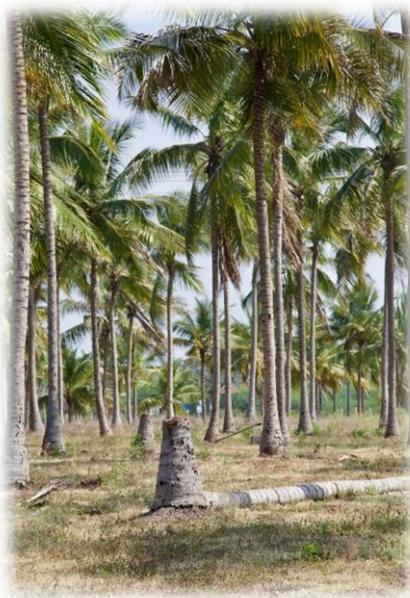


Athoor Boys Town

Annual Report 2017/2018



As we drive along the bumpy road to Athoor Boys Town (ABT), we pass increasing numbers of bare-foot pilgrims walking to Palani. It is an annual event and one most Tamils are expected to make at least once in their lives. Many walk hundreds of kilometres, always bare-foot and often numerous times. It culminates at the temple dedicated to Murugan (the Hindu God of War).



Coconut trees at ABT

The countryside around ABT is greener than last year as the monsoon rains were better but the damage from years of poor rainfall is even more evident. The stands of Coconut Palms which did provide a good portion of the farming income here, have big gaps from trees that have died and been cut down. Replacements will take years to grow, providing the rains hold up. Athoor's grove lost 50 coconut trees out of 200. Two months ago some papaya trees were planted with the hope that as they require less water, they will survive and replace some of the coconut income lost but of course they will also take some years to mature before they are producing.

Athoor itself is also showing the effects; the kitchen garden has one straggling pumpkin vine; radishes, ladyfingers and tomatoes were planted recently but don't appear to have made it and a lot of the ornamental bushes simply aren't flowering if they have survived at all. The grounds are neat and well maintained, with dirt properly banked against the buildings and small irrigation channels snaking around the property to channel any water. Grey water is channelled towards the trees but isn't enough to make much of a difference. One bore well provides sufficient water for the boys needs and with the RO system (reverse osmosis) ensures potable water. The two irrigation wells don't supply enough water for more than the basics.

As is frequently the case, the kitchen is divided between a modern gas set-up and a wood burning system which uses the dry coconut fronds for fuel. The cook Sumathi, who has been on the job for over 27 years tells me that the wood kitchen is really just used for cooking rice now - everything else is done over the gas. Everything is immaculately clean though rather worn looking as the residence is over thirty years old. Only limited funds have been available for maintenance and repair, and no major funding for capital expenditures has been made for several years.

One of the dormitories, which had been abandoned as unsafe has been properly demolished. The remaining four dorms house the 50 boys (of that number as usual, there are 4 boys in a private residential school called SUM Higher Secondary School, Rayappanpatti, entirely supported by the Head Master). Eight new boys were admitted to ABT but one returned to his family with long-term severe headaches which the local doctor felt would be better treated at home and another boy returned to his parents when their circumstances improved.

The library has been moved to another building as its previous location was damaged - it is now a well organized and bright room with plenty of space for the students to sit and study and do their homework. The computer room has four working units and the other one in the office has an internet connection so the boys

can do research for school projects, both locations have UPS for power interruptions. There is also a generator but as the electrical grid gets more and more reliable it hasn't needed to be used in a long time. Security is limited; there is CCTV but no fence or wall around the property and no night watchman.

Warden Ramasamy has been with BTS for 10 years, four of them here at Athoor and is qualified to Higher Secondary School 12th standard (or +2) in the social sciences stream. His wife and daughter who just started school this year, live onsite with him. In support is Assistant Warden Gobisankar present for several months now, although it can be difficult to recruit and retain good staff. Ramasamy works with the younger students from 6th to 8th standard and a tutor from the village teaches Math and English to the 9th and 10th standard boys every evening. In addition a new initiative has the better students working with the poorer ones to improve their skills and knowledge.

The boys parliament is organized in the usual fashion with the various officers elected quarterly and the prime minister for the entire year. One of the issues which frequently crops up is the boys often don't return to ABT from home visits when they are supposed to. This year the parliament passed a unanimous resolution to ensure that all the boys returned on time.

I visited Athoor during school hours so I didn't get to spend much time with the boys except at school and I do try (not always successfully I might add) not to disturb classes too much. The boys have a good sports field and play volleyball, kabaddi and cricket. The PE tutor comes once a week. Four of the boys played Tennikoit at District level. The indoor activities include chess, carom and table tennis. The boys don't really do any crafts but they are known for their dance and drums. In fact Ramasamy's father is the drum maker and has supplied sets to several of the residences.

During the recent Pongal celebrations although they didn't win the coveted overall championship this year, the Athoor boys did do extremely well; winning firsts in the science fair and both senior and junior volleyball, kabadi, relay races, shot-put and long-jump. They came second in the computer competition, senior Tennikoit, carom, cricket and discus.

The boys have a scheduled regular health check-up in July or August which covers the basics - eye, ear, nose and throat and a monthly check is done at school but I was unable to verify this. No major health issues have been reported but any illnesses are treated promptly at the local government hospital. AIDS awareness is covered at school and five boys from ABT recently attended a workshop held by the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) at Tirumangalam Boys Town on personal hygiene, AIDS awareness and Adolescent Development. These boys then returned to ABT to teach the rest of the students.



Boys playing Kabadi

All the boys had blood-work done in July which identified their blood type and haemoglobin levels. To help maintain healthy haemoglobin levels the boys are now being given drumstick greens (also known as Moringa Olivera) which are high in iron amongst other vitamins, every Saturday. They also receive vitamin supplements twice a week and vermifuge tablets twice a year.

Ramasamy reports having a good relation within the community. For the past three years two local families have both provided special meals and visited the residence. Some the "Old Boys" have been able to help out as well. Recently an unnamed Dindigul resident gave everyone t-shirts and provided a special biryani meal.

While the required government reports are time consuming and ever multiplying, Ramasamy has no problems with the various inspectors. He doesn't have any major concerns other than saying that the boys are often "normally mischievous". He would like to have a fence and gate at least where the property abuts the road and the DCPU wants some kind of wall/fence around the very large, dry step well which is situated some distance away near the coconut grove (I concur).

Twelve of the ABT boys go to the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Middle School (SHRC) from 6th to 8th standard. Sister Maria Shanti of the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception, a teaching order has been in charge for the past 7 months. She has a BA and an MSc. There are 17 full-time teachers who are qualified with Diploma Teacher Education (DTE)(second grade). The school has 418 students from 1st to 8th standard. They have one craft teacher twice a week. Twice a week for the past six months, the government pays for a

karate teacher for the 6th to 8th standard girls and recently they won a gold medal at the all schools level competitions.



Boys at SHRC Middle School

The school teaches in the Tamil Medium and follows the government mandated syllabus of three semesters punctuated by the usual tests and exams. Remedial assistance and tutoring is held after classes with the help of the older/better students. Once a month on Saturday there are more intensive sessions in maths, science and English for the 7th and 8th standard students. Weekly prizes are awarded on Fridays for the best weekly test results. One of ABT's students, B Gopinath is exceptionally good in the sciences.

The school is situated in the middle of the village of Athoor so it does not have a sports field as such; games are played in the centre of the compound. The original buildings are old - the school is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year

but everything is neat and well organized. There is a decent library with well over 500 books on school related subjects. Fiction is sparse as I'm told there is a very good lending library in the village. Science equipment is stored in the office and brought to each class as needed. There are no computers at all and the only AV equipment is one TV with a DVD player tucked into an unused classroom where the children can watch various lessons.

The school kitchen provides a daily nutritious lunch including eggs for 360 of the students and includes all the ABT boys. Other students bring lunch from home. There is no well onsite but the school is connected to one of several village wells and piped in.

The school is well run; the Head is in control and reports that she and Ramasamy work well together to resolve any problems which may arise.

The remaining 34 ABT boys go to the Government Higher Secondary School (GHSS). The campus is huge with a great many unoccupied and derelict buildings surrounding a central playing field. Current classes are held in the "best" buildings.

The Head Master Solomon Jesuraj holds MSc, MEd, MPhil and an MBA in Computer Applications, which makes him by far the best educated head of school I have met to date. He is still spending his own money to effect many necessary repairs instead of waiting for the government to do so and things are improving with a schedule in place to refurbish the remaining buildings. Last year he set up a nursery and primary teaching centre for handicapped children in several of the unoccupied buildings near the front gate - not especially relevant to the high school but indicative of his energy and vision.



Government Hr.Sec.School

There are 237 students from 6th to 12 standard; 149 boys and 88 girls, and of those 118 are from the scheduled caste (SC). All the 20 teachers hold masters degrees in their subjects with several having philosophy degrees as well. This gives the school a very enviable student to teacher ratio. There are both computer and PE specialists with Yoga being one of the disciplines taught. The school is a Tamil Medium system with the usual government mandated syllabus - to the end of 9th standard there is a no fail policy run on three semesters with weekly tests and regular exams. From 10th onwards there are major pass/fail exams. The 9th standard SC students now receive government paid coaching and the 10th to 12th standards have additional school tutoring before and after school daily.

I am happy to report that the Virtual Classroom initiative started last year seems to be a resounding success with district experts in various fields teaching online classes and this programme is being expanded to other

schools. The actual computer room has 10 working units and appears to be well used. The science lab is next on the requested list to be renovated/repared so I was unable to visit it. The library has over 10,000 books on a huge variety of subjects and the students are encouraged to take out a book a week.

The kitchen supplies a nutritious lunch including an egg for all the students from 6th to 10th standard but the 11th and 12th are required to provide their own. Water comes from the local dam and is filtered through a RO system (reverse osmosis); there is a bore well for non-potable needs. Security is minimal; the compound wall is "slightly damaged" according the Head and there is no CCTV or night watchman.

Last year all eight of the ABT boys who wrote the 10th standard exams passed, four went onto Industrial Training Institutes (ITI) and four are enrolled in 11th standard. This year another eight boys will write their 10th exams with similar expectations. Ramakrishna who is in 10th standard is the best student in the entire school and Selvendran in 9th standard won one of 50 scholarships for the entire district. Congratulations to both boys!

Solomon Jesuraj indicated that he has no issues whatsoever with the way he and Ramasamy work together to solve any problems which may arise with the ABT boys.



Members of Nursery club at ABT

Joe Homan's wish was to give every child a chance and it really does feel like we are giving them the very best chance in life, here. Boys Town isn't just about providing these children with a roof over their head, food on the table and a good school (although isn't that an incredible feat?!). It's about providing a supportive and nurturing environment which will help the boys to develop into well-rounded young men. The extracurricular activities allow them to develop other skills and interests and give back to the community. Having structure in their lives makes them more disciplined; having a hand in the running of the Boys Town gives them leadership skills and makes them take pride in the things

they have. The teacher's comments about the character and ability of our students compared to others, is already proof of its success.

Thanks to your continued support, the vast majority of the Boys here will go on to gain a trade, or even a degree, which will guarantee them well-paid job opportunities for the rest of their lives. The next generation of their families will be raised above the poverty line... the magnitude of this is almost too big to comprehend. None of this would be possible without the care and dedication of the BTS team and of course the invaluable support of the sponsors, so THANK YOU!

Kimberly Smith, Volunteer 2018.

All Project Reports are checked and when necessary amended by JHC Manager.

Many youngsters supported by JHC are seeking sponsorship; you may have a relative or friend who might help these youngsters?

We need volunteers who might help these children and others in projects JHC supports with their education and spoken English, do you know anyone who might be interested?

Want to read news from JHC and India? Then why not follow us at www.facebook.com/JoeHomanCharity or www.joehoman.org.uk. We need friends to spread the news of our work with needy children.

To write to your sponsored child, please use email via the charity website, or the following postal address.

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