



District
Rotary 5340
2007-08 GSE Team to India



January 19, 2008

On Sunday January 13th we were taken to a small Village to celebrate Pongal.

Pongal is a harvest festival equivalent to thanksgiving. It is celebrated by Tamils across the world. Pongal in Tamil means "boiling over or spill over." The act of boiling over of milk in the clay pot is considered to denote future prosperity for the family. Traditionally celebrated at harvest time, it is a 4 day celebration of the prosperity associated with the harvest by thanking the rain, sun and the farm animals that have helped in the harvest. The festival is at least 1,000 years old although some believe that the festival is more than 2000 years old.

The first day, Bhogi, is celebrated by throwing away and destroying old clothes and materials, by setting them on fire, marking the end of the old and the emergence of the new. The second day, Pongal, is celebrated by boiling rice with fresh milk and jaggery (unrefined brown sugar) in new pots, which are later topped with brown sugar, cashew nuts and raisins early in the morning and allowing it to boil over the vessel. For Tamils, it is considered a good sign to watch it boil over, since it means that good luck and prosperity is forthcoming. The New boiled rice is offered to the Nature during sunrise, a gesture which symbolises thanks to the sun and nature for providing prosperity. It is later served to the people present in the house for the ceremony.

The third day, Maattu Pongal, is for offering thanks to cattle, as they help farmer in different ways for agriculture. On this day the cattle are decorated with paint, flowers and bells. They are allowed to roam free and fed sweet rice and sugar cane. Some people decorate the horns with gold or other metallic covers. During the final day, people visit beaches and theme parks. They also chew sugar cane and decorate their houses with kolam. This day is a day to thank relatives and friends for their support in the harvest.



Larry's host's house decorated for Pongal

The team participated in a variety of ways. First we were all dressed in festive traditional garb.



Julie and Anthony danced folk dances. Anthony and Larry participated in a tug of war. I think we won but it was diplomatically considered a tie because the heavy rope broke as we pulled on it.

There was a pot full of water hoisted over head. Different people were blind-folded and given a stick and asked to crack the pot – piñata-style. Larry was lucky or unlucky enough to do so and won the prize – that is in addition to having the pot full of water crash down upon him to the great merriment of the kids and adults watching.

One significant issue developed today. Anthony told me that his favorite aunt has passed away suddenly. He also told me that his father is having trouble with his gall bladder and may need to go in for surgery. These two things are troubling him greatly. He said he wants to go home. I told him that I would support whatever he wanted to do but that he should think about it carefully. We are in the home stretch during the trip of a lifetime. There is only so much he could do if he went home now.

On January 14th we were finally taken to a Public school. As we had suspected this was VERY different from the private schools we had seen thus far. The school had 4,200 students and about 40 -50 students per teacher. The medium of instruction is Tamil – not English – although some courses are taught in English. We visited the school on a Public holiday. Yet school was in session. The school was open to make up for a previous missed-day. It was a girls-only and all were in uniform. Although there were lots of them outside the school building, they appeared to be studying or talking to each other quietly.

We wanted to sit at the back of the class and observe a teacher teach. Our local GSE coordinator is really great! He was able to arrange that. We sat in chairs at the back of an 9th grade science class. Students sat on the floor. There were 39 students and 3 were absent.

I thought the class was quite advanced for 9th grade. (It could have been a show for our benefit). The subject was the human system –digestive, circulatory, skeletal, etc. I learned a lot of new words. The teaching method involved a lot of repetition, perhaps because English is not well-understood by students.

Students were able to repeat phrases and respond to the teacher’s questions about what she had just taught. Following the class the students are required to develop a “mind-map” or a picture showing what they were taught. We looked at their books and noticed many mind-maps that they had created for other subjects. The theory is that through repetition and the creation of mind-maps the student is able to create and remember what was taught.

Our teachers were not impressed. Yet, in a poor country a teacher transmitted technical information in a “foreign” language to forty students using a black board and chalk. There were no pictures on the wall, no text books, no furniture, and no walls separating classes on either side that were going on simultaneously, making hearing difficult. Yet 98% of these students are able to graduate, live and work within the Indian social system. Some of them even take jobs away from the USA.

After school we went for a brief shopping excursion so the team could pick up small souvenirs. We spent the afternoon with our hosts. Or more accurately all but one of us took naps! In the evening members from all 12 Madurai Clubs were invited to our presentation. We are getting really good at this. Then we exchanged banners and we were off to dinner at a local private club hosted by Rotarians.

Today, January 15th Anthony told me that he has decided to stay. I am so happy. He seems at peace with himself. These last two days have been very tough on him.

We spent most of the day at a Government-sponsored Pongal celebration. It was designed to show the large number of assembled tourists what Pongal is all about. But what we saw was crowded and noisy – part carnival and part gong-show theatrics. It was nothing like the quiet dignity we have seen and experienced in our hosts’ homes. What a sharp contrast between the real thing and the tourist experience. The Tourist Board should be ashamed of itself. Makes one wonder about all those other “real” experiences one has as a tourist!!!

We spent January 16th with our hosts, going shopping etc. Local Rotarians hosted us for lunch and dinner.

On Thursday January 17th we left for Kodikanal. Kodaikanal is one of the most popular resorts in India. It is a charming hill station. The British built towns and roads up to the hills so they could escape the summer heat. The town is located on the southern crest of the Palani Hills. Its rocks, woods, lovely lake and bracing air makes one realize why the English considered this an ideal hill resort.

Perhaps because of the British influence or the number of foreign tourists, the town seems more “western” than eastern. There is a greater choice of food, once can occasionally hear western music, there is less traffic and noise, etc.

We were welcomed by members of the local Rotary club and then taken to our hosts’ homes to rest. Then it was off to a very short Rotary meeting at a local hotel. Dinner followed at a Rotarian’s home. We returned to our home at a reasonable hour.



On January 18, we went to two schools. The second one was by far the more interesting. It was founded by CSI missionaries (Christians in Southern India) about 100 years ago. It is now a quasi government or public school. We observed a class being taught using the government mandated Activity Based Learning cards which involved students picking a card with a word and a picture. The teacher helps them spell and pronounce the word. It still seems like a lot of rote learning. What was interesting is that one of the students was 100% blind and another was mentally impaired. Apparently all impaired students are mainstreamed and included in classes. Later in the day those that need help (with Braille or tutors) receive it. Finally, the impaired students are also taught marketable skill such as making paper bags, plates, picture frames, etc. These products are sold locally and the money saved for the children.

We ended the day at another Rotarians home. He runs a touring service. It took a very long time for dinner to be served. The time was spent in what can best be described as a cultural exchange. Our host made us stand in a circle, turned on the music (loud of course) and together we did the “chicken dance”! This was followed by other culturally appropriate music such as Pink Floyd, Elton John, etc. Not content with playing western music. He began to dance a version of western swing with the female members of our team. It was great fun.

Tomorrow, Sunday is going to be a very long day. I will try to wrap our final four days, if I get access to the Internet.

Yours in Rotary Service,
Larry Sundram, larrysundram@gmail.com

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	DATE
Rotary	District Conference	12/28/07
	Micro Credit Bank	01/02/08
	Rotary Meeting	01/02/08
	Rotary Meeting	01/03/08
	Rotary Meeting	01/05/08
	Rotary Meeting	01/06/08
	Reception for DGE	01/06/08
	Rotary meeting and Dinner, Theni	01/08/08
	Rotary meeting and Dinner, Bodi	01/10/08
	Rotary meeting and Dinner, Madurai	01/11/08
	Rotary meeting and Dinner, Madurai	01/12/08
	Lunch and Dinner with Rotarians	01/13/08
	Lunch and Dinner with Rotarians	01/14/08
	Dinner with Rotarians	01/15/08
	Lunch and Dinner with Rotarians	01/16/08
	Lunch and Dinner with Rotarians	01/17/08
	Lunch and Dinner with Rotarians	01/18/08
	Lunch and Dinner with Rotarians	01/19/08
	Totals	15
Cultural Events	Classical and Popular songs at District Conference	12/29/07
	Song recital at Rotarian's Home, Trichy	12/31/07
	Dance Performance by children of Untouchables - at school	01/01/08
	Dancing and singing at school, Karur	01/04/08
	Bharat Natyam Dance, Karur	01/05/08
	Folk Dances at Organic Farm	01/07/08
	Folk/Movie Dance@student-teacher	01/08/08
	Folk Dances at Primary school	01/08/08
	Periyar National Park	01/10/08
	Pongal Dances at Lakshmi School	01/11/08
	Classical Songs and Dance at TVM school	01/11/08
	Pongal Festival in small Village	01/12/08
	Folk Dance at Rotary Meeting	01/12/08
	Pongal Festival in small Village (Rotary)	01/13/08
	Pongal Festival in small Village (Tourism Dept)	01/14/08
	Totals	15
Historic Sites	Rock Fort Temple, Trichy	12/30/07
	Sriranganathan Temple, Trichy	12/31/07

	Dam on Kaveri River built in 200 AD	12/31/07
	Meenakshi Temple	01/12/08
	Nayak Palace	01/12/08
	Gandhi Museum	01/12/08
	Totals	6
Economic Sites	Village Wood Carving, Perambalur	01/03/08
	Rice processing Factory, Peramalur	01/04/08
	Textile Manufacturing and shipping	01/05/08
	Textile Wholesale business, Karur	01/05/08
	Organic Farm, Dindigul	01/07/08
	Hand-loom silk sari manufacturing, Dindigul	01/08/08
	Silk Cotton Processing Plant, Bodi	01/10/08
	Coffee, pepper and cardamom plantation, Bodi	01/10/08
	Totals	8
Vocational	Sironanda Balalaya School (2 sites) - New Education concept	01/01/08
	Middle School in Worryiar (slum school rehabilitated)	01/01/08
	Infant Jesus primary school - primary	01/02/08
	St. Philomena school – poor middle	01/02/08
	Monfort School – modern high school	01/02/08
	College of Arts and Science for Women, Perambalur	01/03/08
	LNVN Private Primary school	01/04/08
	Regional District Education Office	01/04/08
	Meenakshi College	01/05/08
	Raja Metric School, Puliur	01/05/08
	PSNA Engineering College, Dindigul	01/07/08
	Lakshmi School, Madurai	01/11/07
	TVM School, Madurai	01/11/07
	Meenakshi Matric School	01/12/08
	St Peters School, Kodikanal	01/18/08
	CSI (christians in southern India) School	01/18/08
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