

A South Indian Christmas

Nathar Puthu Varuda Valthukkal

This means "Happy Christmas" in the Tamil language!

What do our friends in the Diocese of Vellore do to celebrate Christmas?
Some things are (nearly) the same as the things we do:

- Churches and homes are decorated with paperchains and huge paper decorations such as stars. A lot of people like to make their own special decorations and church groups such as the youth club will take responsibility for decorating the church. Often Christians will make huge paper star lanterns and hang these on the outside of their houses so everyone can see. Indians do have Christmas trees too, but of course they do not have fir trees in India, so they will have to use other kinds of trees or bushes instead (and sometimes artificial fir trees), they decorate the trees with stars, tinsel, toys, plastic fruit and colourful streamers. The favourite decorations in the houses and churches will be mango or banana tree leaves, and also poinsettias because the beautiful red leaves of the poinsettia remind people of the shape of the Star of Bethlehem. The paper decorations in the churches will be left up until the beginning of Lent!
- Lights are important at Christmas time, as they remind Christians of Jesus coming as the Light of the World. Christians will make small divas (clay thumb-pots which are used as lamps) and stand these lights on the corners of their flat topped roofs or walls, where they will burn to show that this is a Christian house. The lamps are lit for the whole of the month before Christmas. Hindus burn the same kinds of oil lamps at Divali, so if a Hindu neighbour asks why the Christians are burning lamps at Christmas instead of Divali, it gives them a chance to share the Christmas message.
- Children enjoy taking part in nativity plays. Sometimes the school or church will organise a nativity tableau – this is when the actors who are in the play just pose together around the manger (as if they were a picture in a Christmas card) but do not act or say any words. The main celebration consists of traditional Indian dancing and singing which all takes place in front of the tableau while the children stand perfectly still. There is a picture of a nativity tableau on this site.
- In the days before Christmas members of the church will go carol singing in the evenings. The carol singers will make sure that they visit every house in their town or village where someone from their church lives- as church congregations can be very big in Vellore Diocese this can mean visiting over a hundred houses and walking many miles! The carol singers are not doing this to raise money, but to give everyone a special greeting for the Christmas season. It is also very cold for the singers, although not as cold as it would be in England.

- On Christmas Eve in England people often like to go to a “Watchnight Service” which is on at midnight. In Vellore Diocese there are similar services in the evening on Christmas Eve, and when everyone leaves the church at the end of the service they take with them a lighted candle or diva lamp. It is very dark by the time they leave and you would be able to see great processions of lights going through the town as the people make their way home. This shows people how the story of Jesus, the Light of the World, is taken out of the churches and into the world.
- Early the next morning many people will be back in the church again, perhaps they will only have had three or four hours sleep! They will be dressed in their best clothes and many of the women will probably be wearing wonderful smelling flowers like jasmine in their hair. The whole church will be filled with lights and there will be much joyful singing. The service will last about two or three hours and finish at dawn (6.00 a.m.) Churches will be packed for these special services, with hundreds of people attending. Often many will end up sitting on the floor, or even sitting outside because the church is too small to hold everyone!
- There will be a special Christmas dinner, but as this is India, as you would expect, it is a curry. Many people will cook a biriyani, as this is the meal you always have on special occasions like parties or weddings. In a biriyani you cook all the rice and ingredients together in one pot, instead of cooking the rice and curry sauce separately. The most expensive biriyani is made with chicken. If you go to a large Christmas party with many guests then the meal will probably be served on a banana leaf which you throw away when you have finished. Also Indians eat with their right hands instead of using knives and forks, so there’s a lot less washing-up after the meal is over than we have!
- Later in the day families with new babies will return to the church once more for a huge baptism service. Lots of babies are christened on Christmas Day, as it is seen as a good day to welcome children into the light of God’s family.
- People give each other Christmas presents, but they also make sure that they give charity money to the poor at this special time. Servants and workers may give their employer a lemon as a gift, because this is a special symbol of long life and prosperity.
- Christmas Day is a national holiday in India, and Hindus enjoy celebrating Christmas with gifts and parties as well, although, of course, they do not join in the Christian celebrations. You will also see Santa Claus decorations in the shops, and some of the large stores in the cities will have a Santa’s Grotto and be playing western carols!