

Asha Houston – Project Build –
Pasumai Trust Site visit report.

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Project Location: Thiruvallur village,
Tamil Nadu, India

Project Build is project started for the education of Migrant laborers children. These laborers work in the brick kilns in villages close to the city of Chennai for about 6 months and then return to their native villages which are in the surrounding areas only to return the next year. The nature of the work is seasonal and so the schools / centers for these children function from January to June /July every year. The coordinator of this project Mr. Murthy runs a trust called Pasumai Trust and this organization is the one that handles this project in its entirety. Asha Honor members from Chennai provide logistical and other support for this project namely Jeba Durai and Ms. Dhanalakshmi and DP {Vermont} has been providing some guidance for this project along with actively seeking funds for their activities.

The village where the centers for Project Build is located is called Thiruvallur. We started from Chennai

on the morning of 8th April and drove towards the village. The main road that leads to the village is well connected from the city of Chennai and in our private vehicle it took us about an hour to reach the area from where we turned into the village in roads. Once in this area the roads are not well developed and so it took us quite some time to reach the centers. Project Build currently functions through 6 centers. These centers are either rented for a nominal amount or provided by the Brick Kiln owners for the school activities. The centers are usually barely a room or maximum 2 and a concrete structure with little or no ventilation and some centers without electricity. 2 of the centers are operated from within the local government schools and the remaining 4 {there are total 6} are situated in the different brick kilns. There are several brick kilns in the area. All the centers are close to each other and the kilns although the walk is probably not pleasant. The centers are not a very education conducive environment as the Brick Kiln owners provide a very small place and sometimes without a fan, especially during summer the heat can be unbearable. The government school classrooms are bigger and better ventilated but the other centers are too small and cramped with children. Yet the teachers do their best to decorate the walls of the centers and generally try make them a welcoming environment for students.

The names of the centers are names of flowers. From memory I recall only Sunflower, Hibiscus, Rose. On the drive to the centers we met Murthy who is the coordinator and lead of Pasumai trust and met the Asst. Coordinator for this project as well. They were on a motorbike and our car followed them from the main road into the first center.

The first center we reached had one teacher {animator} and approx 40-45 children. The children were in the age group of 3 to 13. The younger children just accompanied the elder ones to school since there was no one to take care of them at home since both parents are working in the kilns. All of their parents work in the Brick Kilns and are paid meager wages. The accommodation provide to them is one small shed sort of a structure and most families in the area only eat one meal. The first center we visited, the children had school bags and books for each of them almost and their art work was posted on the walls. The teacher seemed quite dedicated and when we arrived they were serving them food. This is the mid day meal we provide at some centers. The meal was comprising of rice {pulao} made with spices and some mixed vegetables. An old lady who was presumably the cook brought the enormous pan with the food and the children were given steel plates and then the food distributed to all of them. We distributed some

bananas and biscuits as well and the kids appeared to be having a feast on such a simple, almost inadequate repast. Despite the conditions and the environment, all children had bright eyes and brighter dreams. Almost all of them wanted to become a teacher or a police officer or hold some such important post. All of them were fascinated by us strangers who had arrived out of nowhere but still the children were so friendly and welcoming, I felt as if we had known each other forever. When I was leaving they all excitedly asked me my name and each one wanted to tell me theirs. I remember only the sound of their excited voices though.

The next center we visited was a government school. The area for the school is like a regular village school and the classrooms are big and ventilated. The school was a single storey building and had few large classrooms and a small play area outside. In one of the central classrooms there about 40 of the brick kiln children who have recently been given admission to sit there and be taught at the government school premises. This has happened due to Murthy's extensive work with the government and local schools, so the students are recognized and although they are not admitted to the government schools they are being allowed to receive the instruction there from a teacher of Project Build and

when they leave in 6 months they will receive a transfer certificate which they can take back to their respective village schools to gain admittance back to their schools there and have proof that in the past 6 months they have been regular students. Due the nature of their parents occupation these students have to travel where the Brick Kilns are located but when they return back to their villages the local government schools there do not recognize them as being regular students that is why these certificates are needed. The second center was an equally amazing experience as the first one. As I was filming the children, one boy got fascinated by the video camera so I handed it to him and he filmed his own classmates! Apparently this child had a speech problem earlier but has become rather confident and fluent ever since he came to our center. The children of our project don't get any school uniforms from the govt. schools and our taught by our teachers but they are slowly being accepted as part of the fraternity. The school principal and other teachers were very warm and welcoming and very excited to see us. They even asked a girl to perform an entire Bharatnatyam recital for us.

The next center we visited had 2 small rooms. This center was earlier run under a bigger room with a thatched roof but the government has strict restrictions on running schools with such structures because they can catch

fire and there was recently such an incident. So the children have to sit in the heat inside the concrete rooms now. This center also we give the children mid day meals and here there are 2 teachers. The children are divided into age groups of primary and secondary and sit in separate rooms. There were totally approx 50 children in this center in addition there was a cook and the 2 teachers. These children sang a local rhyme for us and were quite pleased with the biscuits we distributed. The teachers are all young and energetic and seemed quite happy to teach the children. The children all responded enthusiastically when asked questions about their names, how they like studying there, how they like their teachers and what they want to do when they grow up.

The next center was a much smaller one and was in a garage. The place was donated by one of the neighbors who owns this place and has his own house next door. The center doesn't have electricity and the place was quite dark. The children also looked like they were suffering in the heat but all brave and seemed to be able to withstand the adversities. There was just one teacher here and about 40 or fewer children. They were very excited to see Dhanalakshmi who is quite affectionate with all children. She spoke to them in Tamil {native language in Tamil Nadu} and asked them how they liked the place. The

teacher was also quite young and one could see that she had to put in a lot of effort to travel and teach and withstand the temperature all at once.

There is another government school where we have 2 teachers and around 50 + children. We couldn't visit this school though cause they were done for the day before we arrived. The usual school timings are from about 10 am to 3pm.

The last center we visited was situated right inside the brick kiln. This was also a room donated by the owners of the kiln but the school structure seemed divided, at least by a small fence from the main property and appeared more like a school than the previous centers. There were about 30 or so children in that center when we visited and one teacher. The accommodation provided to the laborers was right behind the school. The girls of this class were quite bright, the boys a bit shy. All the girls had big ambitions; one boy wanted to be a pilot! One small boy was rather shy and didn't speak to us despite several attempts but regarded us quite curiously. All the children were happy with the biscuits though. We don't provide meals at this center and a couple of other centers too. We met one of the accountants who works at the kiln. He spoke to us about the issues in the area and how there is injustice when treating this laborers; though he understood the importance of the work we were doing, one could

see that it would take considerable time and effort to garner local support. This being the last center we visited in Thiravallur, we bid goodbye to Murthy, the assistant coordinator and the teacher and amidst a sea of waves from eager and excited children and lots of "byes" we departed from the place.

The stone, the dust, the heat and all the apparent adversity of the brick kiln could not dim the spirit or make less bright the smiles of all the children and the teachers we met.

I left only with the hope that we can strive to ensure that their tender hands hold within them books, not bricks.