

## Pannaikadu Boys Town Annual Report 2017/2018



As I travel up from Dindigul on the twist mountain roads in to the Western Ghats, I see evidence of the fairly good monsoons this year. The shimmery lakes of years past are small but a vast improvement of the dust bowls of last year. Even up into the hills which are still green, the waterfalls which were so delightfully noisy are bare trickles; the main reservoir is a third larger than it was last year. Several years of good monsoons are still desperately needed.



Coffee bushes

Driving into Pannaikadu Boy Town (PKBT) though, you could be forgiven in thinking there wasn't a drought. The hilly grounds are surrounded by towering, mature trees, shorter coffee bushes and verdant bougainvillea. The site on a small knoll, allowing downhill views on all sides, encompasses 11.5 acres; 2.5 for the actual campus, 6 acres which are planted with coffee bushes and silver oaks, and the rest for the playground or currently unused forest. There are four bungalows to accommodate the boys with another not being used as it is not structurally sound enough. As the climate is temperate to cool, the windows in the bungalows are glazed rather than covered with mosquito screens and fans aren't necessary. Two buildings; the auditorium/study hall/library and the one housing the computers and guest/TV room have had their roofs replaced with metal ones. The resident tribe of macaque monkeys play havoc with the clay tiles, cracking them when they jump down from the trees and then stealing the broken bits; they also descend on the fruit bearing trees and make off with a good portion of the ripe fruit.

Unfortunately none of the Silver Oaks have been harvested even though the revenue is sorely needed. The coffee bushes have been leased out to another producer but income is likely to be minimal as they are still too shaded from the Silver Oaks and the bushes are well past their best producing years.

The Warden Ilayaraja has been at PKBT for 11 years less a short stint at Athoor Boys Town and he lives in separate quarters with his wife Mahalakshmi and six year old son Doni. He is qualified to 10th Standard, with vocational training (ITI) in leatherwork. His wife is a tailor and also the resident computer teacher. There hasn't been an assistant warden since last June – the difficulty of finding good quality staff, particularly away from the city does not change. The live-in cook is Mallika who has been on staff for a year and a half. She is the sole guardian of her grandson who also lives at Pannaikadu.

This year there are 46 boys in residence; 18 new boys were admitted but two left during the course of the year - one boy who's asthma didn't take well to the climate and another boy who was simply homesick. The boys are in the following standards: eight in 6th standard, nine in 7th, seven in 8th, 10 in 9th, none in 10th or 11th and two boys in 12th standard. All eight of the boys who wrote their 10th standard exams last year passed

with four going into various Industrial Training Institutes (ITI), one boy to a Polytechnic, one boy into a catering apprenticeship and the remaining two returned home.

A general medical check-up was given to all the boys in August and the third week of January they all also had a haemoglobin test with unfortunately mixed results. There has been some improvement in the diet with more greens and vegetables added but more needs to be done. The care given is as prescribed by BTS - any problems or illnesses are dealt with at the local government hospital. One boy was suspected of having Dengue Fever which if diagnosed quickly and treated is not too dangerous. He was sent home to his family for the appropriate course of treatment and is now fine and back at school. There were no dental or eye problems; vermifuge tablets are administered twice a year and multi-vitamins are given twice a week. A group of five boys attended a workshop held at TBT by the local DCPU on hygiene, AIDS awareness, sex education and "appropriate touching", which they then came back to PKBT and taught the rest of the boys.

The library which is housed in a large and airy room still has approximately 1,200 books (there being no budget for new books) in both Tamil and English all worn but useable. There is a TV with a DVD player and most importantly a music system - the Pannaikadu boys often clean up in the annual Pongal dance competitions. The computer room has two working units and a UPS; the boys can use the one in the office and it's printer under supervision and that computer is connected to the internet via dongle. Basic instruction covers Word, Excel and PowerPoint; having the computer specialist on-site is a big plus.



Library at PKBT

The boys playground is about 500 metres away and quite small given the terrain but it doesn't stop them from playing all sorts of game such as kabbadi, kho-kho, volleyball and cricket, though the mountain slopes claim many a ball, never to be found again. Laundry is done outside at two small concrete tanks, but there is now an enclosed bathing area with four stalls - considering the climate the boys' fervent but still unfulfilled desire for a hot water heater makes complete sense. Each residence has an attached toilet and there is another separate toilet block all connected to a septic system. Water is now piped in from the village as both boreholes ran dry sometime ago; potable water is produced with a reverse osmosis (RO) system.

The electrical system experiences fewer power outages other than a scheduled shut down once a month, as they are on the same power lines as the tourist town of Kodaikanal. In any case PKBT has both a generator and an uninterrupted power source (UPS) for the office computer. Security is maintained with CCTV but there is no night watchman. The site is relatively isolated so security is not as much of a concern as is the case in some of the more urban residences.

There are two different secondary schools for the boys to attend. Twenty one boys are sent to the private Nagammal Memorial High School (NMHS) in Thandikudi, some 11 km away and the balance attend the Government Higher Secondary School (GHSS) in Pannaikadu. In both cases the boys take buses which are free and considerably more on schedule now than in years past. The private school goes to 10th standard only so any boys progressing to the higher levels must transfer to the government school for 11 & 12th standard.

The private school has been considered by far the better school academically and the brightest of Pannaikadu's students are sent there. The government school has more perks for the students - free uniforms, sweaters for this cooler climate, flip flops, geometry boxes, and school bags; in standard 11 students are given a bicycle and the 12th standards receive a laptop. The quality and timeliness of some of these items is certainly suspect but doesn't negate the value of having them for these students. By contrast, although the government pays the salaries of the teachers at the private school there are no specific benefits for the students.

Nagammal school is in the midst of the village and occupies a former home which was given to them to open the school many years ago. It is a jumble of ramshackle rooms, some large, some small and some doing double duty. Theoretically there is a classroom for each of 6, 7 & 8 standards, and two each for 9 & 10. There is one toilet for the girls and one for the boys; teachers have another one, which is pretty minimal for a student body of 155 along with ten full-time teachers, three part-time specialists and two clerical staff. There are no

computers and only one science lab which covers physics, chemistry, biology, botany and zoology. The library has about 1,500 very old books in Tamil and English and another 2,500 newer ones which can be loaned out to the students as needed. They do have a TV and as JHC gave them a DVD player this year they are getting copies of the DVDs the government is starting to supply to some of the schools which are designed as aids to the curriculum, especially in English. Potable water is now supplied by the local village Panchayat. CCTV security is not yet required for schools this small; there is a partial wall only as villagers need access through the campus to get to their homes but a night watchman in on duty.

The school does produce well educated students. I spoke at length with the Head Master Narayanasamy who has returned from an extended medical leave. He believes part of the reason the school does so well is because they have a very dedicated and motivated group of teachers. All have Masters Degrees in their respective fields as well as their teaching certificates and some also have MPhil degrees. Staff turn-over is very low with a number of the teachers having been at the school for at least 10 years.



NM High School

The school is on the Tamil Medium syllabus and uses the Advanced Learning Methodology (ALM). Which simply means that 60% of a students' mark for the year comes from the exams and 40% comes from work done throughout the school year - homework, assignments, projects and making mind maps. Mind maps are considered an effective visual aid to note taking and planning assignments.

From standard 6 to 9 the students in both schools, are on the government mandated tri-semester, "all pass, no fail" system. Once in 10th standard, the system changes completely to whole subject studies over the course of the entire year with tests/exams taken weekly, monthly, quarterly and

a final exam in March. In order to prepare students for these all important 10th standard exams, NMHS has compulsory extra studies from 8:30 to 9:30 when regular classes start. The 9th standard students can also avail themselves of this extra study time but it isn't compulsory. Extra classes are also offered during the lunch hour for anyone having specific problems.

Of the 21 PKBT students at the school; two are in 6th standard, four in 7th, six in 8th, two in 9th and seven boys are in 10th. Three PKBT boys, Gowtham, Nandhakumar and Manikandan are above average students and expected to do exceptionally well in the upcoming all important 10th standard exams. The HM feels that the PKBT boys do better than average over all and are more disciplined because of the extra tutoring they receive at the residence. They do well at the cultural dances and are always ready to perform for special occasions. In his opinion they mix well with the other students but not surprisingly do have a certain unity with the other boys from PKBT. The warden meets at the school a minimum of 2 times a month but as all the teachers have his mobile, they frequently speak daily so any problems are dealt with immediately. "No homework is left undone because someone wasn't aware of it."

When asked if he had a wish list, Narayanasamy expressed a desire to have more of the PKBT boys attend his school and he desperately needs computers - he has the teachers who could teach on them but no units. Although they would like to add 11th and 12th standards and start teaching an English medium stream no progress has been made in doing so as yet.

The Government Higher Secondary School (GHSS) has been steadily improving its effectiveness but once again has a new Head Master Pandiarajan who has been on staff since the start of this school year. There are 24 full-time teachers, for 260 students. The girls are at a separate school next door from standard 6 to 10 so the school is only co-ed for 11th and 12th standard. GHSS also uses ALM and has an English stream from 6th to 10th standard. There are extra tutoring sessions every morning. Additional classes are offered in yoga and there is something which is referred to as a "morality class" or "Value Education Period" but I am unsure exactly what that actually encompasses.

The campus is quite large with a playing field for volleyball, cricket, kabbadi, kho-kho and badminton; this year the school hosted the district level competitions. Eighteen class rooms are in use; in addition they have separate labs for the sciences and a computer room with 10 working computers for the 11th and 12th standards only. The library is growing with perhaps 2,000 books in Tamil and English. The new Smart Classroom is just getting started; they received CD's last week for the higher classes but they are not yet

online to stream lectures as the equipment has been delivered but not yet installed. At that time all students will be integrated into the lectures which will go along way to standardizing curriculum content.

The PKBT boys do well; Paramasivan in 6th standard and Gokulan in 7th standard are the best students in their classes. The HM meets with the Warden as needed to solve any problems and Ilayaraja has a well deserved reputation of staying on top of any issues which may arise.

In recognition of the improved school performance, GHSS is now hosting the National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET) for medical and engineering schools. The NEET draws from all the district schools and so the GHSS is offering intensive coaching on Saturdays to all who wish to write.



Science lab at Government School

They have adequate sanitary facilities for both the boys and girls. One thing they do need quite badly is a RO system for their water supply as students are still getting sick from drinking the unfiltered water from the village bore well.

Security is virtually non-existent, CCTV isn't required and there is only a partial wall as the various school buildings are separated by the village streets. The previous issue with the villagers considering the campus to be their property to use as they wish appears to have been solved through more focused attention given to the parent association. This association has also started improve the attitude of parents who are beginning to give support to the school either through donations or in ensuring that their children work hard at school.

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.*

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