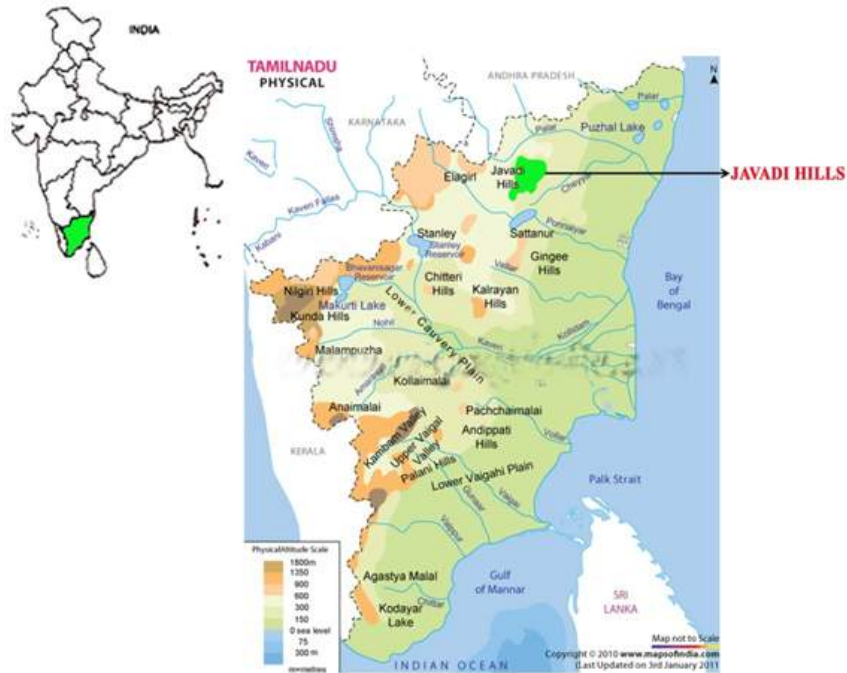


VISITS TO THE BUDDHA SMILES CLASSES OF THE TRIBAL AREAS: February 2016



Amethi is a forest reserve and access is limited due to that and the high incidence of sandal-wood smuggling in the area.

We drove through winding roads into a valley nestled in high hills, some of them solid rock. A stream meanders along the valley floor and that we have to cross to access small villages snuggled against the foot of the hills.

We will say a lot about the social context of these villagers elsewhere but for now, they have many problems such as alcoholism in their menfolk, very high unemployment and low educational attainments, especially among their girls.

First we visited Palaparambattu village but the class was not gathered so we went to Sattampattu Village and came back after dark which limited our ability to interact.

Sattampattu Village, Polur Talak, Dist. Thiruvannamalai.

Chandru is our program manager for Buddha Smiles in the Amethi tribal area. He is a local and the program has used him to introduce the BS concept and identify the teachers within these villages and went pretty well door to door to find the



Suresh with about half his Buddha Smiles class. After teaching them he'll move to another location and teach the remaining half.

jewels that have become teachers in this program such as K Suresh, a 23 year old third year computer science teacher that travels 60kms daily, half on bicycle and half on bus to attend classes, gets home at 3pm and then teaches 20 children in two locations from 5 to 7 pm Monday to Saturday!! He is the only educated person in his family and in fact in his entire village. After completing this, his 3rd and final year he will be the only person to ever graduate from this village!

The children in his class range from 5 to 10 years across classes 1 to 5, primary school level. We asked Suresh how he planned his classes. The class has only been running for two months and with not much guidance it seems, so he is working with revising the children's school lessons and clearing any doubts. If these and in fact any children are to do well in school, attend regularly and not drop out due to being discouraged due to poor grades as well as disinterested teachers and parents, they need assistance to make sure they are doing their homework and understanding it as well as ensuring they clear the concepts being taught in classes. These things are not done in Government village schools and children with illiterate parents are simply left behind unless they have an extraordinary intelligence that serves them to pull through by themselves.

So far Suresh has not started with learn through play but will attend teacher workshops in March to learn all about it and then integrate into the classes. Suresh plans to study for a Masters of Comp Science after finishing his BA this year. Not one person has ever graduated from this village previously!



Chandran riding the motorcycle with (my Diva in the middle) and Santosh at back

Palaparambattu village, Polur Talak, Thiruvannamalai:

We reached back after dark and which severely limited our ability to interact with the class but had a great interview with the teacher.

19 years old, year 12, science stream graduate, A Sudha of **Palaparambattu village**, is the wonderful female teacher at this Buddha Smiles class and has settled into regular classes since December/January. She was initially identified by Chandru just before November 2015. There are currently 17 in this class; 7 boys and ten girls.

Sudha told us, “I want to teach the children of my village and encourage them to study rather than waste time watching TV and non productive activities.” Underling the importance of educating these children, “I am the first girl to graduate high school ‘ever’ from this village! Here no one supports education of girls and I had to protest, including refusing to eat until they agreed to support my education. Until 8th standard I stayed in a hostel at Jamunumarathur – 50 kms from my village, after which it was very hard as I had to travel 17kms everyday to study at high school.”



Sudha (far right in blue) with her class in front of the very quaint Palaparambattu village post office

How do you plan the Buddha Smiles classes? “I run the classes for 5 days a week. The children need a lot of help in maths and all subjects and I revise their school-work to make sure they understand the daily classwork. I conduct tests, especially to prepare them for school tests and exams and after which they feel

more confident and do better than they otherwise would have. There is time for story telling but I would like to do more and plan to set aside one day for play as it creates more interest and encourages the children to come to classes.”

Sudha tells us the children are from 1st to 8th class and between the ages of 5 to 13 years.

What does the future hold for you?

“I am very keen to study nursing or teaching but my parents are not allowing me to do so.” Sudha’s mother was standing nearby during the conversation and chipped in, “who will pay for the studies?” We all laughingly agreed there could be another hunger strike coming up... Mani has expressed a keen interest in helping the Buddha Smiles teachers wishing to undertake further studies and we will work with Sudha to assist her in any way we can.

Thathankuppam Village, Namiambattu Panchayat, Polur Talak, Dist. Thiruvannamalai.



As if two gems were not already enough, we couldn’t have imagined yet a third fabulous and one in a village educated person would be in charge of the new Buddha Smiles class in this village, but as it turns out, 17 years old Ms. Jayamani is another shining star in the firmament.

At first we couldn’t get Jayamani to sit with us, she said with great respect for her elders, “how can I sit with you, I am just a small girl.” Eventually we had another woman sit with and near her and finally she managed to sit and do the interview.

I also have to recount how she, with tremendous care and concern took me and my daughter coming down with fever at the time, to a nearby school to use the bathroom. She took her shoes off to enter the school even the floor was filthy, asked permission from the headmaster and then insisted on getting water in a bucket to flush the toilet as I cared for my ailing daughter. This was a humbling experience for me and showed what a kind hearted and generous person we had for a teacher in this program.

Again Jayamani was identified in the latter part of 2015 by Chandan on his door to door canvassing of all the villages in the area. While only 17, Jayamani has already completed her year 12 in the commerce stream. She has three siblings but interestingly, her father has a second family with two children. It is apparently common for men to one that one family in their culture.

Why teach the Buddha Smiles class?

I was also educated in a tribal village school at Jamunamathur. I like to teach, children especially and there are lots of children in my village that are not studying well and I like to support and encourage them.

There are 38 children regularly attending the classes, 8 boys and 30 girls!! I hold classes 7 days a week. 6 days are dedicated to school/class work and Sunday is just for play and I also teach the children dance. I also include storytelling in the classes by reading to them from books.

The children come from 3 schools in the area that are up to 3km distant.

Jayamani desperately wants to continue on to higher studies into accounts/commerce. Her mother and family are interested and supportive but they are too poor to manage themselves. Professor Mani was moved by her determination and love for education and will see how Buddha Smiles (GOP) can support/encourage her College education.



Jayamani's 38 strong Buddha Smiles class waves us off.



Children arrive from 3 schools to join this joy-filled class