

Home for boys, Pneuma Trust, Madurai - site visit report

24 June 2011, Friday

[Pneuma Trust](#) (Professional Network for the Emancipation of Under-privileged MAsses) is a registered Trust founded in 2003 working in the fields of health, education, social and legal awareness. They have been running a free home in Madurai for boys since June 2006, all of whom are from Families Affected by AIDS (FAA), and from families Below Poverty Line (BPL). The affected adults are often unable to keep a steady job, are not healthy enough to work or care for their children, and in many instances unable to send their children to school. Pneuma's goal is to provide nutritious food, clothes, and shelter free of cost. The children are also sent to schools to continue their education. Their project goal states: "To improve the quality of life of the Children Affected by HIV/AIDS whose parents/parent are infected or died due to HIV/AIDS". I had first visited them in March 2008 before Asha partnered with them and this was my second visit.

I reached the home at around 7pm on a Friday night. Ms.Paulin and her father Mr.Rajan were there in the center. All the boys had come back from school earlier and had settled in to their evening routines. There were 22 boys in all at the time of my visit. Due to some confusion regarding new curriculum and a related court stay order, schools in TamilNadu opened for a new term only around mid-June as opposed to the usual early June. That was part of the reason for the low strength. There were other important reasons though. Ms.Paulin mentioned that families from places farther from Madurai had been finding it difficult to visit the children and so had started sending their children closer to home instead. The government has opened support centers & clinics for FAA in several districts over the past few years and the children are sent there, she said. For instance, I remember that there were about 7-8 kids from western TN (Erode & Salem) three years back but there were none now.

The age group of the boys was between 6 and 15 and there was one boy (forget the name) who was 19 who was studying in a polytechnic. I could recollect a few faces from my previous visit and Paulin confirmed that about half of them have been in the center for over three years. I interacted with them for quite a while and asked about their families, interests, school, etc. The younger kids were generally enthusiastic and very forthcoming and the teenagers were reticent, as one would expect. The newer boys were still getting their bearings in the center and the school, but it seemed like having several other boys around was helping. The boys were generally healthy and were given periodic health check-up at Pnuema. Profiles and records for all boys were maintained, though I didn't get a chance to verify them during this trip.

The setup at the Home was similar to my previous visit. The ground floor is a large hall (previously used for weddings). There is decent ventilation but mosquitoes are a menace, mainly due to open drainage in the nearby streets. The boys keep their belongings, usually a steel case plus a bag or two and school bag & books, lined up against a wall on one side. The beddings - nylon mats, sheets and pillows, are stacked in a corner. The kids use the floor for studying, eating and sleeping. The nearest playground is not too near, so not all boys go out to play every evening. Sometimes they tend to stay a little longer at school, play and come back to the hostel. Study time is usually between 5:30/6pm to about 8pm. After that, they get ready for dinner; a few boys take turns to sweep the floor, wash plates and bring the food out. The dinner for that day was lemon rice and a fried item as a side. The boys collected their dinner, sat around, offered prayers and had their dinner. Mr.Rajan supervised the dinnertime activities and kept encouraging the children to have a full dinner. After dinner, they get half-an-hour to an hour of TV time depending on the day of the week.

Paulin was telling me that they were still receiving some applications and might admit a few more boys over the next few weeks. The schools that the boys go to have been quite supportive over the years and keep Paulin posted about all developments. They have a tutor who comes every evening to help out the children during their study time. A few volunteers come during the weekends to spend time with the children either to tutor them on some subjects or just to keep them engaged with different activities. Pneuma continues to receive local support and donations, and is able to find local volunteers/well-wishers to help out once in a while.

I asked Ms.Paulin about the finances and she mentioned that they were still uncertain about the total headcount this academic year and plans to write a proposal for Asha only after they get a clear idea.

She mentioned that their funds' situation was manageable for a few more months, and hence preferred to wait. I asked about the plans they had about constructing a new building and she said that was still the plan but they were not sure about when and how they were going to proceed with it. She was pregnant and due to deliver soon and hence planned to hand over day-to-day operations to her dad for a few months.

The boys finished their dinners at half past eight and I bid goodbye to all of them and left.

Photos - <https://picasaweb.google.com/chennai.asha/PneumaTrustJun11>

Observations

- They continue to not want to scale up beyond their means, and want to make sure they can provide for all the boys adequately.
- Not much has changed in terms of the facilities and the infrastructure since my last visit, which is both a good and a bad thing. Good because boarding, lodging and education for boys are provided for and bad because "progress" is not very visible.
- I recommended a few things that I felt might add real value right away – have a library inside with a lot of books, magazines and newspapers, spruce up the hall with some bright colours, install window nets for protection against mosquitoes and buy a lot of indoor games for the kids. I said these are not very expensive budget items and Asha might be willing to fund these.
- It might be good for the steward/chapter to have a conversation with Paulin to gain greater clarity about the following:
 - They have a fixed food menu but having seen that night's dinner, am not sure about the nutritional content of the food provided; for instance, there were no vegetables or meat in the diet that night and it seemed very light. Get the menu provided and ensure it is reasonably balanced and nutritious.
 - The number of children at the Home has decreased over the years, which is not a bad thing necessarily, but we should find out what their 1-, 2-, 3-year plans are.
 - What sort of atmosphere would the children prefer to live in? What are things that could be added that would excite the children and keep them stimulated?
 - Operationally, do they find the current setup optimal?

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