



April 2020

Annual Visit Report April 2020 - By Muriel Thomson



India in lockdown since March 24th.

India update- Covid-19 pandemic: I was fortunate to be able to complete my annual visit to the various Projects we support in South India and get back to the UK before the Covid-19 started to spread around the world and flights were disrupted. When I was in India they had only a few confirmed cases there. Since then as in other countries things are beginning to escalate and now more than 20,000 people have tested positive and over 600 people have died. The virus is now beginning to spread through dense communities with new clusters of infection being reported every day. At the end of March with zero preparation the Indian Government gave only 4 hours' notice for the whole country to go into total lockdown for 21 days. All buses, trains and other means of transport were immediately halted. All over India millions of migrant workers who found themselves jobless and homeless were left with no option but to exodus from the cities and walk for miles back to their villages. These casual workers are the backbone of the big city economies. Most are employed on very low wages living from day to day working as labourers on building sites, cooking food, serving in restaurants, cutting hair, cleaning and plumbing toilets among other things. It is estimated there are over 100 million migrant workers living in squalid housing in congested ghettos and depending on handouts who are trapped and can't escape to their villages. In countries such as India where so many of its people are living in such cramped conditions it is impossible for them to achieve any sort of social distancing. Many households have no running water and regular hand-washing opportunities are just not available. The country is also coming into their very hot summer season which brings with it with various other diseases such as dengue fever, chikungunya and malaria. With the lockdown extended for another 3 weeks the crisis continues in India. We will be monitoring the children and families we support. Their well being is our top priority and any experiencing hardship due to Covid-19 will be considered for assistance.

Visiting Annie at the CHES Home: I first met Annie back in 2009 when she was 2 years old and along with her older brother and sister was taken into care at the St. Joseph Centre in Chennai. Annie was in poor health. After numerous hospital tests it was found that she suffered various health problems which she had contracted from her mother who died shortly after Annie was born. Annie was diagnosed with glycogen storage disease and then after a liver biopsy it was sadly diagnosed she was also HIV positive. It was decided 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 an excellent 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 around 70 orphans of AIDS, children infected and affected by HIV. It provides full medical care, a small hospital and a counsellor. There is a school on the campus as well as

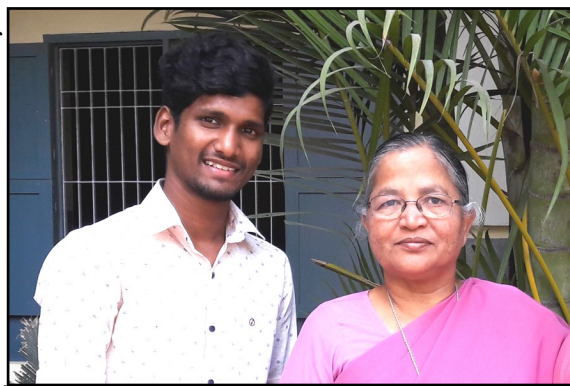


Annie and her older sister Angel.

leisure facilities. After a number of years in the CHES Home Annie's father felt with her improved health and with him having secured a job that he would be able to care for Annie himself. Annie left the CHES Home to live with her father back in Chennai. However 2 years ago her father had a bad accident with a motorbike and spent months in hospital being unable to work which lead to the family situation breaking down. Her father was unable to ensure that she was given her necessary care and medical treatment. Consequently this had a detrimental effect on Annie's health. We were very concerned about Annie's deterioration of health. While I was in Chennai last year we were fortunate to secure a place for Annie back at the CHES Home. Annie has been given constant medical care there and her health has improved greatly. However the nature of Annie's health problems mean she will always have spells when her health is poor and she is unable to cope with school. Annie who is now 14 years old will continue to live at the CHES Home and whenever she is able she will attend the school on the campus where she is being given an English education. We continue to give support to the CHES Home and when I visited this year along with Annie's older sister Angel we presented the Home with new bedding for all the children.

Cyril loves College life:

Cyril who is the youngest of four children was taken into care at St. Joseph Centre when his father died. His other siblings being of school age were able to remain at home with their mother. He was only 4 years old when I first visited the St. Joseph Centre. In 2006 we placed Cyril on our English Education Programme and enrolled him at a local school in Chennai. He very quickly picked up English language. He was a good student, studied hard and gained good grades throughout his school days in Chennai. Then at the age of 14, with a change in family circumstances Cyril was rehabilitated back to his village to live with his mother and other siblings. It was a very difficult time for Cyril having to leave all the other boys and girls at St. Joseph Centre that he'd grown up with. We enrolled him in an English school in his village and continued with our support. His new school Head Mistress who was aware of his background circumstances took Cyril under her wing. She was always there for him when he needed advice and help. She kept a watchful eye over him and she arranged extra homework classes for him in the evenings and ensured he always had a good meal afterwards. Her care paid off and Cyril passed all his Government exams and secured a place at college for a 3 year BSC Physics course. Now having completed his first year at college he is loving life. Every year since he returned home I've taken the 15 hour round trip to visit him. We spent a lovely day in his village where we went for a picnic then visited his former Head Mistress at her school where we were



Cyril with his former Head Mistress.



Cyril's former school students put on a dance display.

treated to a superb dance display. The colleges and schools are all closed now during the Covid-19 lockdown and exams are postponed which will unsettle Cyril and the other students. The Government plans for the exams to be conducted when they resume after the lockdown however the developments of Covid-19 in India will determine whether this happens now the lockdown has been extended and cases are escalating by the day.

St. Joseph Centre & other Projects:

The St. Joseph Centre is a Home in Chennai for thirty orphaned and semi-orphaned children. The Project funds all the Hostel Care needs for the 30 children living in the Home. It funds the school fees at English medium Schools for 25 children from the St. Joseph's Centre and the poor neighbourhood area. 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 have been funded for 12 children. 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. Over several years 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: The Koodu Trust in Nilgiris Hills area - The Grace Vision Centre, Dharmapuri - The CHES Home, Chennai - Prema Vasam Home, Chennai.



Girls of St. Joseph Centre—Chennai.

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

* The 5 Projects support children in Tamil Nadu, Southern India.

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

Grace Vision Centre: GVC in Dharmapuri 5 hours west of Chennai is a Christian organisation that works with the rural poor and tribal people. I visited them in 2016 and we later put in place teachers to run afterschool classes for 180 village children. The children are from the lowest caste families where the breadwinners are mainly funeral drum beaters or cobblers. The classes have proved invaluable and many of the children who have attended have gone on to secure places in colleges. We fund a nurse to run a clinic (built by Little Drops) and she conducts Health Programmes in the villages. I was unable to travel to Dharmapuri this time but I receive regular updates from Pastor Manoharan who runs the Centre. Only last week he gave me the news that they were supplying relief packages to families in the villages effected by COVID-19.



Giving COVID-19 Relief supplies.

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 in Chennai, 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 Dr Sunny of Koodu Trust in Nilgiris District, Pastor Manoharan of Grace Vision Centre in Dharmapuri, 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.



A trip to Nilgiris Hills to our Projects: I had the opportunity to initially visit Dr Sunny of the Koodu Trust Projects six years ago. The Trust supports the local people of the villages in the Nilgiris Hills in Tamil Nadu. Over the last six years we have given support to Koodu Trust in various ways. We have providing Bio Gas plants to some farmers, sewing classes for women, computer classes for school children and we donated a couple of goats. For five years now we have supported the Trust by funding six Student Development Centres in the villages. The majority of the children are either Tribal or the children of the many tea pickers living in the area. The children have to walk 4 to 5 km to the small government schools up in the hills. They don't have sufficient teachers to teach every subject. The Student Development Centres provide high quality after school education to the children from the poorest families and ensure every child achieves basic competencies in Tamil, English and Maths. We are issued with monthly reports from Koodu Trust. These reports are showing significant improvements in the learning abilities of the children. I visited three of the Development Centres and was very impressed with the level of teaching the children were receiving. It is obviously a very worthwhile Project and ensures the children receive the necessary level of education. We also provide a Health and Personal Hygiene Programme for students in 7th & 8th Standard at four of the 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 with the support of nurses from the Government Health Centre discusses various topics such as environmental pollution, hygiene and sexual related diseases. I sat in on one of the Programmes and could see how much the youngsters were benefitting from the high level of information and support.



Children of one of our Development Centres.

Montfort School update:

25 students are supported on our English Education Programme most of whom attend Montfort School in Chennai. All five of the students who sat their 10th Standard Government exams last summer successfully gained pass marks. This has allowed them go on to complete 11th & 12th Standard at the school which will in time enable them to secure college places and better jobs in the future. The schools have now had to close during the Covid-19 lockdown and some of the final exams have had to be postponed which has been very unsettling for the students. The Government have taken the decision to give all children up to 8th Standard an automatic pass for promotion. The 10-12th Standard exams are planned to take place when the schools resume after the lockdown.



Our Montfort School students—growing up fast.

With the lockdown now extended the developments of Covid-19 will determine whether this is able to happen. With 10 of our students due to sit their 10th Standard exams it's a stressful time for them as these exams are very important. They must gain a pass in all subjects to be able to continue their final two years of school. Keertiga is one of our students due to sit her 10th Standard exams. Keertiga lives with her mother and younger brother. Her mother who earns a low wage doing domestic work has been unable to support her children's education since their father passed away. Keertiga has been on the English Education Programme since her kindergarten years in 2006. She has studied well throughout her school days and was delighted to gain top marks in her class for English in the last Term exams—gaining 86%. She's an avid reader and was very proud to win the Montfort School 'Consistent Reader Award' for the second year running—this award is given to the school student who uses the school library most often.



Keertiga wins Award.

Pongal festival & a picnic day out:

While I was in Chennai it was Pongal Festival. Pongal is a four day long harvest festival of thanksgiving celebrated in Tamil Nadu southern India. Pongal is one of the most important popular Hindu festivals of the year. Over the four days people clear out their houses—a sort of Spring Clean, farmers decorate their cows and people visit their relatives in the villages. The festival takes its name from the Tamil word meaning "to boil, overflow". It's held in January during the season when rice and other cereals, sugar-cane, and turmeric are harvested. On the second day of Pongal the people wear traditional dress and a puja or act of ceremonial



Children enjoy a picnic day out at the Fun Park.



Children dance while the Pongal Pot boils.

worship is performed. Rice is boiled in milk outdoors in an earthenware pot and is then symbolically offered to the sun-god. This is traditionally the new harvest rice with milk, cashew nuts, ginger and sugar added. Being sticky and sweet it's naturally one of the children's favourites. One of the first things we did starting up this Project was to treat the children and staff to a picnic day out. This has been done every year now since 2006 and is always a highlight on their calendar. With them all dressed up in their best clothes we piled into the bus with great excitement and headed off to a local Fun Park. After a morning of fun on the rides we had a lovely picnic lunch then the children enjoyed endless hours in the water park.