

Annual Report of Buddha Smiles-White Lotus Project on Non-Formal Education for the Children in Vellore and Thiruvannamalai Districts of Tamil Nadu– 2015

Contents

Highlights of 2015	2
Background and Location	2
Areas Focused	5
Teaching Methods	6
Background of our Teachers and Training Provided.....	8
Challenges in Successful Implementation of the Programme	9
Lessons Learnt and New Opportunities	10

Highlights of 2015

Building on the solid momentum created by previous 11 years, Buddha Smiles-White Lotus Project on Non-Formal Education for the children of stone quarry workers, landless labourers, small farmers, daily wage workers as well as from tribal and weaver's families in Vellore and Thiruvannamalai Districts of Tamil Nadu continued achieving significant goals in 2015 too. We continued to build core competencies in each of our functional areas (special evening educational programs and resource development) to better serve needs of the children from stone quarry areas and weaver's villages in Vellore and Thiruvannamalai Districts of Tamil Nadu. Notably, the extension of the evening classes initiative in five new villages in the tribal areas propelled the initiative forward this year. Here are some of the year's highlights

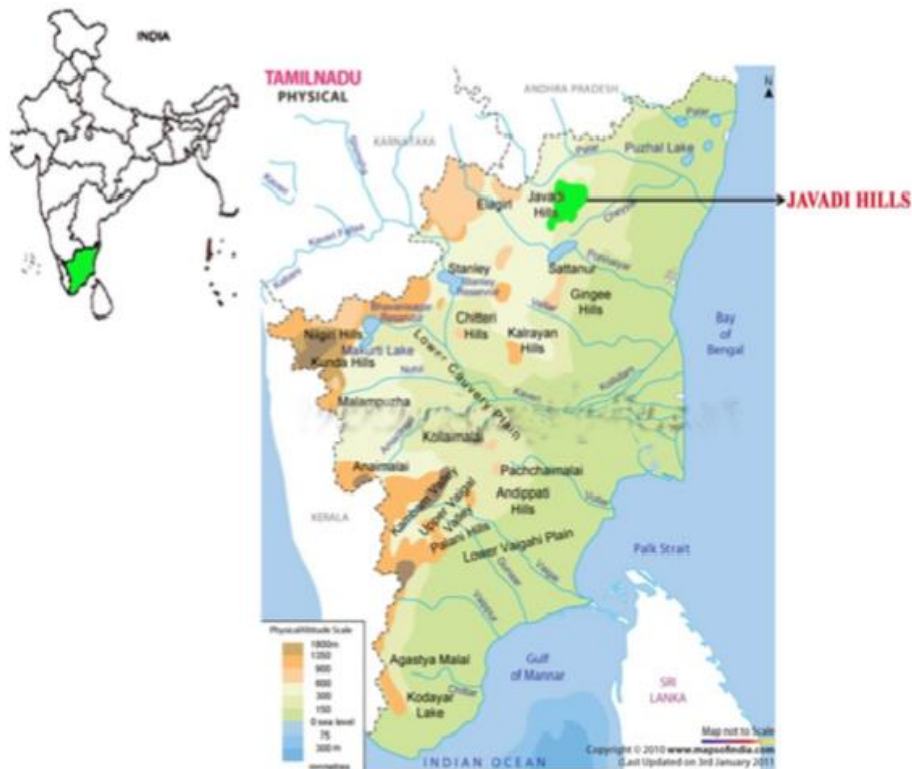
- During the period 2015, there were total of 485 student beneficiaries of which 212 were female and the remaining 273 were male children. Students in each center range from minimum 20 to maximum 40 students.
- The number of functional centers have been increased this year from ten to fifteen where evening classes are given to children
- The community of beneficiaries have widened and now includes tribal community in addition to the children from the weaver's community and children from stone quarry, landless labourers, small farmers, daily wage workers
- The areas served now include tribal villages

Background and Location

Buddha Smiles-White Lotus Project on Non-Formal Education for the children from stone quarry, landless labourers, small farmers, daily wage workers and weaver's families in Vellore and Thiruvannamalai Districts of Tamil Nadu have been operational for more than eleven years now. This programme is being implemented in 10 villages in Vellore and Thiruvannamalai Districts of Tamil Nadu to reduce dropouts, improve students' knowledge

and build values in them. During the period 2015, there were total of 485 student beneficiaries of which 55% were female and remaining 45% male children. Students in each center range from minimum 25 to maximum 40 students. These students study in the Government primary schools. The parents of these students are daily wage earners, stone quarry workers, landless labourers and mainly from tribal and weavers' families. Majority of them come from socially and economically backward communities.

There are ten functional centers under this programme in two districts of Tamil Nadu. Recently we have extended the initiative in five more functional centers in the tribal areas of the Vellore and Thiruvannamalai Districts of Tamil Nadu. A geographical specification of five new centers covers the forest and hill areas of the Amirthi forests and Javadhu Hills in the same above two districts.



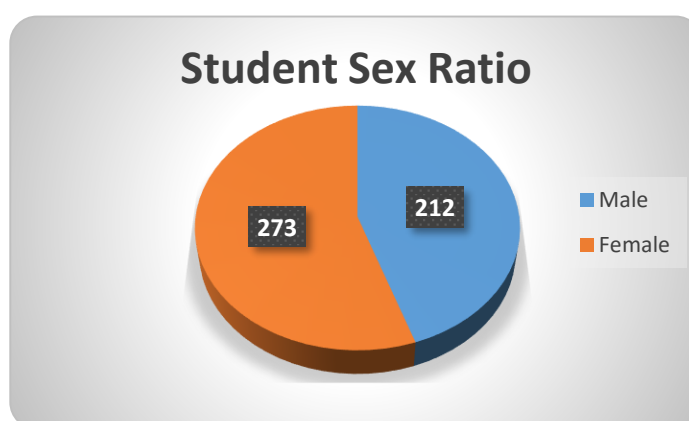
Location of the 5 new centers - Javadi hills

The below table provides details of the number of students studying in the 15 education centers in detail.

Table 1: Area wise gender ratio of the schools in the fifteen educational centers

S. No	Name of the Village	District/Area	Total Students	Total Male Students	Total Female Students
1	Athimalaipattu	Thiruvannamalai	40	17	23
2	Chinnaiyampalayam	Vellore	39	18	21
3	Reddypalayam	Vellore	39	17	22
4	Ayagasennai	Thiruvannamalai	46	19	27
5	Pattankullam	Thiruvannamalai	29	16	13
6	Mettukudusai	Vellore	37	15	22
7	Sevoor MD	Thiruvannamalai	38	15	23
8	Ekambaranallur	Vellore	25	14	11
9	Rangapuram	Vellore	31	13	18
10	Ooteri	Vellore	37	18	19
11	Saathambattu	Thiruvannamalai	21	13	8
12	Aavaramvalasai	Thiruvannamalai	23	11	12
13	Saranangkuppam	Thiruvannamalai	21	10	11
14	Thaadhangkuppam	Thiruvannamalai	38	8	30
15	Palalapiraampattu	Thiruvannamalai	21	8	13
	Total		485	212	273

Graphical Representation of the Current Student Sex Ratio



Areas Focused

The main areas of this initiative started with an aim to address the educational needs of the children from the stone quarry areas. This programme had diversified its operation to become inclusive of special circumstances of children from other communities such as weavers (e.g. Sevur Center), socially marginalized groups and areas with poor educational infrastructures and motivation for pursuing school education with high percentage of outflow of migrant labour from rural areas (e.g. Nelvoy Thoppu). And now in 2015, we have expanded the initiative to five more villages in the tribal areas of the Vellore and Thiruvannamalai Districts of Tamil Nadu.

Though compelled to adhere to the mainstream curriculum, the non-formal centers share a bigger mission and vision of social change. Hence, the programme has become more inclusive of special needs and circumstances of the people in the region. The major objective of this initiative is to encourage children from the targeted communities to go to school as well as to ensure their retention/ attendance at the nearest schools.

This geographical area of the five new centers in the tribal area is known for very low level of education and deforestation activities controlled by Sandalwood/Redwood mafia. The poor tribal people are exploited by the Redwood/Sandalwood smugglers for cutting the precious trees. Poverty, unemployment and illiteracy among the people are important factors for the poor conditions of life, criminal nexus and police atrocities in the region. Hence, we extended our centers to these areas where all the children come from tribal families of this hill region near Amirthi Forests/Javvadhu Hills.

Due to lack of education and high school dropouts, men take to smuggling of sandalwood and redwood trees and women face neglect and social marginalisation, we are making a conscious decision in choosing to work in these areas as part of genuine extension of Buddha Smiles-White Lotus work.

Buddha Smiles-White Lotus has been keen and preparing the ground make a beginning in this difficult social terrain. We have held a number of ground meeting with the community leaders, parents and children as part of our preparations including identification of teachers & volunteers during this period. Before the actual centers were opened up, several visits were undertaken by a team of volunteers led by Mr.Chandrasekahar, teacher-volunteer, as he comes from the same Amirthi Forest area.

Teaching Methods

Along with adherence to the mainstream curriculum at the non-formal educational centers, we also incorporate several non-formal techniques of teaching/learning in addition to the traditional classroom methodologies. We have been developed activity based learning for the children to ensure their interest, which ultimately address the challenge of retention. We also adopt, develop and implement more non-formal methods such as play and learn, activity based educational systems as well as the integration of visual teaching/learning methods. The evening class education methodology and curriculum in specific are not just framed to improve the education skills of the students but also intended to create positive values in their lives through active participative learning methods.

The evening class starts by 4:30 - 5:00 pm, with a silent meditation and children also join songs. Thereafter 45 minutes of reading exercise is carried out followed by supporting work towards completing their homework. It may be mentioned here that majority of children in rural schools and Government schools do not receive any support or attention from their parents due to social and economic circumstances. Socio-economic and educational background of the parents and families are important reason for the drop-out of children from the government schools.

Hence, the Buddha Smiles-White Lotus programme addresses one of the critical challenges of our education system –i.e., the prevention of drop-out of children in rural areas and government schools. Apart from these, summer camp was held in May 2015. In these camps the child development programs are conducted. Students are divided into groups and

games/activities are organized accordingly. Children games like lemon and spoon, Frog jump, Ring ball, Musical Chair etc. were conducted.

Social Awareness on judicious use of plastic bags was also created amongst children during the camp. Languages like Tamil and English were taught through Activities Based Learning (ABL) methodology. Students of first and second grade were taught letters and words, third grade were taught to create and read sentences, story and paragraph creation for fourth and fifth grade. Mathematics for children was also taught through ABL method.



The children studying in the centre receives an excellent quality education they are able to perform well in their respective classes as an outcome of this initiative. One of the good practices in these classes is to respect and revive native wisdom through play and learn methods in terms of recollecting/recording the names of plants, trees, flowers in the region. Among other factors in measuring our work and relevance in the stone quarry areas and other centers, we have able to make a difference to the environment by encouraging children to pursue studies and attend school regularly.

Children do enjoy the support base that the teachers can provide as they bring their questions and clarifications to the community teacher. This provides greater confidence to the children as they become aware of supporting systems/bases within the community given the

pressures/demands of educational system. There are instances of appreciation received from villagers about the growth in pass percentage in the village and change in the general attitude of the children towards their interest in education. This change has been reported in particular in the Nelvoy village of Vellore District. More importantly, the evening classes engage the children in a creative way than being placed before the television without any choice and activities of learning. This is an invisible but definite change in the educational and social environment of the stone quarry areas and weavers' villages.



Background of our Teachers and Training Provided

Teachers basically come from the same geographical, socio-economic environment as the students and belong to same villages. Majority of teachers are also Graduates. Teachers demonstrate lot of interest and commitment at the evening schools. Several of them are undergraduate students in the nearby colleges and few of them have an High School pass certificate. It is also our goal and policy to encourage teachers to pursue higher education and remain connected in pursuit of education/knowledge.

Bi-annual Teachers' Training programme has also helped us to identify and address specific concerns of each teacher and support them both individually and collectively. All teachers come together on at least three occasions during the year – twice for the bi-annual teachers' training and for the interaction with the formal school teachers at the Garden of Peace School in the month of April every year. We have combined this training with the need for deep

listening exercise for everyone including the teachers, volunteers and the administrators (co-ordination team).

Teachers get an opportunity to come together as well to interact with different ideas and experiences shared/narrated by each other including the trainers. Trainers have also expressed their satisfaction of having been engaged with the social mission of this nature and offered to do a further follow-up including future assessment/evaluation of the programme through interaction with the teachers and students as well. Apart from these, teacher training workshop were held in May 2015. During summer teacher training workshops, teachers are trained on Methodology of Learning and Evaluation and on Teaching Mathematics.

The children from the stone quarries and the weavers' communities from the school go on an educational tour every year besides the biannual get-to-gather for the children held at the Garden of Peace Primary School at Kurumbapalayam Village, Kanyambadi Block, Vellore District, Tamil Nadu. These children more often do not get an opportunity to travel anywhere other than circumstances of migrating from one place to another and the opportunity of travelling to their native place once in a few years for family and religious ceremonies. This initiative has been in practice since 2010.

Challenges in Successful Implementation of the Programme

The routine monitoring of the centers and the regular supervision also become very challenging given the poor road accessibility. The regular communication between the teachers and the co-ordination team remain at a modest level and needs to be improved. Another major concern is not only the ability of the teacher to address the needs of different age groups/classes during a period of an hour and a half to two hours but the challenge of keeping them focused. This is a real and routine challenge for the teacher. About the difficulties and challenges, we do believe that they are realities that we must face and learn from.

We are also faced with routine challenges of migration of teachers from one place to another and in the process an urgent condition of finding an alternative within a short time. Given the challenges of travelling and monitoring in tribal areas we are constrained of transport access and mobility. We are examining the possibilities of purchasing a jeep within a year exclusively for the work in tribal areas and in other evening schools. We consider this as necessity because of the opportunity for travel for children and teachers in these areas. Children and teachers could travel from one centre to another occasionally and interact with children from other centres. Face to face meetings of teachers and children could improve our functioning in a major way.



Lessons Learnt and New Opportunities

Given the above challenges, we understand the need to translate them into opportunities for finding solution to problems that are not uncommon. Hence there are shifts taking place in our approach and orientation to working in these places. Buddha Smiles- White Lotus programme has been exploring to broaden the focus and work with more children in the same areas by integrating with the government schools in the same areas that the quarries and weaver's colonies are located. This is the major shift that is underway.

Given the developments regarding the legislation of Right to Education Act, Buddha Smiles-White Lotus Programme considers this momentum as an opportunity to campaign for the Right to Education among the rural people and more particularly among the people who live and work under disadvantageous social, cultural and economic circumstances. Our growing interaction and engagement with the government schools is proving more useful than we had imagined. In the process, we can work the children from quarry/weavers' areas and at the same integrate and involve with other children studying in the government schools in the same area. We are in a better position to make interventions and also remain beneficial to these rural communities faced with certain socio-economic and professional disadvantages.

This year could be recognised for turning another page in our education movement as had begun to establish five centers in the forest and tribal areas of Javvadhu Hills. This has been one of our objectives to take the Right to Education campaign in tribal areas and respond to challenges in terms of access to education for the tribal children as well as identify young men and women in tribal areas and encourage them to become teachers in their community besides supporting them to pursue higher education and achieve educational/professional goals and objectives in their lives. Every time we take a step forward we acknowledge the time and efforts gone in making the way for the first step. Though we have only begun our work in tribal areas this year, we do believe that we have made good beginning. Our work is more inclusive than ever before in the last decade as move into tribal areas of Tamil Nadu, much neglected and exploited people of this country.

Buddha Smiles acknowledges with respect of the annual visit, review meetings, field visits, critical inputs and recommendations shared by Glenn Fawcett.