



## On the Road with Krishnammal



It is 3:00 a.m. After spending a week in the Chennai area, caring for her 99-year-old husband, Krishnammal Jagannathan (“Amma”) is returning to LAFTI’s office in Kuthur. She often travels this long distance by bus, but today she has the luxury of a car. She thinks about all the work that lies ahead. She finally dozes off to sleep, but awakes with a jolt to the sound of a ringing cell phone. Her companion answers the phone and quickly hands it off to Amma. It is the office of the Chief Minister (similar to “governor”) of Tamilnadu. The caller tells her that the Chief Minister wants to meet with her in Chennai to discuss a partnership for distributing more land. LAFTI’s staff is already in the middle of completing land transfer documents with 250 women, negotiating with dozens of landlords, and arranging for loans. How can she possibly ask them to take on more work? Yet, she knows that she has to act now since political priorities can change quickly. She happily accepts the invitation to meet with the Chief Minister the following week.

She looks out the window at all the women and men working in the rice paddies. Although she has made this trip thousands of times, she still marvels at the sight. She has lost count of the exact number, but she knows that LAFTI has helped about 20,000 families each acquire an acre of land, freeing them from years of bondage (“modern day slavery”). She remembers their stories. Some were forced to borrow money at exorbitant rates in order to purchase medicine for a sick child, patch a leaky roof, or buy food. They agreed to pay back the “loan” with their sweat. Often entire families or villages end up in these debt traps, keeping them in bondage for generations and pushing them deeper into poverty. Amma has proven that land ownership helps families break this cycle and increase their income, lifting them out of abject poverty. Looking out the window, she sees that the harvest will be good this year. Life is good.



Amma again thinks about her dedicated, over-worked staff that made this land movement possible. She wishes she could pay them more, or at least give them a generous gift for Pongal. She’ll deal with that later.

She notices a herd of goats in the fields. Friends of LAFTI provided the funds to purchase over 500 goats. Could these be some of those goats or perhaps their offspring? Life is good.

She asks the driver to stop at one of LAFTI’s training sites. As she approaches, she hears the buzz of 20 sewing machines (a donation from a Chicago group) and the chatter of 20 women. The teacher quickly pulls out a plastic chair for her. While encouraging the women to work hard and learn new skills, she notices that one woman seems to have difficulty threading a needle. Amma remembers that a LAFTI friend had given her a large donation of reading glasses, so she asks her companion to fetch one from the car. The woman smiles as she easily threads the needle.

Amma slowly returns to the car, and an elderly woman, bent over in pain, approaches her. The woman tells Amma that her pain is getting worse and she cannot afford to buy medicine. Amma reaches into her pocket for some rupees.

Soon they arrive in the village of Karunganni where 25 houses are in the final stages of construction. Workers run up to greet her, some bend to touch her feet. She dislikes this custom. Amma marvels at the new houses. What an improvement over the deplorable mud huts that stand a few feet away. This very generous gift of housing is from a Seattle-based group of travel writers. Their organization, Passports with Purpose (<http://www.passportswithpurpose.org>) teamed with the Friends of LAFTI Foundation to help 25 families move from mud huts into small brick houses. The JAIN Center of Northern California is funding a similar project in Orathur Village. Amma must go there tomorrow. This is a dream come true for her and these families. Life is definitely good.



Next stop is one of LAFTI's four hostels. LAFTI supports about 250 children, including 32 who are currently attending college. This is an extraordinary achievement, as they come from among the poorest of the poor – children of landless laborers, migrant workers, Dalit orphans who no relatives could afford to take in. Funding for the hostels primarily comes from LAFTI's Italian friends. A few of the younger children run up to Amma for a hug. She always has enough hugs to go around.



Before leaving, Amma stops at the water filter for a glass of water. LAFTI is now providing clean water at all their sites. Biosand water filters, designed by some scientists at the University of Calgary, remove 95-99% of disease-causing bacteria and viruses. Friendly Water for the World (<http://www.friendlywaterfortheworld.com/>) provided the training and funding for this project. The water is refreshing.



Back in the car, she has time for a brief nap. It is late afternoon when they finally arrive at LAFTI's office. Men, women, and children from upwards of 500 villages continue to find their way here. Today is no different. A group of women came to ask Amma to help them acquire an acre of land so they will no longer be at the mercy of their landlords. Amma listens to their pleas and promises to help, but first she must talk to them about working hard and saving the down payment. As she tells them they have a right to a dignified life and the power to make it happen, she sees their tears. Tomorrow she will go to their village.

Three visitors drop off a truck load of rice and blankets. LAFTI can never get too many donations. She offers them some chai.

A woman, whose husband recently died shows up with her two small children. She has no money, no marketable skills, no place to go for help. Amma knows she will have to find a sponsor for this family, but that is for another day. Now she needs to give them food, shelter, and comfort. Someday, she will build a house for them, and enroll the mother into a training program.

A landlord and his son drive up in their fancy car. He will be moving to the city, and wants to give 30 acres of land and his house to LAFTI. Perhaps he wants to make amends for the way he has treated the people who worked for him or maybe he just wants to share his wealth. It does not matter; LAFTI will gratefully accept his gift. Amma says she will turn his house into another hostel.

A mother arrives with her 8-year-old daughter. She desperately wants to educate her two children, but her husband does not agree. Although he allows their son to attend school, the girl stays home to cook. Amma agrees to accept the girl into one of LAFTI's hostels. The mother will deal with her husband's wrath.

One of LAFTI's managers walks into the office. He just learned the cost of cement has increased again. Five years ago, LAFTI could build a house for less than \$2,000. Now the cost has doubled. Amma wonders how she will ever reach her goal of building 5,000 houses. Yet, she knows it will happen. After all, "Everything is Possible!" But now she will sleep.

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*Note: Although this is a fictionalized account, it is a very typical day for Krishnammal Jagannathan, LAFTI's founder. Those of us who have traveled with her have witnessed these and similar events and heard her stories about the people she serves.*

**The Friends of LAFTI Foundation wants to offer a sincere thank you to all our friends around the world who have helped Krishnammal and LAFTI with their many projects. Please visit our website for more information about LAFTI's projects or to make a donation.**

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***Together everything is possible!***