



April 2019

Annual Visit Report April 2019 - By Muriel Thomson



Cycling through India: This year I combined my visit to the St. Joseph Centre, in Chennai with a cycling adventure down India from Delhi to Goa. Throughout this 3,000 Kilometre adventure I travelled through many remote villages. This allowed me the opportunity to meet the people and visit some village schools. It was eye opening to see how far India still has to go particularly as regards education, sanitation, housing and transport links. However it is encouraging that the present government recognises

that ensuring access to quality education for all, in particular for the poor and rural population, is central to the economic and social development of India. Massive improvements have taken place in education in the last three years. Government schools were in a very bad state. Toilets were non-functional, there was no access to safe drinking water, furniture was broken and buildings dilapidated. Many classes had more than 100 students and a lack of teachers to conduct the classes. In short, government schools had a very gloomy atmosphere. With the education budget doubled, buildings being renovated and a new teacher training programme this has already shown a big improvement in exam results. As I cycled through the remote villages the stark living conditions were very apparent. In rural India more than five hundred million people still live on less than a dollar a day, most of them living in terrible conditions. 60% of the world's open defecation happens in India, and 70% of households in rural India defecate in the open. The Government introduced a national sanitation campaign in 2014 to clean up towns and villages. It provides subsidies to vulnerable social groups to help them construct toilets at home. The plan was to end open defecation by 2019. However an education programme will be needed because Hindu practices of purity and pollution, India's history of untouchability, and the ongoing caste system, prevent widespread use of the simple latrines commonly used in other developing countries. The infrastructure of the country is another problem. Cycling through the towns and villages was a real challenge with the narrow potholed roads, open drains and dodging pigs, cows, goats, camels, tuk tuks and motor bikes coming at me from all directions. Things were no better on the open roads where I was gobsmacked at the vast amount of new construction that was going on. It was a bone rattling cycle experience! However the big improvements in the infrastructure will make a huge difference to the villagers by enabling them to connect with the towns and cities. Mumbai India's most populated city of over 22 million has started a campaign "Clean Mumbai, Green Mumbai" and its clearly working.



Visiting a village private school on my cycle trip.



Girls ready for school at St. Joseph Centre.

The Projects: "The St. Joseph Centre Project was initiated in 2006 after I spent a month in India doing voluntary work with the children at the St. Joseph's Social Service Centre. It proved to be a life changing experience for me in many ways and after living at the St. Joseph Centre for a month I had to do something to help. I just couldn't turn my back on them and walk away. In recent years I have become involved in four other Projects in Tamil Nadu South India. The Projects are The Koodu Trust, GVC, The CHES Home & The Prema Vasam Home." *Muriel*

* 100% of all donations go directly to The 5 Projects.

* The Projects support children in Tamil Nadu, Southern India.

* The Projects provide for the Health, Education, Welfare & Social needs of the children.

Visiting the GVC Project in Dharmapuri:

The Grace Vision Centre (GVC) Project was brought to the attention of the Little Drops Charity Trust a number of years ago. This is a Christian organisation run by Pastor Manoharan that works with the rural poor and tribal communities assisting in the children’s education and development. I first visited this Project back in 2016. After-school classes are provided by teachers catering for around 180 village children. These particular villages are housing some of the lowest caste families where the breadwinners are mainly funeral drum beaters or cobblers. I was so impressed with the work being done by GVC that I decided to become involved. On my return to Dharmapuri this year



At the afterschool class in one of the villages.

I had the opportunity to meet with some of the former students of these afterschool classes. I was delighted to hear that one was in her first year of nursing college, one studying engineering and one was about to complete his final government exams and hopes to go into medicine. Little Drops Charity Trust have financed the building of a small medical clinic attached to the GVC Church. The medical clinic will provide local assistance for the many families from the villages who are unable to travel the distances to the nearest towns to see a doctor. We hope soon to employ a doctor to operate the clinic for four hours daily. In the meantime the clinic will be run by a full time nurse which we have agreed to fund. Part of the nurses duties will be to conduct Health Education Programmes for the children and their parents in the various villages.



Medical Camp at the new Medical Clinic.

A Sweet Story for Annie back at the CHES Home:

Annie, who you will know from my previous newsletters, suffers from various health problems which she contracted from her mother who died shortly after Annie was born. Annie who has glycogen storage disease was admitted to hospital for a liver biopsy back in 2013 which sadly diagnosed her HIV positive. It was decided then that it was in the best interests of Annie’s health to move her to a Home where she would get specialised medical treatment. We were very fortunate to find a wonderful Home specifically for children with HIV. The Home which is funded by Emirates Airlines and run by CHES (Community Health Education Society) caters to the needs of orphans of AIDS, children infected and affected by HIV. It provides full medical care, a small hospital and a counsellor as well as leisure facilities.



Annie back with her friends at CHES Home.

Annie was given constant medical care there and her health improved dramatically. After five years in the CHES Home her father felt with her improved health and with him having secured a job that he would be able to look after Annie. Annie left the CHES Home to live with her father back in Chennai. Last year her father was involved in bad accident when he was knocked down by a motorbike and unfortunately suffered severe head injuries. He spent two months in hospital and has not yet fully recovered from his injuries. Consequently this had a detrimental effect on Annie's health as her father was unable to ensure that she was given her necessary medical treatment. We were very concerned about Annie's deterioration of health. After talks with her father he asked if we could get Annie a place back at the CHES Home. We were very lucky to secure a place for Annie before I set off on my cycle trip. I visited the CHES Home a couple of days before leaving India and was amazed at how much Annie's health had improved in just six weeks. We hope now that she’s settled in that this will be her home for the future.

Support for The Prema Vasam Home: Prema Vasam Home in Chennai provides residential care for mentally & physically challenged and less fortunate children. It is a Home for over 200 children, 130 who are mentally & physically challenged. It is a non profitable organisation that cares for children irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Many of the children had been abandoned on the streets in Chennai and without the Prema Vasam support would have no where to call a home. On my initial visit in 2017 I was struck by how worthwhile an organisation this was. Over the past few years we have given support in small ways with Christmas gifts, a picnic day out for the children and school uniforms for the 70+ school going children. I would like to give a special thank you to the Rotary Club of Westhill and District who held a curry night and donated the proceeds to the Prema Vasam Home. With their support the Home will be able to purchase some very important pieces of equipment that will be used daily by the physiotherapists who work with the physically challenged children.



Visiting the PremaVasam Home in 2017

Koodu Trust Tuition Centres & Health Programme: I had the opportunity to initially visit the Koodu Trust Projects six years ago. The Trust supports the local farmers and people of the villages in the Nilgiris District in Tamil Nadu. Over the last six years we have supported Koodu Trust in various ways by providing Bio Gas plants to some farmers, providing sewing classes for the women, computer classes for school children and we even donated two goats which were named after my sister and I! During the terrible floods in 2018 funds were sent to provide a sleeping mattress, study materials, groceries & kitchen utensils for some flood victim families whose homes had been damaged. For the past five years we have given support to the Trust by funding six Student Development Centres in the Nilgiris Hill villages. The majority of the people are Tribal and Sri Lankan repatriates. Most of them are working in the tea plantations as labourers or coolies. Their children have to walk 4 to 5 km to their schools. At the government village schools there is not sufficient teachers for every subject to teach the children. The Student Development Centres provide high quality after school education to the children from the poorest families and ensures every child achieves basic competencies in Tamil, English and Maths. Monthly reports are provided to us by Koodu Trust and these are showing significant improvements in the learning abilities of the children. This year we will also provide a Health and Personal Hygiene Programme to the students in 7th & 8th standard at four of the government schools in the villages. The aim of the Programme is to convey the importance of personal hygiene and thereby build up a disease free society. The Programme will discuss various topics such as environmental pollution, hygiene and sexual related disease of women. These Health Programmes will be run with the support of nurses from the Government Health Centre.



Koodu Team give supplies to Flood victims.

What the St. Joseph Centre Project covers: This Project funds the school fees at English medium Schools for 25 children from the St. Joseph's Centre and the poor neighbourhood area. It funds all the Hostel Care needs for 30 orphaned and semi-orphaned children of the St. Joseph's Social Service Centre. School uniforms are provided for all the children. We employ teachers to assist with homework, and a driver to transport the children to school. College fees are funded for seven older children of the St. Joseph Centre. A Health Programme and medical care is provided for all the children. Christmas gifts, an Annual Day Out, and other treats are given to all the children and staff. The complete renovation of the building has been funded to bring the St. Joseph Centre up to a suitable living standard. Support is also provided to 4 other Projects in Tamil Nadu: Koodu Trust, GVC, CHES Home & Prema Vasam Home.



Our Sponsored Montfort School students.

Montfort School update: We support 25 students on the English Education Programme most attend Montfort School in Chennai. Five of these students are about to sit their 10th Standard Government exams. It's a stressful time as they must pass in all subjects to be able to continue the final two years. Montfort School in an endeavour to improve the school's status has increased the pass mark to be achieved for students to be promoted. Students are feeling the stress with a new syllabus to cope with & Government exams now taking place in 5th, 8th, 10th, 11th & 12th Standard. It's no surprise that the school has now employed a counsellor to assist the children.

The Crèche closes as Indian culture changes: I was saddened to learn a decision had been made to close the crèche at the St. Joseph Centre. The crèche had been set up by the late Sister Bakkiam in 1984 when she came to Chennai as a young Fransican nun. She had been moved by the plight of young children who were left roaming the streets on their own while their mothers toiled endless hours, earning barely enough to survive on. She started the crèche by taking 40 children off the streets, providing them with nutritious food, medical care and an education. However India has developed greatly over the last few years. The country has prospered and the people particularly those in the cities are now in better paid jobs. Families are now having only one or two children as opposed to five or six. Mothers are able to seek full time employment giving two wages coming into the home. English has recently been included in the curriculum in the Government schools. Parents now realize that an education in English is their passage out of poverty and want their children to go to English Medium schools. Many of the schools in the area of the St. Joseph Centre have introduced crèches in an endeavor to capture the children to their schools for future education. The parents are choosing this as an option because places at English Medium private schools are at a premium. When I first visited India in 2006 we had almost 100 children attending the crèche. Numbers have dwindled over the last few years and are now down to around 40 with many of them having to be drafted in from other areas. The crèche previously had some financial support from the Red Cross but two years ago this was rescinded. After weighing up the full situation it was decided that the only viable outcome was to close it down. The crèche has touched the lives of thousands of children over the last 35 years and has served as a very important part of the community but the changes taking place in India dictate that it is sadly no longer a requirement or a viable proposition.



Brothers at the crèche.



5 Medals for Vignesh.

Thank you to all our supporters: I would like to thank all who have donated to these Projects and the Sponsors who have committed to supporting children on the English Education Programme. Without your generosity and support we would not have been able to improve the health, education, welfare and living conditions for all the children. I thank Sister Jayaseeli & the staff of the St Joseph's Social Service Centre, the 'Little Drops Charity Trust' in the UK, our 'Little Drops Charity Trust' Director in Chennai and all the staff at Montfort School. My thanks also go to Pastor Manoharan of GVC in Dharmapuri, Dr Sunny of Koodu Trust in Nilgiris District, The staff of CHES Home & all at the Prema Vasam Home in Chennai.

Little Drops Charity Trust—Registered Charity Number: SC028069

Projects : *St. Joseph Centre *Koodu Trust *GVC *CHES *Prema Vasam Homes.