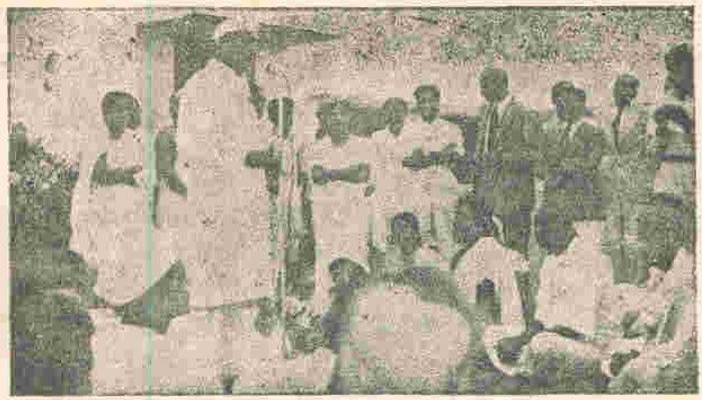


BALA MANDIR

A child needs protection and a sense of security. An unwanted child needs it even more. The role of Bala Mandir is to give a homeless child—a parental roof, affection, education, happiness—in short a home.

It all started in a humble way. Twenty-five years ago in a small Cottage, two foundlings came under the care of some dedicated Gandhians. Bapu's ideals of service to the community were translated into concrete shape, in a sphere where there was a great need. Over the years more than a thousand children have passed through these portals and found a new life which would otherwise have been denied to them.

Bala Mandir is unique as a foundling hospital and home in that it receives with warmth and open arms any infant under three

years of age, in need of shelter. Infants even a day old are brought in—some scarred, suffering, unwanted, undernourished, some close to dying. Every child is taken in whether discarded because of social opprobrium, poverty, epidemics or other disasters. It has not always been an easy task to nurse back to life and health and nurture the sick, the dejected, the defective child. But it has been done with patience and understanding. These ars miracles worked with the enduring faith that no retarded child is hopeless, that no sick child is incurable and that no difficult child is intractable.

In 1950 the Madras Government who had been pioneers in piloting schemes for the welfare of children allotted land to Bala Mandir. In 1952 the main building was completed. In 1957 Bala Mandir was recognised as a " Fit person Institution " in the State. Destitute and deprived children, under three years are sent by the Juvenile Courts. Bala Mandir has established educational sections and vocational training centres, as it has to serve the triple role of parent, teacher and community.

THE HOSPITAL

The Hospital is a vital wing of the Foundling Home. Infants with serious malnutrition problems, with physical handicaps and mental defects are all handled with quiet efficiency, by the hospital staff. An honorary visiting pediatrician is always available on call. There is an ambulance for children requiring regular orthopaedic, dental and pediatric care in the various departments of the city hospitals as well as for emergencies. The van was donated by the Lions Club of South Madras and West German donors. In the gradual progress of the child towards robust health, no expense or care is spared. The present hospital building, extended in 1968 by a generous contribution from OXFAM, has the capacity to accommodate a hundred children.

THE KITCHEN

The Kitchen is under the over-all supervision of the resident lady Superintendent. Wholesome balanced meals are carefully planned with emphasis on the nutritional value of foods. International service organisations contribute milk powder, enriched wheat and soya-bean oil. There are high-protein diets for the very weak children. Fresh eggs from the Poultry Unit are used for the weak children.

The Kitchen and Dining Hall were built by a generous gift gifted from OXFAM in 1963. Cooking gas ovens were gifted by the Overseas Women's Association.

THE EDUCATIONAL SECTIONS

The Nursery School was started in 1952. The Central Government aid and some private contributions enabled the construction of a new building to accommodate the Nursery School. It has over a hundred children in four sections and is staffed by a Headmistress and four teachers. It is recognised as a special School by the State Government.

The Elementary School was started in 1956. It is open to children from outside Bala Mandir also. The School is fully staffed, recognised and aided by the State Government.

The Sri Satyamurthi High School was opened in 1961. There are separate sections for boys and girls. It is recognised and aided by the Government of Tamil Nadu and has a strength of six hundred students, hundred of whom are from Bala Mandir.

THE BOYS RESIDENTIAL SECTION

There is separate accommodation for boys in a large building across the road from the Main Building. There are about hundred boys in this section, under the supervision of a Resident Warden. The boys are trained for community living. Working in groups they maintain their own rooms and premises.

The Life Insurance Corporation of India has granted a loan for the purchase of this building.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Vocational training Units have been started in Bala Mandir, so that the youngsters are armed with skills by the time they leave School. Those with low academic potential can enter trade. Apart from training the boys and girls in skilled work, it is hoped that these Units will be commercially viable and serve as supplementary sources of income for the Institution.

The carpentry unit was started in 1956 with a complete set of machinery donated by CARE. In 1959 it became a work-cum-training centre for boys. Later with aid and recognition from the Central Social Welfare Board it became a Socio-Economic Unit to train women for Carpentry. Currently 25 boys and girls are receiving training in Carpentry. Small stipends are put into Savings Accounts in their names. The Carpentry Unit fulfils the Nursery equipments needs of the Balwadis, set up by the various Panchayats in the State. The Unit also makes small household articles to meet the needs of city dwellers.

The building for the Laundry was donated by the Rotary Club of Madras and the power equipment by private donors. Apart from meeting the requirements of the inmates, the Unit takes up work

on a commercial basis too Some of the boys have been trained in the skill, under the Supervision of a professional Laundryman.

The Poultry Unit is run on a small scale now, providing eggs for the nourishment of the specially weak children. There are plans to develop this Unit and train more youngsters in the skill.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING FOR COMMUNITY LIVING

The Institution has the weighty responsibility of bringing up the children with a sound sense of values. The values of honesty, hard work and self-reliance are emphasized. Latent qualities of leadership are drawn out within the framework of discipline, latitude is allowed for individual behaviour patterns and no child is pressed into a mould. Group activities like amateur dramatics, outdoor sports, kitchen gardening, sewing and folk music are organised. Voluntary helpers teach the children group songs, bhajans and folk dancing. Recently lessons in Yogasanas have been added to the activities. The Consulates of Japan, West Germany, U.S.A., U.S.S.R., the British High Commission, and the Film Departments of Central and State Governments show films to the children from time to time.

Occasionally the children are taken to a movie, the zoo, the beach, the museum, the airport and other places of interest The State Social Welfare Board under its scheme of Holiday Camps for children has enabled batches of Bala Mandir children to spend a fortnight in the Camps at Tiruchi and Kanyakumari.

REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES

The three channels of rehabilitation are adoption, career and marriage. No matter what is done for the welfare of a child in the

institution, there is no substitute for a good home. Couples desirous of adopting a child send in their applications which are carefully scrutinised and considered by the Committee. After satisfactory reports are received the child is given in adoption. More than a hundred children have been rehabilitated by means of *adoption* and have been happily absorbed in families.

Training and Employment help to rehabilitate the youngster in a vocation. The aptitude of the young man or woman is considered before training is imparted. Some of the girls have been trained as Nursery and Elementary School Teachers and others as nurses, midwives and carpenters. Boys have been sent for training in the Government school of arts and crafts, agricultural farms, technical concerns and in business firms. Some of the alumni work as welders, carpenters and photographer's assistants.

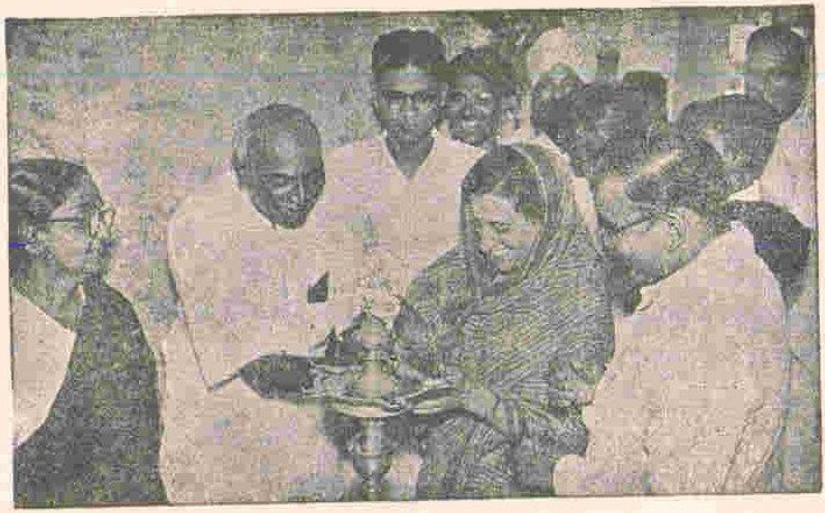
Marriage is a universally valued method of rehabilitation for girls in their late teens and twenties. The girls are encouraged to learn house keeping, to sew clothes, to help in the kitchen and to supervise the feeding of the younger children. The applications for marriage are carefully considered by the management. The consent of the young man and woman is obtained and the marriage is performed in a traditional and simple manner. Bala Mandir provides the bride with the minimum household equipment to start a home of her own. The girls enter into lifetime partnerships, run their own homes and gracefully fit into the pattern of family life.

AID AND SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMMES

International Service Organisations as well as national and local organisations have been of immense support to Bala Mandir. Special mention has to be made of Aktionsgemeinschaft Solidarische Welt E. V., West Germany and Oxfam, Oxford Committee for Famine Relief.

THE NEEDS OF BALA MANDIR

Bala Mandir acknowledges gratefully the contributions in cash and kind of individuals, service organisations and business concerns.

To make Bala Mandir a self-contained and self-supporting institution and afford more facilities for the children, funds are required. The expansion programme includes class-rooms for the High School and Primary School and a large multi-purpose Hall for assembly, indoor games, etc.

There are also the intangible needs which cannot be satisfied only by money. There is a great need for interested people to give incentive and ideals to a child. There is a need for people who will help to narrow the cultural gaps and channel the child's energy into proud and useful citizenship. Helpers from outside can aid the workers within the home to guarantee that Bala Mandir is enshrined in the smiles of the children and perpetuated in the happiness of their adult lives.