

School for Tribal Children, Manjampatti (TRUWDES) – A site visit report

[This is a brief report; a detailed one will follow]

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Photos - <http://picasaweb.google.co.in/chennai.asha/ManjampattiJul09>

It had been two years since my last visit to Manjampatti and I was looking forward to this one. The school and the tribal hamlets had been facing quite a few issues over the past two years including government's plan in 2008 and 2009 to relocate people out of Manjampatti into the plains. There was and continues to be stiff resistance from the people, and the relocation plans have been shelved (for now, at least). The school's existence and functioning was uncertain last year and so, I waited until there was some clarity before making the visit. Before the trek up, I met up with Mr. Anthony, an ex-teacher at Manjampatti, Mr. Robert, a staff with TRUWDES and Mr. Balaji, a colleague of Mr. Anthony's at Udumalpet at about 6:30am of 17th July. We reached Chembakadu, a small hamlet about 35km and an hour away from Udumalpet at about 9am and noticed that the stream was flowing very full as we walked to the trailhead because of recent rains in this part of the country. There are three trails to get to Manjampatti, two of which don't involve crossing deep streams but are much longer. We decided to take the trail which has 3-4 stream crossings but is shorter; we started on the trek at about 9:45am after breakfast. We hit Thalinj, a village at the foothills where motor-able road ends, and enquired some villagers about the stream depths. They said it wasn't too bad and so we were on our way. After a couple of 3-foot deep crossings, expertly judged by Antony and Robert, and a couple of pit-stops, we reached Manjampatti at 1:30pm.

We were welcomed by Mr. Alexander, the trustee, and the two teachers. The school was in session with only 27 children. As it happened, there was a caste-related clash between two families in Manjampatti leading to violence and so police troops had been deployed in the village for the past 10 days or so. They stayed at the school during the entire time and so the school was not functioning until the day we arrived. I introduced myself to the kids and started interacting with them. I could right away see that the children were more interactive compared to my last visit. I asked them a few Maths & Science puzzles and questions, and also asked them to recite some Tamil kurals. A few kids stood out in being able to do long multiplication and long divisions. Some younger kids volunteered to sing some rhymes as well. The teachers try and adhere to a fixed timetable and work like any regular school. Kids are grouped by class forms, but many forms are mixed based on subject - particularly primary classes with ABL methodology. ABL is not used entirely since they don't have access to materials and so the learning is a combination of both teacher-centric and child-centric methods. There is a good bit of rote learning as part of the teaching methodology but overall, I felt that the academic training of kids has definitely gotten better since my last visit.

The next morning, we walked up to Muduvakkudy and met a few parents. We also had a long chat with the village head; he was very aware about the need for children's education and promised to continue cooperating with TRUWDES. We told that it is unacceptable for parents to take their kids away from school for extended periods of time as happens now and he told us that he would speak with the parents about it and do his best to stop that from happening. We tried to talk to him about the need for all kids to eat together and so on, but he refused the very idea because of caste reasons (details in the para below). After the trek, we went back to the school. I observed the classes handled by the teachers and also spent some more time with the kids. We then assembled outside the school for some photos following which the kids were let off for lunch.

Drop-outs is still an issue when kids hit age 10-12. Lot of folks here do farming, and there is no access to external labor, and kids past age 12 many times help out in the farms with basic duties like guarding the field (including during the night, from elephants and other animals), chasing birds and pests away, etc. Girls sometimes get taken away to cotton mills in Tiruppur on contract work to work on weaving etc -- about Rs1500 p.m. for 3 years of contract + Rs50000 if they stay the entire time [middle school or high school girls]. 10-15 kids stay at the hostel each night, which is down from about 25, mainly because the facilities in the shed are limited. The cook by name Chaplin is very good and comes from Moongilpallam. The Muduvakkudy tribe folks don't want their kids to eat the food he cooks nor want their kids to stay in

the school as long as he is the cook because he comes from a "lower caste". Alex needs to decide how to go ahead with this dilemma.

Alex has been trying to get the government involved, to have officials visit the school from Kodaikanal and officially recognize the school but so far it has been avoided by the officials as it is too much of a hike for them. The school has been recognized as a bridge course and can provide TC to students who want to move on to regular schools in the plains. But official recognition as a school needs 21 certifications which will take a lot of time/effort but they are working towards that. Government does provide materials once in a while albeit on a request basis as nothing happens on its own.

One tin-roofed mud-walled structure that belongs to the village has been serving as the school building and hostel for about 15 kids & two teachers at night for the past several years. The structure has deteriorated very badly since my last visit and is certainly in urgent need of renovation. Asha-SV did allocate funds to build a new structure two years back but that plan was put aside because of possible relocation. So, the plan now is to renovate the current structure only – provide better flooring, some windows, replace part of the roofing, more protection from weather, and some comfort for the kids. Alex plans to re-use some materials (bamboo, tin sheets, etc) from the current structure, get bricks burnt & made in Manjampatti itself and to procure minimal material from Udumalpet for this renovation work. The head mason needs to be brought from the plains though labourers can be hired from the village, and the work needs to be taken up before the onset of north-east monsoons.

Overall, I think TRUWDES is doing a wonderful job of running this school at Manjampatti and managing all the challenging issues including terrain, weather, forest officials, people, etc to provide education for the children here. I feel that Asha-SV can be proud being part of this effort and should ensure that the children from Manjampatti and nearby should get the education they deserve.