

# Oru Paanai: Newsletter 2024

## First Issue

*Dear Oru Paanai (OP) supporters and well-wishers*

*Greetings from the OP Trustees*

We write to bring you a summary of the activities of OP in the past 12 months. In this issue, we also bring you a report from the front line, written by Prof. Swaminathan, the chairman of Oru Paanai UK (OP UK), following a visit he made in January 2024 to the north of Sri Lanka and Haputale in Malayaham. His report speaks movingly about the poverty levels prevailing there and emphasises the need for OP to continue the work it is doing there. Mr. Skandakumar, the chairman of Oru Paanai Sri Lanka (OP SL), also visited the north, and makes some pertinent observations in his brief report.



The economic situation in Sri Lanka remains uncertain. The second tranche of aid from the IMF is expected to be delivered in the near future. However, poverty levels remain worryingly high. Robberies and burglaries have increased at an alarming rate, undoubtedly a reflection of the prevailing economic circumstances. Excessive rains recently and the ensuing floods have destroyed the rice fields and rural agriculture. The effects of this will be felt in months to come when food poverty will be accentuated. Presidential and parliamentary elections are expected to be held later this year. Only time will tell whether this would result in renewed hope for the country. The wars in Ukraine and in Gaza continue to affect the cost of living in all countries and Sri Lanka is no exception.

The situation in the Gaza and Israel has worsened considerably since we published the last Newsletter. The catastrophic damage done to Gaza, with nearly 30,000 Palestinians killed, including over 10,000 children is indeed soul destroying news as is the news that around 130 Israeli hostages are being held in Gaza. The bombing of ships in the Red Sea by Houthi rebels has caused serious disruption to the transport of goods across the globe, bringing adverse economic consequences to most countries including Sri Lanka.

## Prof Ram Swaminathan (*below, right*), OP UK Chairman's visit to Sri Lanka in January 2024

In January I had the opportunity to visit areas where OP is helping the needy.

On the 10th of January I arrived in Jaffna after an overnight bus ride from Colombo. After a brief conversation with Dr. Dan Muthuveloe, I joined Anusha, the Oru Paanai Administrator in Jaffna and her team to visit Mallavi. We arrived at the church where people had gathered to receive the dry rations. There were 95 people mostly elderly with a few young people. The gathering started with prayers (both Hindu and Christian) followed by volunteers going around the group to identify the individuals in the list prepared by Anusha.

In the meantime, I had the opportunity to speak to several of those in the group. It was very evident they have undergone severe hardship in the past and the difficulties they are having to feed themselves and in the case of young mothers, to feed their children. Everyone I spoke to had a story to tell and one can't help being moved by the experiences of these people. I spoke to one young single mother who is desperately trying to feed and educate her son. She was grateful for the help we offered and was pleading to get help for her son, who is doing well at school and preparing for the scholarship examination. Another young

mother helped to distribute dry rations to the group.

I was moved by the dedication and effort by the volunteers who have given their time to help the people.



*Prof Swami in conversation*



*Dry rations being distributed*

Next day we went to view some of the wells OP had helped to build. Altogether, I was able to see 5 of these wells and talked to the homeowners.

We were not able to go into the interior because of recent floods. Some of the wells were not accessible. We visited the following villages in the Mullaitivu district: Tharmapuram, Theravil, Moonkilaru and Udaiyarkattu. All the well owners were very grateful to OP for providing the wells. All of them have undergone severe hardship and are now benefiting from the wells – the wells providing them with clean drinking water as well as helping them to cultivate the land around the house for veetu thottam.

However, all of them pointed out that due to the recent rain, many of their crops have failed. This was echoed throughout the areas we visited. It is likely that this will bring more food shortage and hardship. We can expect more requests for help later this year. One of the well owners is sharing the well with two other families, a very charitable action. I also had the opportunity to see a hole in the ground, a dug out open well before construction. This had no protection to prevent accidents. It made me realise how dangerous these types of wells can be. Children and adults can fall in and I have been told of instances when children have died falling into these unprotected wells.



*A newly constructed well with its proud owner*

After visiting the wells we went to the school for children with learning difficulties at Udaiyarkattu and met the teachers and students.



*Visiting the school for children with learning disability*

On Friday we returned to Udaiyarkattu for annathanam and dry ration distribution. The annathanam was in memory of my wife Kamala. This was an emotional event for me having lost my wife in November. The lunch was preceded by prayers and after lunch one gentleman sang the song 'Kurai ontum illai'- a favourite song of Kamala . Later a young mother sang some songs in a beautiful voice - a voice good enough to be on a stage or contest. Unfortunately, due to her family circumstances she can't leave the area to participate in any such events.

On Saturday I visited the office of the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) at Tellipalai and saw the work they are doing and met the MOH - an inspiring man. He has dedicated his life to improve the health of the people in the district. He started his social activities during his medical student days. He, together with my late brother Ram Subramaniam, started remedial classes for students for 'O' level examination. His centre has a grinding mill to produce the 'sathu ma' (a nutritional cereal food supplement) for malnourished preschool children. I was able to see the improvement in health of preschool children with the nutritious supplement. This activity is funded by Oru Paanai.

Dan Muthuveloe and I met with the Deans of the Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of arts of University of Jaffna. Both deans expressed their thanks to Oru Paanai for the support we are offering to needy students. At present OP is funding bursaries to 21 undergraduates in Jaffna University and 5 undergraduates in Eastern University. A new batch of 200 medical students are expected to start in February at the Jaffna Medical Faculty and the dean expected there will be many more students who will need a helping hand. We agreed to look into the possibility of expanding our contribution.

I also had a request from a member of staff of the Faculty of Hindu studies to include students from that Faculty for financial support. We discussed this with the Dean of Arts and he agreed to include students from the Faculty of Hindu Studies with the Faculty of Arts for financial assistance. OP agreed to support 10 students from the Faculty of Arts and Hindu studies for the coming year.

After a day in Colombo I travelled to Haputale to meet Mr.Skandakumar, OP SL chairman. After an overnight stay at Skanda's house, I visited Louis Marie Children's home and orphanage. OP gives nutritional support to these children. Children in the orphanage were glad to see us and seemed very happy.

Our next visit was to be the Hadumulla Elders home, but unfortunately, we couldn't visit as there was a death there that day. But we did see the construction of the new treatment centre for the elderly. Due to time constraints we couldn't visit Winrose Academy. However, all the staff and students came down to the main road to greet us and talk to us. It was satisfying to note that some of the staff are graduates from that academy.



*Staff from Winrose Academy*

Finally, we visited Bandarewela Day Care Centre where OP gives nutritional support. Children there were very happy and enthusiastically writing and drawing pictures of Pongal.



*At the Day Care Centre in Bandarawela*

My overall conclusion from all these visits is that there is a great deal of poverty in the rural areas and we in Oru Paanai should make every effort to help the needy.

## Brief report from Mr.S. Skandakumar (below, right), OP SL Chairman's visit to Jaffna in January 2024

On a very brief stay in Jaffna, I accompanied Dan Muthuveloe and Anusha Devi to visit two of our distribution centres, one each in Moolai and Arali divisions. The Grama Sevaka was also present. Distribution was efficiently coordinated, and the assembled elders were most grateful for their individual parcels. Dan and I addressed them in response to their expressions of gratitude by saying we felt blessed to be able to do something as meaningful as providing for the hungry.



We also visited a dilapidated home where the mother of three young children was on some form of life support. Serious consideration is being given to providing support for the children through our Education arm to see how best we can make their home more secure and habitable.

## Activities of OP in 2023

### ***Dry Rations Program***

- In 2018, OP launched a program of providing 4 weekly supplies of basic foods – rice, wheat flour, dhal and sugar – to some 500 elderly men and women in the Wannu, who had been carefully chosen on the basis of need. As this program proved a success, we extended the program to villages in Jaffna, Batticaloa and later to areas in the upcountry as well. Currently, OP provides dry rations to 1,260 elderly people on a 4 weekly basis.
- In June, we expanded the program to include some young families with small children as well, once again recipients being selected in consultation with the Grama Sevakas and Social Services of the area. Fifty young families are currently being provided with such support at present.

### ***Sathu Maa to the Malnourished children***

- Malnutrition in preschool children has become a much greater problem in Sri Lanka in the recent past. OP has been sponsoring the provision of Sathu Maa , a nutritional supplement for severely malnourished children. Over 1,000 children from 7 MOH areas, received Sathu Maa through this program, in 2023.

## ***Provision of wells in arid zones of the north***

- In 2014, OP initiated a program of constructing wells for individual homes, mostly in the Wannai area, but also in some of the neediest villages in Jaffna. These wells provide much needed water, not only for personal needs, but also for home cultivation. Many of the recipients of wells engage in home cultivation, which provides an extra source of income for these families. OP is delighted that we have been able to empower them in this manner.
- The cost of constructing the wells has risen considerably in recent months due to the increased cost of cement and other materials, and each well costs OP around 420,000 rupees.

## ***Assistance for educational needs***

- From April 2023, OP has been contributing 75,000 rupees per month to a project initiated in Batticaloa, the brainchild of Dr. Arulnithy, Consultant Physician, whereby 18 deserving students from rural areas in the province are facilitated to live in the town and all their personal and educational needs are met. OP will support this project up to April 2024.
- In July, OP responded to an urgent appeal from the principal of Uthayapuram Tamil Vidyalayam, Kallaru, an economically disadvantaged area, for assistance with purchasing desks and chairs for use by the boys and girls attending the school. Although such provision is outside the remit of OP, the trustees decided to fund the purchase of furniture for the school to the value of 280,000 rupees.
- OP has very recently become involved in awarding bursaries to needy undergraduates studying in Jaffna University and Eastern University. We provide 16 bursaries to medical students and 10 bursaries to Arts / Hindu Studies students, beginning in November 2023. The selection of students is done by the University authorities. Our support will take the form of monthly stipends which will be channeled through the University administration. In the Eastern University in Batticaloa, we support 5 medical students via the university student welfare body called 'Eahai' who will administer the scheme.

## **Oru Paanai's activities in upcountry areas**

Many of OP's supporters frequently ask us what we are doing to help upcountry people, arguably the most deprived group in the country. We list below some of the steps we have taken thus far in pursuit of this objective.

- Provision of 100 dry ration parcels each to Elderly destitute residents of Nanu Oya and Belihul Oya.
- 50 dry rations parcels to differently abled elders in Grand Smiles Home.

- 15 dry rations packets to identified very poor residents of all ages in Haputale
- Monthly provisions to 24 children in Louis Marie Home in Haputale run by Sisters for girls discarded by parents.
- Dry ration parcels to 10 young families in poverty in Kotagala.

It is our hope that more benefactors will come forward to specifically support these projects in the estate areas.

## Flood relief in Batticaloa

- In January, we received an urgent appeal for help with the provision of dry rations to families driven out of their homes by floods which affected the Batticaloa district. The appeal was made by the Batticaloa Civil Society and OP responded by sending a sum of £2,500 in two tranches. Over 200 families were provided dry rations. The authorities in Batticaloa have conveyed their sincere thanks to OP for this timely help.

## Fundraising activity

- In 2023 a high-quality Bharatha Natyam concert was staged at The Bhavan in West London on the 16th of September to raise funds for OP. The highlight of the show was the performance of a father and daughter duo, Suresh Swaminathan and his daughter Sashvita, who danced both singly as well as in conjunction.



- Two other accomplished dancers, Abirami Sri Pathmanathan and Jasline Antony, completed the quartet who presented this brilliant show. The accompanying artistes were led by the well-known Pushkala Gopal who had also trained all the dancers. We are very grateful to all the artistes who participated in this concert.

### ***Forthcoming Event on the 22nd September 2024***

**The OP Trustees will be staging a lunch / dance event in Sept 2024 at the well-known venue, Nakshatra Hall. Details of tickets will be circulated when they become available. We urge our supporters living in the UK to note the date and come along to help us raise funds.**



## Looking Ahead in 2024 and to 2025

- Food poverty will be the great challenge in the immediate future in Sri Lanka.
- The escalating cost of living and food scarcity is going to become a greater burden to ordinary folk, particularly the vulnerable elderly and children in young families.
- We would, funds permitting, want to enlarge our capacity by reaching out to more people.
- There are more and more elderly who will need monthly dry rations. Recently, an old couple were found dead in their home in Sri Lanka, reportedly having starved to death,
- We need to extend more help to young families in dire poverty, particularly women headed households with school going children who are facing hunger, malnourishment, developmental delay and starvation.
- “Sathu Ma”, the nutritional cereal supplement for malnourished children has to be made available to more severely malnourished children.
- The current cost of dry ration distribution to the needy amounts to approximately £150,000 per annum and we need to raise this amount to £200,000 to enable us to keep up with the demand for dry rations.
- We need to construct wells as in the past. Each year we are able to construct 30 open wells. The estimated total cost would be £30,000.
- We have begun granting modest bursaries to help undergraduates in Jaffna University and the Eastern University who are in financial need. The estimated total cost would be £15,000 per annum.

*All in all, we need to raise an extra £65,000/- this year to face the challenges before us.*

This is a formidable sum to fund raise, and the only fundraising event we stage each year is not enough to enable us to provide the increased support we would like to provide. We hope that the friends of Oru Paanai - like you - will extend us a helping hand to enhance our targets. Those of you who are already regular monthly donors, please consider increasing your monthly donations. To our occasional donors, we appeal to you to either become monthly donors or make one off donations.

*We trust in the generosity of friends of Oru Paanai and the benevolence of God to provide the extra support we need.*

*Please see the response page at the back of this news update.*

## Very many thanks to ....

**We wish to thank the following donors, whose generous donations enable Oru Paanai to continue our charitable work in Sri Lanka ....**

- Our regular contributors, numbering around 130, who have stayed the distance with us ever since Oru Paanai was launched
- Canberra Tamils, who have been sending us regular contributions for many years. Their donations are divided equally between dry ration distribution and educational initiatives.
- Serendip Foundation from the US, whose donations are substantial.
- The Church of St Michael and All Angels in Stourbridge who have regularly supported us from their annual givings to charitable causes.
- Two generous donors, one from the financial sector in London and the other a businessman from Australia, both of whom have made large donations to us on a regular basis. We are not disclosing their names at their behest.

If we have inadvertently left anyone out in this list, we extend our sincere apologies to them. We thank God for each of the donors great and small for your support and good wishes that has not only enabled but also inspired us to continue our efforts to help feed the hungry, our strap line and motto.

We must not forget our team of volunteers and workers on the ground in Sri Lanka who work tirelessly with dedication and compassion. We thank God for them and thank them.

## Deepest condolences

It is with great sadness that we share with you the news that Kamala, beloved wife of our chairman Ram Swaminathan, passed away after a short illness, in November 2023.

She was a very active participant in all the activities of Oru Paanai, at times hosting the trustees meetings in her home in Radlett.

She will be greatly missed by all of us in Oru Paanai.



We extend our sincere condolences to Ram, Suresh, Ramesh and their families.

## A brief word ...

We wish to end by clarifying Oru Paanai's aims and objectives.

- Oru Paanai aspires to relieve poverty and hunger in Sri Lanka, mainly in the northeast of Sri Lanka as well as chosen areas in the upcountry area.
- We also encourage empowerment of the local population by constructing water wells for home cultivation and farming, assisting educational projects and providing bursaries to undergraduates in financial need.
- All our projects are chosen carefully, with input from local agencies. However, we are not a funding agency, although we have at times stepped in to help in times of urgent need.

**Dr. S. V. Devendra**

### **Oru Paanai**

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***Please use the response form on the reverse of this page to indicate your support for the work of OP. If you are already a donor to OP, please consider increasing your monthly donations. Thank you.***

*You can donate to Oru Paanai easily and securely online, including using GiftAid*

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Your name .....

Address .....Post code .....

### Your Bank details

To the Manager .....Bank, plc

Branch address.....

Sort code..... Your Account Number.....

Please pay **monthly / yearly** [delete as appropriate], until further notice

The sum of **£**..... Amount in words, **Pounds**.....

Starting on [date of first payment].....

Beneficiary's Name **Oru Paanai**

Beneficiary's Bank **Barclay's Bank, plc**, Stourbridge Branch  
81 High Street, Stourbridge, West Midlands  
Bank Sort code **20-82-70** Account Number **53279685**

Reference.....[ your name ]

Please cancel any previous standing order in favour of the beneficiary

Your Signature[s] Date .....

.....

*Cut here*



*Please send this portion to your bank*

*Please return this portion to Oru Paanai*

**Treasurer – Oru Paanai**  
**c/o 58 Hungerford Road, Stourbridge, West Midlands DY8 3AB**

### **Either**

I have instructed my Bank to pay my donations by **S/O** [amount £..... monthly/yearly].

### **Or**

I do not wish to pay by **S/O** and enclose a cheque [amount £.....] made payable to 'Oru Paanai - Feeding The Hungry in Sri Lanka'

Your Name and Signature .....

Tel Number ..... E mail: .....

**Gift Aid:** I would like to GiftAid my giving and confirm that I have paid or will pay an amount of Income Tax or Capital Gains Tax for the current tax year that is at least equal to the amount of tax that all the charities and community amateur sports clubs that I donate to will reclaim from my gifts for the current tax year. I understand that other taxes such as VAT and Council Tax do not qualify. I understand the charity will reclaim 25p of tax for every £1 that I have given.

*Please inform us if you have any changes in your address details, want to cancel this declaration or no longer pay sufficient tax.*

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