see the project in action and reproduce the same in their own schools. They will replicate the accounting and reporting methods.

We need to raise Rs 10,000/- [£50/-] per month for nine months of the school academic year , for each school.

The schools identified are

- 1] J/Senguntha Hindu College
- 2] J/Muthuthamby Maha Vidyalayam
- 3] J/kandarmadam Saivapirakasa Vidyalayam
- 4] J/Nallur Mangayakarasi Maha Vidyalayam
- 5] J/Thirunelvely Hindu Tamil Mixed School

6] J/Chetty Theru Methodist Mission School

Funding

Periyapulam Maha Vidyalayam costs £50/- per month. There are 9 school months in an academic year. We need 9 donors for PP M/V, each donating £50 per year..

We will need in all, 60 donors, each giving £50/- per year to Feed the Hungry children of Jaffna from the 7 schools.

We have 10 donors on our books at present who have pledged to donate £50/- per year.

Your response

We need the heartfelt support of people who share with us the desire to assuage the hunger of the children of Jaffna. The underlying sentiment that drives us to help in this project is hidden in the old Tamil expression 'Oru Paanai'. This is an expression that our grandparents used, to describe our common heritage, our common destiny and our original humble beginnings when our fore fathers ethic was to share the food and resources within the larger extended family.

The words of an ancient Tamil [Aarthi Soodi 2] saying comes to mind 'Aiyam ittu unn'. – meaning 'first give alms before you sit to eat'.

Another saying comes to mind - 'Iyalvathu karavel'- meaning 'what you can do, you must not fail to do'.

Another saying goes 'Eevatthu vilakel' – do not stop being generous in giving.

We have in our Tamil moral and religious code sufficient weight and obligation laid on our soul for an unambiguous response.

Please join us not because of any sense of loyalty or obligation to the person who forwarded this appeal, but because the core of your being cannot help but share what you have in your Paanai with those who are hungry. As in that old Tamil story the mythical 'Amutha suravi' 3 will be true to your own paanai.

We would like your feedback if nothing else. We are aware that you may be already committed elsewhere.

Accountability

- Each school will send monthly statements of their expenses.
- You can expect periodic reports electronically.
- A Council of Reference has been set up. The members of the Council are-K.N., D.M., LR. N.S. and L.M.
Dr Ana Thevathasan will act as an Independent Examiner and adviser.
- Please make your cheques payable to 'The Friends of Jaffna'⁴
- We had not seen the immediate necessity to register this as a charitable organisation with the UK Charity Commissioner, but in the long term however, there may be some

advantages in doing so for reasons of tax refunds on donations and of course the benefit of establishing our bona fide as an organisation observing and complying with the Charity commissioners regulations.

Notes

1. 'Oru Paanai' – in Tamil language means One Pot. Paanai is usually a clay pot in which rice is cooked over an open hearth. Traditionally the cooked rice is served straight from the paanai.
2. 'Aarthi soodi' is one of the writings of a poetess 'Auvaiyar'. The other work by her is called 'Kodrei venthan'. Both writings are sacred one liners arranged in alphabetical order which has been known as the Tamil moral code. These are taught to children in primary school and are memorised by them.
3. 'Amuthua suravi' – in Tamil amutham means delicious food or nectar and sura means to prosper or flourish. According to a story in ancient Tamil literature [Mani megali], 'amutha suravi' was a mystical vessel which never became empty of food despite repeated serving out of food.
4. Friends of Jaffna. This was an organisation that was started a few years ago. Our first project was to do with artificial limbs for the people in the Vanni and Batticaloa and later, following the tsunami, we were able to send medicines to Mullaitivu. We also supplied refurbished computers to schools in the Vanni and Jaffna. 'Friends of Jaffna' Account with Lloyds TSB is being used by Oru Paanai.