

Nilakottai Boys Town Annual Report 2017/2018



Although the countryside around Nilakottai isn't quite the "scorched earth" of previous years it is still not completely recovered. The drive to Nilakottai from Tirumangalam takes about an hour and a half, and gave me the unique experience of driving over a freshly paved road - a first! We passed fields where farmers are harvesting the maize, making tall stooks to finish the drying process or laying out stalks across the roads so the traffic threshes out the grains. The general area around the town of Nilakottai is famous for growing flowers, such as Jasmine (3 types), which are then shipped to Dindigul, Madurai and even exported. The closer we got to the residence however the drier it became. The actual campus which was built in 1974 and has a total of 22 acres of which 10 are leased out, has tall shade trees and exuberant flowering bushes but you can certainly see the signs of careful water conservation.



Raja, warden

Warden S Raja has been on staff at Nilakottai Boys Town (NBT) for four years and other BTS projects for many years, he holds a MA in Social Science and a B Ed. The Assistant Warden is K Pitchaimani, has been here for about 10 months and holds a B Com; Pandiammal is the cook and has been with the residence for the past two years.

Maximum capacity had been set at 50 children and there are currently 48 boys in residence. The school year started with 13 new boys and 4 transferring in from one of the children's villages but two left due to severe homesickness. The boys are distributed as follows: nine boys in 6th standard, eight in 7th, ten in 8th, eleven in 9th, nine in 10th and one young apprentice who is studying motor mechanics (two year programme) at an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) about 10 km away. Last year seven boys wrote the all important 10th standard exams with three advancing into Polytechnic studies (three years), two to apprenticeships at ITIs and two returning to their homes to pursue 11th and 12th standards.

There are two part-time tuition teachers; one who comes daily to work with the 9th and 10th standard boys and a computer specialist who comes on Saturdays for all the boys. Both the warden and the assistant warden who are well educated themselves, help the 6th to 8th standard boys daily. Not very surprisingly when asked, the boys worst subjects are Maths and English!

The boys live in four of the bungalows, with the fifth being used as a table tennis/cultural room. There are separate accommodations for the Warden and the Assistant Warden, each with their own sanitary facilities. The cook lives near the kitchen and has her own facilities as well. There are two toilet blocks for the boys as well as a "night urinal"; bathing and laundry (once a week usually but uniforms are often washed again mid-week) are done at an open air tank not far from the road. Grey water is channelled back to the kitchen garden where new plantings of ladyfingers and beans are just starting to appear. Beside the garden is a small grove of Pitchi Flowers - a type of Jasmine which the boys harvest for a very small income.

Security here is fairly basic; there is a CCTV set-up with the monitor in the office and a fence along the road - due to the size of the property it would be quite impractical to enclose the entire area. The neat and clean

computer room has two functional computers, though one is positively ancient looking; the library is well organized with about 300 books - 200 in English and the balance in Tamil. They have the usual AV equipment and a TV & player with a good selection of DVD's covering everything from Instructional Math (on Sundays the 10th standard students use these), to Spoken English, songs and dance as well as stories and Yoga.

The power grid is ever more reliable with usually only one scheduled monthly power outage per month. There is a very large UPS set-up which provides at least one light and one fan per building and powers the computers in the event of a power failure. There is one bore well drilled down to 700 feet which supplies just enough water for the residence's needs and perhaps a bit more for the kitchen garden. The RO system (reverse osmosis) provides potable water. Little maintenance or repair work has been done at NBT in the past three years with the exception of a wall/fence around the deep dry step well.

The boys play Volleyball, Kabadi and Tennikoit on one field and Cricket on weekends on the larger field. A part-time PE instructor helps every Sunday. Indoor activities include such things as Chess, Carom and Table Tennis. In addition there are a variety of indoor and outdoor clubs with the requirement that the boys must belong to one of each. Club meetings are held on the first Sunday of each month and on Tuesday evenings. Unfortunately there are no longer any funds for a craft teacher so any such activities are only to be found at school.



Library at NBT



Science exhibition during Pongal

The recent Pongal celebrations were certainly enjoyed by the Nilakottai boys and they brought home their fair share of prizes. Sivapandi, who is in 10th standard was acknowledged as "Best Boy" or student and won second prize in the speech competition; Thirumurugan came first in the senior Chess competition. The science team came second with their very clever hydraulic back-hoe (personally I thought they should have won) and in sports - individual and teams did very well with a slew of first, seconds and thirds.

A general annual medical check-up was done by BTS in August which covered the basics - eyes, ears, throat, skin etc. At the same time a finger prick blood test was done to check haemoglobin levels. Unfortunately the two associated schools then scheduled their student annual exams in November which left most of the rest of the year uncovered. Two boys had dental issues which were dealt with at the local dentist's office. Five of the boys from Nilakottai attended a DCPU workshop held at Tirumangalam Boys Town covering such issues as AIDS and Dengue Fever awareness, personal hygiene, appropriate touching and general Sex Education. They then returned to NBT to teach the rest of the boys. Personal guidance is generally

handled by the warden. BTS organizes career guidance workshops three times a year, including twice with the parents/guardians of the boys. In addition there will be visits to various businesses, Colleges, Polytechnics and ITIs for the 9th and 10 standard boys to get an idea of the kinds of careers available to them and see which are of interest to them.

The boys are predominantly Hindu with only four Christians this year - everyone gets along well and they all celebrate each other's festivals and religious observances. A small but well tended Ganesh presides over all. The boy's parliamentary system is in place as is usual. This year they discussed ways to save power such as shutting off lights when not needed and realized a net savings. Another issue brought up was the distance the boys had to walk to the higher secondary school (about 3 km or 2 as the crow flies over the fields). As

the 10th standard boys are required to be at school at least an hour before classes start for additional tutoring they either had to disrupt the morning schedule for the rest of the residence to start earlier or as was more often the case arrive late. As a result now the 10th boys take a private, paid bus to school but only in the mornings.

Picnic or trips away from the residence this year have included visits to the Vaigai Dam, Dindigul Rock Fort and some of the nearby hill temples. They are hoping to visit Kodaikkandal before the end of the school year if the funds become available. While the warden indicated that they have good relationships with the community, they have only received two special meal donations - one of which came from an "old boy". The only other local donation came from the Village Administrative Officer (VAO) who provided some stationary for the 10th standard boys. One of the challenges for this residence going forward will be dealing with the new DCPU/CWC restriction on the number of boys who will be allowed to live here. It has been 50 for a number years, now the occupancy has been dropped to 42 with little explanation or warning.

When asked, warden Raja expressed a wish for three more computers but he was very pleased to have received a digital point and shoot camera from JHC which had been something they had wanted for some time!

A colleague last year described the Sourastra Middle school as Dickensian and I'd say that was an apt metaphor. What it isn't, is gloomy. The children are tucked into all sorts of nooks and crannies, up and down stairs in an ancient building in the middle of Nilakottai village. It is a private school with government support for students from 1st to 8th standard and amazingly was founded in 1925. There are exactly 300 children being educated here - 27 of the boys are from NBT. A nice benefit is the school bus which picks up and drops off the students. The Head Master is a kind looking, patient man called Vijayakumar. He has been HM for 21 years with an additional 10 years previously as a teacher; he holds a MA History and a MA Education.

There are 26 teachers all with a minimum of 10 years experience and the HM says that he has a very low turn-over rate for teachers; most often they leave simply on retirement. From 1st to 5th standard they have at a minimum a Diploma in Education; for 6th to 8th they must have at least a B Ed. Two of the teachers are specialists; one for PE and the other for "life skills" - formerly taught weaving but now it encompasses such things as making soaps of various kinds, making ink for fountain pens (which are still in regular use), sewing, clothes repairs and embroidery and the ubiquitous garlands made from everything from wool to fresh flowers.



Classroom at Sourastra Middle School



Teachers at Sourastra School

Vijayakumar showed me the Education Management Information System (EMIS) he has on his mobile (the school does not have any computers) which is used to track each child, a 12-digit unique identity number issued to all Indian residents based on their biometric and demographic data. It tracks bank accounts and all relevant information on each child. Since 2012 all schools are required to have their students enrolled and it has been successfully used in the past few years to rescue children who have been abducted or lost.

The school follows the government mandated "all pass, no fail" syllabus with monthly and quarterly tests - 40% of the overall marks are for practical and 60% from written tests. Sourastra is a Tamil Medium school with 14 classrooms for 6th to 8th standard in this location and 11 more for 1st to 5th around the corner. There is additional remedial assistance for half an hour during the lunch period for those who need it. There are no specialized classrooms; the library of about 700 books are kept in lockers with easy access for the children.

The sports field is used for games such as Kho-kho, Kabadi, and a daily yoga practice. Lunch which includes an egg daily, is cooked onsite for approximately 200 of the students; the rest return home for lunch as they live close by in the village. The sanitary facilities are old but clean; the water is supplied by the Panchayat as well as their own bore well; potable water is done through an RO system (reverse osmosis) donated by the local MP. The electrical grid is more and more reliable with only one monthly scheduled shut down for maintenance. There is a compound wall around both locations but heavier security is not considered necessary as they are located within the village. There is no CCTV.

The HM says that the NBT boys are very good at sports and cultural dance but lag somewhat academically in some instances. Several of the new NBT boys coming into the system at 6th standard are functionally illiterate (not an unusual circumstance for many children unfortunately) and will need the better part of a year to catch up. The Warden at NBT feels that this is the best school with the best quality of education, all the 6th to 8th standard NBT boys go there - "they look after the children very well". Both the HM and Warden agree they talk frequently, work to solve problems before they become major issues and the only reoccurring issue is the boys forgetting their ID cards!

The Government Kallar Higher Secondary School is in many ways the complete opposite physically from the Sourastra Middle School. It is set in an isolated and arid plain with classrooms lining two sides of a huge walled compound. There are 15 actively used classrooms with several others currently being used for storage. Of the 157 students enrolled here, 20 are from NBT, with 11 in 9th standard and nine in 10th. I met initially with the Head Master S Samraj who has been in the position for four years and holds Masters in Science, Education and Philosophy. Unfortunately he was called away so the Chemistry teacher K Devaraj took over to talk about the school. He is a post graduate in chemistry.



Government Kallar Higher Secondary School

There are 17 teachers on staff with one vacancy to be filled. There are no part-time or specialist teachers. The school is a Tamil Medium programme following the usual government syllabus. They have a "bridge" programme in place to bring remedial assistance to students coming into the school in 6th standard - as is often the case, the education at rural primary schools leaves a great deal to be desired. In addition "Kallar" is a designation for the "most backward class". This school was set up by the government to primarily cater to these low caste children. It is also the only higher secondary school within the area so everyone else attends as well.

The Kallar school designation is supposed to mean extra attention and resources to uplift the "most backward classes" but the responsible department never seems to have enough funds to provide even the basic necessities. The school has 9 computers - all working but no dedicated teachers to teach anything other than the most basic material. There is a wonderful, new science lab but absolutely nothing with which to teach - maybe next year? 11th and 12th standard students preparing for their exams shortly may do well on the theory section and have no practical experience for that other part of the exam at all. There is a smart classroom but no one to teach, no connectivity yet and no materials. The school has in the past two years developed two of the four senior streams - Chemistry, Physics, Biology and Math; History, Economics, Accounting and Commerce. As we have already seen these courses maybe offered but none of the sciences are academically complete. If a student wants to pursue either of the other two streams they have to go elsewhere. NBT boys are fortunate in that they can at least transfer to TBT for one of the remaining streams - Chemistry, Physics, Biology and Computer Science.

The school supplies lunch to the students up to 10th standard - 11th & 12th are required to bring their own. The water situation is rather dire. They have a bore well which just barely meets their needs and there is no RO system for potable water. The sanitary facilities are rather smelly as a result, with no water to flush. Although the power grid is quite reliable these days, the physical hook-ups to each of the buildings is so poor that the power often fails - unfortunately this school is entirely dependent on their government department for any kind of supplies or repair. It's ironic that if this were an "ordinary" higher secondary school, they would have access to more support, because it is a "Kallar" it comes under a different rule set and so far much fewer resources.



Boys studying in the shade of trees

Despite all this, the school has a good pass rate from 10th standard; last year 30 out of 31 students passed and this year the expectation is that all 32 will pass. The classrooms are neat and well organized and when I was there some the older classes were studying for exams in the shade of the few spindly trees. The Warden meets with the HM twice a month but is always just a phone call away for issues which need to be nipped in the bud. The biggest concern the HM has for the NBT boys is the distance they have to walk to get to and from school - about three km - as there is no busing for any of the students.

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.

JHC/BTS INPUT

As the need for residential projects reduces and funds become much more difficult to raise BTS are now proposing to close the NBT project at the end of the current school year. All boys affected will be offered new placements at different BTS projects.

JHC will inform all sponsors when there is confirmation of necessary closure and changes.

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.

Child name
C/o Joe Homan Charity (India)
Post Box No 36
Dindigul – 624 001
Tamil Nadu
India