

## ANTHONY ABS CHILDRENS VILLAGE Annual Report 2015 – 2016



Especially noticeable now in the landscape approaching this children's village are sturdy little flat roofed homes in a two tone green livery, sometimes in clusters, sometimes singly, often embellished with fancy trimmings round doors or windows. These are the new breed of government-built homes for the poorer castes, but a far cry from the previous primitive concrete block-houses hidden away for the lowest caste, the Dhalits or 'untouchables'. They dot the landscape and surprisingly now there's one snuggling right up against the Childrens Village fence; we've got neighbours! The entrance from the road is welcoming, almost military. Smart painted double gates flanked by painted masonry walls, at the foot of which lush variegated shrubs fill borders defined by carefully angled white- painted bricks. Even the watchman opening the gates salutes. The good first impression continues within, complete with parade ground trimmings. It's autumn and leaves on the neem trees are turning, but the whole area is swept clean as a new pin. The youngest residential project of The Boys Town Society is in good shape and getting on with the job – helping our children change their lives.

The folk within are every bit as important as the facilities. Warden Saraswathi has five years in the post heads the team running this village; prior to this she served a total of 15 years in two other Childrens Villages. Four Foster Mothers each live with their group of children in their own cottage, providing that level of individual care and support a young child needs, attending to housework and laundry and, taking turn with shared duties such as the school run, cooking and shopping. Those with an education help the children with their studies. Two left recently; their posts remain vacant but hopefully will be filled. Foster Mothers are seldom recruited but are themselves vulnerable and come to the Boys Town Society in distressed circumstances, sometimes with their children. As Foster Mothers they both fill a valuable role and have the opportunity and security to bring order back into their lives; they too deserve their success stories. Nagajothi had separated from her husband and was homeless; a year later he returned and they have been reunited. Pandiselvi had been here 12 years throughout her son's primary and secondary schooling with Boys Town before he left to live with Granny and complete higher secondary school at home. He has now commenced his further education course and the time is right for her to rejoin the family – mission accomplished.

Historically Childrens Villages have normally taken primary schoolchildren from 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> standards. On occasion this has stretched to 6<sup>th</sup> std, to accommodate a population bulge of girls who can't be absorbed into Girls Town. In recent years intervention by government agencies has meant the children can only be admitted to a residential scheme in their district. There isn't a Girls Town in this district so to date girls remain in this Childrens Village, providing secondary education is accessible. Fortunately the local school has recently extended to 8<sup>th</sup> standard, with firm hopes of becoming a High School soon - all the way to 10<sup>th</sup> std and taking our girls with them.

At the end of the last school year out of a total of 54 children in all standards 1 to 7, 13 left from 5<sup>th</sup> standard and transferred to three Boys Towns. A further 9 left because of family migration, leaving 32 to commence the new school year in June 2015. Once again, no children dropped out – a proud characteristic of Saraswathi's style; if any child fails to return from leave or pleads



"homesickness" she counsels parents on their child's unique and not-to-be-missed opportunity and the child is persuaded, successfully, to hang in there. A new intake of 23 across standards 1 to 5 brought the total to 55, split 26 boys and 29 girls. This is well within the limit now applied by government regulations, which also required more segregation. Traditionally a Foster Mother's 'family' was comprised of boys and girls of all ages and replicating home life. Now primary school children in stds 1 – 5 are split up, boys and girls each have their own cottage and Foster Mother. Secondary school level girls, 6<sup>th</sup> std upwards have their own two cottages, until recently each with a foster mother. Temporarily all are using both rooms in one cottage, under the supervision of the Warden. All cottages were built with their own showers and toilets and communal facilities were added later. Now only primary children use the communal toilets and all use their cottages' showers. In the current school year, secondary schoolgirl occupancy is 12; for next school year they'll all move up one and be joined by 6 girls from primary into 6<sup>th</sup> std, totalling 18.

All children attend the Panchayat Union Middle School in the adjacent village of J Puddukottai. It's a 500 metre walk across the fields with a Foster Mother to take them and bring them home. Despite the widening age range, fortunately they all observe the same times, so one school run suffices. Warden visits the school weekly to follow-up on each child's progress and deal with any issues arising. Head Mistress is confident she'll be given High School status, enabling her students to stay for 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> standard and for their coveted Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) - a great asset and convenience for the local area. June 2016 is the hoped-for launch day but with national elections in May.....well, watch this space. She has already introduced English medium, currently the only option for the three lowest standards but creeping upwards one standard each year; it will hit the ground running (along with its students) at 4<sup>th</sup> std June 2016, regardless of politicians. Internal exams for every standard have been reintroduced, albeit still with the requirement that all pass – none fails.

Current roll for all standards is 203 with 10 teachers. Being a Government school, all pupils receive free uniforms, sandals, school bag, text and note books, geometry box and....for the poorest, lunch. As these are political incentives, quality and availability can be disappointing. Stds 6 to 8 have weekly computer training for an hour each, but except for the English-medium standards and normal syllabus content of the English subject, there's no time for any extra focus on spoken English. Having said that, when we later visited every class, they were all engaged in reading from their English text books and there was no shortage of lively lads and pert poppets wanting to come forward and strut their stuff – loudly and confidently. Their excerpts were characteristically 'moral'; a story about a rich man carrying a load and the poor man helping him and, the true story of four famous people who were backward at school with dyslexia but triumphed – step forward Einstein! Headmistress reminds us that next day is International Women's Day and cites girls as the better students, especially those from our Childrens Village; in general there's no difference between our children and those from local families.

Again this year English is generally the most difficult subject, except for those in English-medium – they now have trouble keeping up with the Tamil syllabus! Unusually Maths is no problem at any level. Any new intake from outside into 6<sup>th</sup> standard, the start of secondary school, has a few with deficiencies, including one or two of our girls. Our children all do their homework well. Generally their performance has improved over last year, despite having no formal Tuition Teacher. At extra-curricular activities they excel. The increasing age range of our children's village is no detriment to the older girls – teaching and helping their juniors is helpful to both. Satisfied though she is with our children's performance, when HM pressed conceded that they would benefit from extra tuition, in spoken English, Maths and General Knowledge. Top of her wish list is the desire for more general knowledge – currently they can only fit it in every 15 days and she rates it important. We tried that out on the top class with mixed results but having fun. Following the setting sun from Kanniyakumari, at the southern tip of India, reached some amazing places like Japan and Norway, at which point my translator spilt the beans. Mother Theresa's nationality scored some intelligent guesses but HM couldn't contain herself over the Indian statesman who spent time as a young man in Africa. General Knowledge can knit together much syllabus knowledge, fit seamlessly into many extra-mural activities and perhaps be instrumental in scoring that vital extra mark at exam or interview.

Back in the Children's Village, an hour is set aside every evening on schooldays for homework and study for all standards, while the secondary school girls have a further half hour after the younger children have gone to bed at 8,30; in this slot they complete any set (non-academic) projects from school before their 'lights out'. Two teachers from the Devangar Higher Secondary School in the area and with which Warden has a cordial relationship, come as volunteers to give an hour of extra tuition across all syllabus subjects. For two hours every Saturday morning Warden teaches basic computer skills (typing and painting) in groups of five for half an hour each, on two desktop computers in the library; any one group thus has training about twice a month. In the evening she runs two hours of spoken English, using educational DVDs. On Sunday mornings for two hours a volunteer couple from UK now living in the area and supporting BTS, help the children practice spoken English. Younger children up to 4<sup>th</sup> std are finding Tamil difficult, especially now the first three levels are English-medium; 5<sup>th</sup> and up find most difficulty with English, except for one girl in 6<sup>th</sup> std. Unusually none has problems with Maths.

It's not all work at the Childrens Village; the playground equipment gets a good hammering, numerous ball and team games keep them leaping or there's just skipping. Indoors they switch to board games, card games or Monopoly. Club activities include crafts, drawing, with collections of just about anything – coins, stamps, stones, leaves, flowers. Given Headmistress's enthusiasm for General Knowledge and its value for whole-child development, thought might be given to leisure activities with 'syllabus value.' For example stamps and coins are just asking to be linked to geography, with spin-off for maths, history, natural history and the environment. The library attracts the browser while cultural dancing is a speciality of the village. Aficionados of the great outdoors can cultivate the kitchen garden, go bird watching or join the science club (some of their experiments have water squirting so are banished outside). At the Boys Town Society's Pongal celebrations mid January, they were sports champion in their class for the fourth year running and scooped Best Warden for the third year, Best Childrens Village for the second year and Best Foster Mother. Six children participated in a cultural programme at a Rajapalayam Higher Secondary School and came home with 1<sup>st</sup> prize in the speech contest. In a quiz about traffic rules in a road safety campaign at school, our boy took the Rs 3,000 1<sup>st</sup> prize, sponsored by a motor cycle manufacturer, Hero. Competing against 89 schools in the local area, our team came home with firsts in 2 levels of Public Speaking and, Drawing, plus a few seconds too.

Parent's Day brings relatives, siblings, local community leaders and school visitors, both to see the village and join in the programme.



**Picnic to Dindigul Park.**

A Chief Minister and a Speaker lead 6 Ministers comprising the Parliament. They are elected for six months, then train up their successors. Each has routine duties according to their portfolio – Speaker, Finance, Education, Health, Sports, Food and Agriculture. Items may be put forward for their monthly meeting either by the children or the Warden – she monitors and advises the meetings. Recent measures included helping students who are weak in their studies and, deciding places to visit on their annual Long Tour. This is for two days and one night away and the agreed itinerary was Polachi, Aliyar Dam, Amaravathi Dam and Palani where there's a famous temple. One-day picnics took them to Dindigul (new even to many local children), Andipatti Anjanigar temple and other local scenic or cultural spots. They attended a Clean India programme at their school and, in the Childrens Village hosted a Dengue fever awareness campaign and one against plastic bags. Soon the plastic bags of India, like the great wall of China, will be visible from space (with a black hole that is Childrens Village).

At the medical check up twice in the year at school, no problems emerged, nor were there any illnesses or injuries during the year. Vitamins and Iron supplements are routinely given twice weekly and vermifuge tablets twice yearly. Warden counsels all children on health issues, with two sessions focussed on the adolescent girls.

At the rear of the Childrens Village are six acres of fruit trees. Most are Amla, producing a tart gooseberry-like fruit for making pickles; the crop was contracted out for Rs 35,000. Sappota, Banana and Papaya were consumed on-site and the kitchen garden produced about Rs 6,000 in value, reducing bought-in vegetables to Rs 30,000. The large central pond is dry and fish are confined to an aquarium on the Warden's veranda. Two lively pups live in the dog house.

Of the original ten two-roomed cottages with showers and toilets, intended to house 'families' of children each with their foster mother, four continue to house children but now split by gender and age. Warden has her own cottage, with office, 2 are set aside as boy's and girls' sick room but happily seldom used, one is used for club activities, one is storage and one remains empty and unused. Separate buildings house the library and computer room, the dual kitchens (gas and wood fired) and, the auditorium. The watchman has his own little gatehouse and the open air communal bathing area is now only used for laundry. Sleeping accommodation and library are fitted with fans, lights and mosquito screens and two inverters provide



**At Library.**

uninterrupted power to essential lights and fans during power cuts, now less frequent. A new 700 foot deep bore-well delivers adequate water for the children's use but not for irrigating fruit trees. A piped water and drainage scheme is planned for the adjoining village and it's hoped work will start in the next 2 to 3 months (Election permitting?). Septic tanks will no longer be required (or require frequent emptying), as the Childrens Village drains will connect directly with the new network. Potable water will flow every 3 days and be stored in tanks for the children's use; borewell water will be released for irrigation which should restore the income generating capacity of the fruit trees and hearten the kitchen garden team. The Rain Water Harvesting provisions for every building are said to be in working order again and surface water entering the upper boundaries of the site has been diverted to minimise erosion. Over the past year four buildings have been redecorated outside and dodgy water and drain pipes replaced; remaining buildings are to be redecorated this year. Earlier insistence by government agencies that the entire area be walled appears to have given way to acceptance of just the fence – the site is clearly too big for the envisaged wall. Various committees and units continue to demand reports and statistics, occasionally visiting but being satisfied with what they find. Every three months their "Home Committee" meets here with teachers and children but nothing of consequence results.

Warden's assessment of her Children's Village's strengths and weaknesses pay tribute to the excellent performance and behaviour of her charges – "they study well and cooperate fully". To that must be added the quality of Warden's own leadership, especially in coping with changes arising from inclusion of secondary school girls on a site intended for primary children only. Don't lets forget their school – it's the best of both worlds: a Government school for resources (including upgrading) and freebies but a headmistress and staff who are real teachers and care about their children. The local community and neighbours too are supportive and don't cause any problems; having a few free-range chickens once attracted local dogs – now no hens means no dogs – the dogs solved that problem! Government is doing more to help the poorest so there's less economic hardship to bring them here – they have to be in dire straights. So, what's at the top of Saraswathi's own Wish List? Just that she can continue here with her children, clearly doing what she enjoys most.

Written by Terry Quadling, Volunteer 7<sup>th</sup> 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](http://www.facebook.com/JoeHomanCharity) or [www.joehoman.org.uk](http://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.

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