

Report from Dr Anuradha Rose

RE: The situation in Jawadhi Hills, presented at the annual meeting of Friends of Vellore Sweden on April 11th 2021.

The past twelve months the Covid19 pandemic has hit India hard. The first cases of Covid19 were reported from Jawadhi Hills in May 2020. The cases in this geographically isolated population has been few, and all the cases were among persons who returned from migrant labour. However, in the second wave now there are few reports of cases from the hills. However the social and economic impact of the pandemic and the situation of the population in Jawadhi Hills has become even more difficult:

Migrant labour that has always been an important source of income has decreased due to the pandemic. As a result, income has fallen drastically, and for many families it has become very difficult. In the beginning of the lockdown last year Community Health department, using donations from staff in CMC supplied the particularly vulnerable with dry rations, after getting permission to travel from the district collector. We also undertook the rather laborious exercise of tracing all the chronic disease patients, finding their current prescription and packing medicine for them for 2 months and then for 3 months, which we delivered to them at their homes. Patients were not charged. The clinic in Veerapanoor was allowed to open after the first few weeks of lockdown, by special permissions, and with only restricted staff, and following all the recommendations issued by the Hospital Infection Control Department. Home visits by the health workers were suspended, and has been restarted now. The process of purchasing land for the clinic in Veerapanoor came to a halt during lockdown, but has lately moved on, the survey of the land by the government officials has been completed and some documents which were not available have been obtained. We hoping to proceed with the long lease soon, and hope the new restrictions do not delay things.

The lockdown last year had made it difficult for people in the Jawadhi hills to get in touch with CMC, and sadly to say, treatable conditions have been delayed with fatal results. For example a 17-year-old boy with a testicular mass was not able to seek medical attention for 8 months, at which point his testicular cancer had metastasized and only palliative care was possible, he died shortly after. Tuberculosis cases have also had treatment delay due to lockdown (also in Sweden!). At present communication with the people in Jawadhi hills is restored, and delays are fewer.

The project of model villages is making progress.

The latest addition of a fourth village, Etimarathur, has had 17 toilets finished.

Their well has been damaged in the cyclone, and will be repaired soon.

The previous three villages have all potable water and toilets, and no more open defecation.

1. Vallithathankottai
2. Reddikollai
3. Koiloor, which has toilets but no more interventions

The funding for all toilets in the model village 4 has already been provided for by other FOVs, so the extra six toilets funded by a donation from FOV Sweden will be erected in villages not yet part of the Model Village project, to raise awareness, and maybe encourage to invest in social determinants of health at a later point.

The Nivar cyclone hit Jawadhi Hills in November 2020. In Vallithathankottai a check dam burst flooding the paddy fields and destroying all the crops shortly before harvest, causing huge economic losses. Some animals- goats and pigs – drowned. The government aid to help the farmers who lost their crops in Jawadhi was restricted to those having Patta land, meaning land that was registered on the present owner. As many of the farmers had not managed to transfer the land papers legally from a deceased grandfather or father's name to their own, they got no relief from the government. The model village project has tried to compensate for some of the losses by providing tomato plants, brinjal plants and chilli plants, and even new pigs, but it is difficult to provide for all the needs after such a big disaster.

The exit strategy for the Model Village program was that after a period of five years, when the village had accumulated 500,000 Rs on their bank account, CMC would withdraw in order to turn to other villages. Vallithathankottai village, now in year 4, has just completed Rs. 500,000/- but have requested us to continue till 5 years. We are considering this request after discussions with Don Bosco tribal development society, as we feel it will strengthen the project.

Education is hit hard by the lockdown. In the plains, where there is internet, school could continue with digital lessons, but in the hills the children have received no schooling at all for a year now as internet is not available everywhere, and smart phones are expensive. It is now realized that the pupils of 8th grade barely reach the level of education of 5th grade pupil, and those of

5th grade are only on the level of a 3rd grade pupil. Smaller children have forgotten the alphabets. Children till grade 8 are passed without retentions, as per the law, so we are worried about the quality of education and learning for the children. Due to requests from parents and village elders Don Bosco Tribal Development Society has recently allowed the night schoolchildren to gather together and have some academic lessons in the evenings. We feel this is ok, as they are small number of pupils from the same village, staying in their own village, and the teacher is from the village, but this cannot compensate the absence of regular schools.

It is sad that the summer camp for school children that was cancelled last spring, will have to be cancelled again this year. Hopefully, the funding for the last year's summer school can be used to provide help in other form to children who would have benefited from summer schools last year and this year. There are hostels which continue to house children who cannot go home, as they have no parents or the home situation is very bad. Some input into these hostels will help.

Nutrition is an important part of the project in Jawadhi Hills, often addressed during summer camps and in the night schools. The pandemic has affected the nutrition of vulnerable children, pushing some normal children into malnutrition and worsening those already malnourished.

At the same time alcohol abuse, temporarily lower in the beginning of lockdown when even the TASMALC shops were closed, has now increased. During the lockdown of TASMALC people started to brew their traditional alcohol, which has less impact on public health than the stronger alcohol provided by TASMALC. The reopening of the TASMALC outlets . has had a disastrous impact, in the setting of general unemployment due to lack of migrant labour. As the men are at home and not engaged due to the lack of employment, drinking is high. The age of initiation is decreasing as the children are at home with no schools. The situation has led to an increase in domestic violence and child abuse. The scholarship program is running with the same number of students given the opportunity to proceed to a college education. We hope that the building of our own facility in the hills will increase out services, as we will save time and money travelling. Till then we rely on Don Bosco for the day to day supervision and monitoring. There has some difficulty with this in the last year as their vehicle, a Tavera 6 seater, has numerous mechanical problems and frequently breaks down. It is also about 13 years old and becoming difficult to repair as reported by them. According to Father

Vinod of Don Bosco, much of their income, mostly from the schools in Chennai, has been lost due to the lockdown, and it is extremely difficult to carry on the work, especially since their only vehicle is broken. Anything to help Don Bosco would indirectly be of great support for the CMC project in Jawadhi hills, a point to bear in mind, if a possible donor for the Don Bosco Tribal Development Society could be found.

Finally, a note on the vaccination Campaign. Two vaccines are currently being used: Covishield produced by the Serum Institute of India on license from Astra Zeneca, and Covaxin produced by Bharat Biotech. Adults over 45 yrs. are from April 1st offered vaccination, above 60 yrs. have been offered for the past few months. However vaccine hesitancy is high and few people in the hills are vaccinated. Here health information is essential stating the obvious, that this is at present the only option we have to end the pandemic, and everybody should participate.