

**Inba Seva Sangam Girls' Home, Kadavur.
Annual Report 2015 to 2016**



The winding but generally well surfaced rural road into Girls Home Country and on to Kadavur drops gently downhill, into a bowl among low hills. Along the way both villages and lonely cottages or farms display a mix of traditional disrepair and smart new-build. The final kilometre must be taken cautiously; the road is poor but fortunately traffic is negligible.

Turn into the walled compound and trees and greenery snuggle up to the buildings and blur outlines. No single building dominates the site but, driving on, eventually the Girls Home main citadel appears among the trees, with its portcullis wide open and welcoming. The girls are all at school, so their safe refuge is unnaturally quiet and peaceful, at least until lunchtime.

Overall Manager for the past four years is Mookusamy, Warden Selva Mary and Assistant Warden Radha. Three full time cooks work producing pure vegetarian meals; breakfast and evening meal for the Girls Home but lunch (the main meal) on school days includes the boys, totalling some 250 meals. Two part-time teachers cover Music and Craft respectively. Three teachers from the on-site school stay in the adjoining hostel and give extra tuition in all five syllabus subjects. Two Watchmen share duties at the gate into the walled site.

Schooling covers secondary school for all girls from 6th to 10th standards, followed by higher secondary school (11th and 12th standards and equivalent to 'A' levels) when academic performance and parental wishes warrant. The secondary school leaving certificate exams are nationally set at the end of 10th standard with 12th standard exams at the same time.

Of the 33 girls sitting the 10th standard exam at the end of the last school year 31 passed, with 2 more passing a failed subject at second attempt. Warden cites English as the most difficult subject. 3 left and returned home to continue into Higher Secondary School (they did not reach the minimum mark required by the Girls Home to be reasonably sure of continuing good performance). 3 commenced apprenticeships in nursing college and 27 continued into higher secondary school. During the last school year one girl in 10th standard went on leave and was married, unexpectedly and under the legal age. The police were notified but they and the parents 'reached an understanding' – she remained married; the previous year a similar marriage was averted. Warden explains that many in the local community still support child marriage. The practice arises from poverty and is intended to safeguard property, maintain bonds and be a protection for the husband. About 10 of our girls come from such a background but they are not committed and their presence here protects them.

In higher secondary school 13 girls sat their final exam at 12th standard, 2 failed and returned home while 11 passed to continue as Apprentices, six taking degree courses and 5 Nursing Diploma courses. The 11 new apprentices joined 20 existing, to total 34, of which 13 are JHC sponsored. Our girls aim high – eight on degree courses in Nursing, Hospital Administration, Physics, English, Commerce and Computer Science, while five budding diplomates cluster round Nursing, Health Assistant and Medical Laboratory Technology – all leading to good jobs and not a tailor in sight.

Vocational guidance is given to 10th and 12th std girls twice in the year, with their parents or guardian attending; any defaulters are asked to visit ISS for an individual meeting, ensuring all families are fully aware of their girls' options or intentions. 9th and 11th std girls are counselled at the compulsory annual summer camp held at the end of the school year.

At the start of the current school year 105 girls continued in 6th to 12th stds, joined by the new intake of 23 of which 21 were concentrated in 6th to 8th stds. Most girls are sponsored – 78 by JHC, 44 by the Belgian charity SAWES and 3 by local sponsors. Total strength of 128 is 4 up on last year.

Virtually all our girls come from very poor families with parents in menial and often intermittent work, 12 girls are total orphans. One girl in 10th std. has learning difficulties, possibly dyslexia; she's seemingly normal and active but just can't remember her schoolwork. Whether or not she passes her final exam, practical skills courses are available to help youngsters like her and give her earning capacity. The appointed Doctor evaluates and counsels problem cases.



Sewing Class.

All the girls arrive at school early and stay late for extra tuition and, come home to lunch – it's only a short walk and lunch is their main meal of the day. 3 teachers from the school, who live on-campus, supervise classes for an hour evenings for homework and an hour mornings for private study. Younger girls bed down at 9pm while their senior 'sisters' have another hour for study before bed at 10pm, supervised by the Warden – it's optional, except before all year-end exams. There's no spoken English practice but Warden takes 5 girls for an hour each day to practice on 2 computers. Part-time Craft and Music teachers attend for two hours both days at weekends. Music includes singing and dancing, while craft includes tailoring (with several treadle sewing machines) as well as conventional handicraft. Every evening the girls watch the TV News for 30 minutes and a movie on Sundays. Outdoor

games take place at school in PE or for half an hour after extra tuition has finished; indoor games are reserved for an hour both days at weekends.

The integral Inba Seva Sangam Higher (ISS) Secondary School has a total strength of 214 (128 girls and 86 boys). Classes are small and student/teacher ratio low, leading to ample personal attention. 44 students sat the last 10th standard exams and 41 passed first attempt with the other 3 passing at resit. Top result was 86.8% and the top three were girls.

20 out of 22 passed at 12th standard and 1 passed at the second attempt. Top result was 78.5% and again top three places were girls. Headmaster is in no doubt – girls are the better students.

Of the 94 new entrants to 6th standard, some are backward when they arrive but get special attention and soon pick-up. In general the subjects the majority of children have difficulty with are Maths and English. Both subjects receive extra tuition. This year two more streams have been added to the higher secondary syllabus – Agriculture and, Computer/Maths, additional to Biology/Maths and Computer/Commerce. All secondary children have 2 hours of Computer training weekly on 6 computers; 6th to 8th stds learn Painting and simple Word processing, 9th & 10th have more advanced Word processing and spreadsheet. More senior students will have computer training if it's part of their syllabus. Spoken English is practiced after formal school hours, using DVDs and having one-to-one conversations.

Like many, this school has switched from terms to trimesters up to 9th std, with the cited advantage that after studying a trimester's syllabus, it and its books are finished with, starting afresh on the next trimester. Current teaching no longer determines merit by examination, instead movement up through the standards is by age – "All pass, none fails." However at the end of each school year exams are held, but all pass. Only in 10th standard and upwards do they revert to quarterly, half-yearly and year-end exams focusing solely on merit.

Government appoints one Special Needs Teacher for the whole region to visit and advise schools. Teaching strategy divides the class into 3; the top level is A grade, of 90% and over and they will be given all they can take, maybe more, middle level around 70% or over (B&C grades) mostly will pass, while the lower level are the ones that struggle - they'll be given simplified syllabus in order to pass. This is where any child with learning difficulties is placed and where teachers here give special attention – with a pass level of only 35% in each of 5 subjects, most still have a chance.

HM expands on Life-Centred Education practiced here. All students have Physical Education, Computer Training and grow vegetables. They learn the basics of Organic Farming and learn the names, properties and uses of common herbs, including where they can be found on the greater campus. Paper used by the school is sorted to reclaim unused sheets and waste paper is pulped and converted into card for crafts. Girls learn tailoring; boys learn haircutting and basic electrical circuitry. They have attended 4 Health programmes in the year, including adolescent health and HIV awareness.

Strengths cited by HM include the extra time the school is open and helping students, beyond formal classes. School is open officially between 9:50 and 4:20 but since 9:00 the children have been present and receiving extra tuition from their teachers. Again after closing time they'll be working till 5pm. The children also wake early for a study session in their residential home. He's very proud of the well tended surroundings – buildings are sheltered by trees and punctuated by shrubs and borders making school peaceful, cool and attractive.

There are weaknesses. Being a private school, the children do receive free text books but don't qualify for all the Government incentives – uniforms, bag, sandals, note books and geometry set, or bursaries, or at higher secondary school, free bicycle and laptop!

A Parliamentary system operates in Girls' Home and at school, through a Prime Minister and Ministers for Food, Health, Education, Farm and Electrical. The Electrical Minister is responsible for noting and reporting failed lights and anything not working properly. Results during the year include more utensils for the kitchen, more hand tools for maintaining the gardens and, augmenting the breakfast menu (adding a rice variant some days to replace just idlis and dosa). The girls are very keen on their food and also enjoy snacks, fruit and herbal tea. Multivitamins, including iron are distributed weekly (and are to be provided for apprentices too, to supplement their often poor diet on college campuses).

Six-monthly medical check-ups are held at school, spotting and dealing with any needs or problems. One girl receives medication since her heart problem was diagnosed, one malnutrition case is now monitored and is improving as is a girl prone to fainting. All the school children enjoyed a trip to Rameswaram, travelling in the dark to spend the whole day there. After the school year ends a compulsory 5 day 'camp' for all the girls offers trekking in the surrounding hills, painting, drawing, drama, traditional drumming, dancing, first aid and spoken English practice. 5 apprentices joined in and, on other occasions apprentices who have qualified are welcome speakers; the girls place a high value on advice from their 'old students' – after all, they've been there, done that – and got the degree! Government officials including the CWC (Child Welfare Committee) made their routine visits. The top three standards received an awareness programme on child labour, marriage, child and sex abuse. The Home Committee met at school monthly, involving CWC, boys' and girls' wardens, their appointed Doctor and 2 child representatives from each home.

Most of the Girls' Home is based on the ground floor of the building, with rooms and corridors surrounding a central atrium; a first floor extension is the dining hall (doubling as meeting room or auditorium) and kitchen. Accommodation tally is 15 girls' rooms, two bathrooms, sick room, office, computer room, prayer hall and accommodation for Warden, Assistant Warden and one Cook who lives in. Approaching the main portal is reminiscent of entering a medieval castle, except there's no drawbridge. White ceilings and colourful paintwork lighten the interior and spirits, while keen gardeners have left their mark in the open centre. Outside and opposite the entrance, a free standing Bathroom block stands among trees. Needed to increase capacity, older girls have cubicles, while tanks hold water which younger girls scoop onto themselves to bathe or, all ages dip into for their laundry.



Lunch time

Two boreholes still keep pace with needs, for the girls and for minor gardening, but a third has given up. An automatic standby generator cuts in when mains power fails – less of a problem now. The solar water heater will be refurbished in May and returned to duty, providing kitchen hot water and taking the chill off the bath water. Only general maintenance has been required in the past year and in the year ahead four CCTV cameras will be installed (to satisfy government regulations). After many years heavy use, all 17 ceramic Indian-style (hole-in-the-floor) toilets will be renewed and space in the new bathing block converted to 5

toilets. Growing consumables such as fruit and coconut on site now comes under the Organic Farming Supervisor who 'sells' produce to the kitchen.

The calendar of events is quite full. Parents meetings slot in twice (and include vocational guidance); the festivals of Pongal, Puja and Divali are celebrated, so is Christmas, which is also Founder's Day, Independence, Republic and Children's Days. The Chief and District Education Officers have visited school and Girls Home, as have the Fire Officer and the Health Inspector. A local VIP donated a new blanket to every girl and a Dindigul VIP gave a special meal and scarves to all. A sugar factory donated a very welcome water purifier. All sleeping rooms are to get their own ceiling fan, thanks to a JHC donation.

Warden considers the weaknesses, chief of which is lack of connectivity and little Internet access. Although there's a cell phone tower in nearby Kadavur, Girls Home is in a bowl among the hills and cut off from any signal. Other weaknesses are ineligibility for Government freebies and poor public transport, with gaps in the bus service of between 3 and 5 hours.

Plusses abound but Warden singles out the close proximity of the school, the good food and the girls' happiness. There's plenty for them to do and a chance to widen their knowledge, for example learn a bit about growing crops, herbs or vegetables.

So, what's top of her Wish List? Thinking always about her girls, 17 toilets aren't enough and installing another 5 in the front bathing block will make all the difference.

The school is impressive, achieving high pass rates in simple, almost basic surroundings and owing more to good teaching, small classes and extra support than elaborate infrastructure. That extra support is a vital ingredient. In many schools early shortcomings can go unresolved and compound difficulties at later stages, whereas early effective coaching enhances confidence, subsequent performance (and attitude to study), leading to better results and wider opportunities. Spoken English, the key to better further education and prospects, mustn't be side tracked – apprentices at virtually all levels find they need English, even on Tamil-medium courses, to deal with technical vocabulary, exam questions and answers and, in some cases during practical placements.

I wrote some five years ago "We've come a long way from the austere and somewhat Dickensian Girls Town of the early days and, for partners ISS and JHC it's been something of a learning curve, with both coming from different beginnings but together dedicated to securing the best for the girls". Each year we are now seeing something nearer the finished product – girls who have changed their lives and can compete proudly and effectively in modern India. Feedback from the job-front and innovation within are stimulating change and, for the girls still passing through the system, prospects are even better. Without sponsors and donors, past and present, none of this could have happened.

Terry Quadling, Volunteer March 2016

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 the following postal address, or email via the charity website.

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