

Makkampalayam Mission

Introduction

Makkampalayam consists of two departments. The departments are Parish and PARAN (Pedegogy and Action for Rights of Adivasis in North TamilNadu). Fr Arockiasamy SJ is the parish priest of St Antony the Hermit's Church, Makkampalayam, Ootacamund diocese and the director of PARAN. Fr Philip Kumar SJ is the assistant parish priest and assistant director of PARAN.

Parish

There are 25 catholic families in our Parish. Among them 20 families are tribal families. These families were converted into Christianity in different periods. A group of people were first converted in 1999. Unfortunately they did not have a person who could help them to grow in Christian faith. Occasionally the priests from the neighbouring parish were visiting the people here. They did not even have a catechist who could teach them some prayers. As they were illiterates they could not learn the prayers and other things by themselves.

The bishop of Ootacamund erected St Antony the Hermit's Church, Makkampalayam as a parish in 4 June 2012 and entrusted it to the Jesuits of Madurai Province. Last three years Jesuits have been working for the wholistic development of the people here. As the people have no proper foundation in Christian faith, all our activities and efforts are centred on building the faith of the people. The following are a few activities that take place in our parish:

1. Daily Mass and Prayer

Every day we have the Holy Mass at 7 am. and different types of prayers at 7 pm. Most of the children are regular for them. Sunday Mass is celebrated at 8 am. Many parishners come for Sunday Masses. We constantly motivate and encourage all the Catholics to participate at least in Sunday Masses. I could see a lot of positive change in the attendance of the people and the active participation of the people in these activities. It was very hard for us in the first year to find a person who could read Mass readings. Now we are very happy that the children are trained to volunteer for readings and make prayers of petitions on their own. Most of the children bring Bible to the Church and they have been helped to follow the readings.

2. Basic Catechism

Almost all the adult parishners are illiterates. We make use of Sunday homilies and other occasions to catechize them. We spend a lot time with the children and teach a lot of things about Christianity. The children learn some important prayers, biblical stories, devotional songs etc on Saturdays and Sundays. The children are fairly prepared to serve the priest at the Altar. The children also take a lot of interest in learning devotional songs. Each family was

encouraged to buy Bible and we made it available at an affordable cost. We bought the Bibles for Rs 200/- and sold them to Rs.25/-.

We also try hard to find a place for our children in catholic education institutions, so that they continue to grow in Christian faith.

3. Basic Christian Communities (BCC)

We have divided the 25 catholic families into 3 basic Christian communities. It was not that easy to form this group and make them understand the importance of BCC. The people show better interest this year in participating basic Christian community meetings, prayers and Masses. We make this as good opportunity to break the word of God to the people and try our best to make all the people get involved in sharing of their faith.

4. Retreats and Pilgrimages

We had a day of recollection as a preparation for the feast of St Antony the Hermit the patron of our parish church. The parishners were trained to make confessions and were prepared to celebrate the feast meaningfully.

Three days retreat was preached by a well known preacher in a nearby parish namely Sathyamangalam during the lent in March 2014. About 25 parishners participated in that retreat and benefitted out of it. It was also an occasion for them to associate themselves with other people.

5. Exposure to Shrines and Religious festivals and ceremonies

We realized as parish priests and parish council that exposing the people to the reality of Christian culture was very important. Parishners rarely went to Christian shrines or participated in feast celebrations on their own. Therefore we organized a few trips to a few shrines in our locality. We went to Aralvaimozhi to worship the blessed Devasahayampillai and Our lady of Health at Vadipatti in March, 2014. Some of the parishners were taken to the parochial feasts of the neighbouring parishes namely Our Lady of Lourdes, Gundri and St Xavier's Church, Jallipalayam in May.

Some of the parishners were taken to Trichirapalli to witness Ordination ceremony of the deacons of Jesuit Madurai Province, Tamilnadu in January 2014. Some more people were taken to a nearby parish where another ordination to priesthood took place in October 2014.

6. Celebration of Feasts

Each and every activity in the parish appears to be new and strange for the parishners here. Therefore a lot preparatory meetings take place with the parish council and financial council and sometimes with all the parishners. Though we celebrate all the feasts, due importance is given to celebrate Christmas, Pongal, Lent, Easter, Parish feast and all souls day.

Many people take part in the feast celebrations. Many of them contribute their labour to clean the campus, decorate the church and campus, Participate in Mass etc. They also have begun to contribute a small amount of money especially for the celebration of the parish feast.

7. Parish council and Finance council

As the parish is very small in every nature, we have the same people who constitute both the Parish council and finance council. All the activities in the parish are planned by the council and executed maximum with the cooperation of all the parishners. The parish council is still in the initial stage. The people rarely voice their opinion; because they have not grown in such a culture. We continue to motivate them to speak out and express their concerns in the meetings. As we had planned we printed parish family cards and distributed in the month of November.

PARAN (Pedagogy and Action for Rights of Adivasis in North Tamilnadu)

Makkampalayam village is at the reserved forest of Sathyamangalam hills in Erode district, Tamilnadu. Koothampalayam is a village panjayat. There are 4 hamlets in this panjayat. Makkampalayam is one of them. As we were visiting the catholic families, we also spent ample time and energy in visiting all the other families in this village. We realized that we have to go beyond our liturgical and pastoral activities to cater to the humanity of this area. Thus we began to extend our service to all the people in this area.

More than 50 percent of the population in this panjayat is belonging to a tribal community. The others are from various communities belonging to Backward Class in the hierarchy of caste system. The entire panjayat depends on agriculture for their survival. As they live in the midst of the forest, they have to protect themselves and their cultivation from the wild animals like elephants, wild bores etc. Therefore the farmers make a small tent on the top of a tree in his/her land and stay there at night to protect the cultivated plants from animals. This small tent or hut is called PARAN in Tamil Language.

We have named our organization symbolizing the people's hut which is helpful to protect their cultivation. In the same way we wished that our organization 'PARAN' might become a pointer to protect the people from the vulnerable realities such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, cast discrimination, unavailability of basic needs like medicine and transport facilities etc. There are many villages around this village in the same forest who are experiencing the same problems in life. Also there are some other tribal people who live in various districts of North Tamilnadu who need our intervention. Makkampalayam is a starting point. We hope that our experience and involvement here would lead us to other villages and districts. We formed this organization at the end of 2013. This is year we have extended our service to another panjayat. We cater to all kinds of people with the preferential option for the tribals and dalits. The following are a few activities that we are involved in:

1. Study centres

The children from this reserved forest area are studying in government primary or middle schools. The standard of the education is very poor as the teachers are least bothered about the students. Therefore is an acute need for the special study centres to create in the students an aptitude for knowledge.

PARAN has got 6 study centres in two panjayats. There are 4 centres in Gundri Panjayat and two in Koothampalayam Panjayat. The centre in Makkampalayam is at the premises of the church. A teacher is appointed to take care of the students; This centre has got a lot of privileges as we are staying in the same campus. i) Two Jesuit priests also join the tuition teacher to teach the students here. Therefore the students get personal attention. ii) This centre is both morning and evening. Morning the students are specially trained to learn English. iii) These students get nutritional food after the tuition in the evening. iv) Many

special programs are organized occasionally for these children such as cultural programmes 4 times in a year, competitions of various kinds, small picnics etc to give them a proper personality development and skill development. About 50 students benefit from this centre. v) Children's parliament was formed in October and they were given two days of training. The children have begun to plan and execute some projects. As the first activity they have begun to teach the illiterate women to write their names. They are also preparing themselves to perform street play once in a fortnight highlighting the issues of the village. vi) Children often do not go to school for lame reasons and parents also don't bother about this as they do not understand the importance of the school education. So we go around the village and make sure they go to school regularly.

2. Sponsorships for education

Students from Koothampalayam Panjanyat (Makkampalayam village) have to travel minimum of 25 kilo metres for their high school and higher secondary education. They have no regular transport facility to travel that distance and study. Therefore the students are put in different boarding schools to continue their studies. Mr Johannes Mispagel is sponsoring those students from the academic year June 2013.

54 Students benefited from this sponsorship for the academic year June 2013 – April 2014. Among them 2 of them have completed higher secondary school studies and gone up for higher education studies (college studies) and 2 of them have completed college studies and have been employed in different places. The others continue their studies.

The students who completed 8th standard in the village have newly joined the sponsored children in June 2014. There are 42 students who study in 12 schools in different places from 5th standard to 12th standard. 15 students are studying in 10 different colleges and technical institutes.

We had two meetings for the sponsored students and their parents. The first meeting took place in May, 2014 before the reopening of the school in June. The second meeting took place in September 2014 during their quarterly exam holidays. The meetings were very useful. We continued to explain to them the process of collecting money for the students and stressed on their responsibility to make use of this golden opportunity. We could feel that the parents resonated with our intention. The students also promised to study well.

3. Welfare Activity:

Some of the parents had mortgaged their gold jewels to avail loan for their children's education fee in June, 2013. Mr Johannes Mispagel graciously offered to free these people from debt and donated Rs 107000/- from his pocket this year. The money has been distributed to those 8 families in July 2014 and made sure that they got back their jewels and became free from debt. These families are very much grateful to you Papa Mispagel. They

were moved and positively wonder struck by your noble gesture of sacrifice to redeem them from the debt.

4. Nutrition to the Children

Knowing the poor health condition of our children in Makkampalayam Papa Mispagel approved our proposal to provide nutritional food items to the tuition children. We bought a milk cow in July 2014. It gave 7 liters of milk for a day; now it is milking 5 liters. Every evening the students at Makkampalayam are distributed a cup of milk after the tuition is over. Also they are given different nutritional food items like biscuits, protein contained nuts and cereals etc on different days. The parents and the children are very happy about this project. This project also has attracted the children to be regular for tuition and thus learn something apart from boosting up their health.

5. Computer classes

We have got 4 computers for students use in our centre at Makkampalayam. The middle school children are taught to operate the computers, type and a few other fundamental things. During the week days the children use the computers from 7 pm to 9 pm. On week end and holidays the students use the computers on different timings.

6. Library

PARAN inaugurated a library for the use of the children and the people in Makkampalayam in November 2013. There are books on various topics. All the books are very much relevant for the school going children. We have books like world leaders, stories, novels, general knowledge, compositions, various titles for competitions, dictionaries, etc. We continue to add different types of books to the library.

We took 10 students for a book exhibition in October 2014 held at Sathyamangalam to give an exposure to them. Hopefully this would also create a thirst for knowledge and reading books. The children spend a long time browsing many books at the exhibition centre. Of course we also bought some books for our library.

We make sure that the students make use of the library sometimes. They use these books for competitions such essay writing, public speaking, general knowledge and storytelling. We are happy that a few students have begun to voluntarily ask for books to read.

7. Summer education Camp

The school children are on summer holiday in the month of May. In order to help the students to spend the vacation usefully we organize summer education camp. This camp is organized from 1st to 15th May. This year the camp was organized from 1st may to 13th 2014. All the students from this panjayat benefited from this camp. There were 96 students from 1st

standard to 12th standard. They were taught general Tamil, English and Mathematics. They were given a lot of opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities and develop their talents like singing, drawing, public speaking, storytelling, acting in skits, games etc. The children spent the days so joyfully and fruitfully. We had 8 volunteers to guide and help out the students. The summer education camp was concluded with a spectacular cultural program on 13 May 2014.

8. Educational tour

The people in general and the children in particular rarely travel to other places. They seldom know the world outside. Last two years we have been taking the tuition children and interested adult on a tour. We took about 20 children and 20 married men and women to Chennai in March 2013 for a day. In the same way about 30 children and 10 married women from self help groups volunteered to join us for the tour in March 2014. We had the trip for two days and visited the southern part of Tamilnadu such as Kanyakumari, Trinaveli and Madurai. Almost all of them traveled in the train for the first time. All of them traveled in the sea for the first time by boat when we visited 'Swami Vivekanada's rock' in Kanyakumari. Also we visited some of the historical places like Padmanaban Palace near Kanyakumari, Thirumalai Nayakkar Mahal and Meenatchi Amman temple in Madurai etc. Also we a glimpse of the airport this year in Madurai and last year in Chennai though we could not take them inside the airport.

9. Women Self Help Groups

There are 10 Women Self Help groups (WSHG) in two panjayats. Among them 6 groups were newly formed this year. Each member in WSHGs saves Rs 100/- every month. After the formation of 6 months the groups are encouraged to avail loan from their own savings for less interest. After a year or two the groups are given loan by banks or donors; so that the groups could avail a big amount as loan to meet their needs. This in a big way helps them to relieve themselves from the clutches of local money lenders who exploit them by getting unjust interests. The groups which were formed two years back have crossed the first stage and they are in the second stage. A French organization called LACIM granted Rs 55000/- to be given as loan for these groups. This money has been given to two groups and it is being used as revolving fund for these two groups. Also Jesuit Madurai Province granted Rs 100000/- as revolving fund for two more groups. They have been also using it fruitfully.

Women's Day: The 4 groups which existed in March 2014 celebrated 8th of March as Women's day. These women had bought same type of sarees and wore them on that day. This uniformed dress made a outward difference from other women and also it added grandeur to mark the day. It was the first time for these women to celebrate this day. Rangoli and other competitions were conducted among the groups to build the unity of the group; a few fun games were also conducted to make the day joyful and enjoyable. After the

competitions and games the concluding ceremony took place. Ms Sundari a teacher from a nearby government school gave the chief guest's message and distributed prizes to all the winners and a gift to all the women.

10. Income generating activities

Goat Rearing: People in this area depend on agriculture for their income both as land owners and as coolies. Unfortunately they could not cultivate all through the year as they depend on monsoon rain. The people would have work only a few days in a year. Otherwise they travel to faraway places in search of manual labour. A few families were growing cattle which gave them some income. After examining various possibilities in consultation with the people, PARAN initiated goat rearing project with the support of a donor from Belgium. 65 goats were distributed to 7 families in April 2014. The families which otherwise had no chance to begin an income generating activity were selected from Women Self Help groups as beneficiaries. In order to ensure the success of the project an agreement has been made between PARAN and the beneficiaries and the document is kept in the office. The following are the conditions of the project:

- One of the family members must go for grazing the goats.
- They should not sell the goats at least for three years.
- Each family will get 8 goats and they should give back 9 goats to PARAN in three years. Each year a family should give three goats. At the end of the first year they must give at least 6 months old lambs. The following two years the goats given must be of one year old.
- The goats which are given to PARAN by the beneficiaries would be distributed to some other families along with the next years' project.
- A representative of PARAN will visit the families on a regular interval to monitor the project.

The people are very happy about the project and they are doing very well. Many of the goats have given birth and the people so joyfully share about it to us.

11. Youth group formation

There are lots of unorganized youth in this village and panjayat. Most of them are working in different parts of the country as manual labourers. Only a few of them have completed 10th or 12th standard schooling. They come to the village on feast days. Twenty youth have formed a group namely 'Friends youth group'. Whenever they come to the village, they would have meetings and plan for the future. They have taken up a few common works like cleaning the ditch in the village, organizing the feast of a temple in the village and supporting the initiatives that are done for a common cause.

12. Animation and Awareness programs

The people are organized in different groups and are trained and motivated to live a fruitful life. The people are given awareness about the available schemes of the government and they are advised to make use of them to come up in life. The people are being motivated to fight for their rights.

We have no road facility for 15 kilometres to reach the nearby town. A bus was going up and down on the muddy road thrice a day. Due to a heavy rain in September 2014 the road became worse and we have no transport facility from then on. We have been motivating the youth and women to make a petition to the district collector. Periodic meetings have helped us to mobilize 50 people. We travelled to Erode the head quarters of our district to submit our petition to the collector demanding a proper road and transport facility to our village. The collector gave a positive reply. Tamil news papers carried news about our initiatives. We were happy that one our demand was fulfilled within two days. That is, last two months people were struggling a lot to buy the raw materials for food from the public distribution shop as they had to travel to another village for 10 kilo metres with no transport facility. The district collector has ordered the public distributing authority to make the things available in the village itself. And the things reached the village within two days. Unfortunately nothing has been done to lay road or for transportation. We are planning for different means to achieve our demand.

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