



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

When we started BM Connect in November 2014, we wanted to create a newsletter that would highlight the interesting work done and events from across the different units and talk about the people who make the institution what it is. Over the last 5 years we have shared news and pictures with you to showcase much of this.

A situation like this lockdown makes this task very different from the usual. Many of our usual events for the quarter from April to June did not take place, including the highly anticipated Balu Sir Summer Camp that is held in the first week of May every year. Normal activities within the Home have been significantly impacted and there were no physical School activities. Many of our staff members were working from home as well. Hence this issue has less photos and more of write ups on how the pandemic impacted Bala Mandir and changed the normal routines.

The Bala Mandir team has the experience of dealing with various exigencies but this crisis was different and needed lot of quick action and team work to adapt, keeping front and centre the interests of the children it serves and the staff it employs. Each unit stepped up to this challenge and ensured that the children and staff were positively engaged while ensuring safety, which is always the first priority.

In this newsletter we are sharing with you the various initiatives taken up by the Bala Mandir units. Bala Mandir was able to fast forward some of its plans in use of IT – cloud server, online learning and the use of virtual meetings. The celebrations of festivals was confined to the Homes but was done without compromise. It was truly remarkable to see how the children, staff, and members of Bala Mandir coped during this unprecedented situation. Many thanks go out to the volunteers who have supported the institution in this period, especially our medical experts. Two of our senior staff who led our COVID warriors share their thoughts with us in this newsletter.

The Education units and Madhuran Narayanan Centre engaged with the children and parents through mobiles and WhatsApp messages, and found ways to reach out to them. The institution was also able to support families through distribution of provisions to the community we serve. After a few postponements, the Class X exams were cancelled much to the disappointment of the children of Bala Mandir who were confident of doing well and scoring much better marks than what the final results would be based on mid term examinations. All this is covered in the news section.

Bala Mandir unfortunately lost one of its own on July 4th, our former President Mr V. Sethuram. A personal memory of Sethu Sir is of the time I interviewed him for the second BM Connect issue that we published in February 2015. He was very gracious and shared stories about his time in Bala Mandir. In this issue we are re-sharing some of that interview as an article in his memory.

We hope you find this issue of our newsletter interesting. Do share any feedback you might have to the mail ID below. Happy reading!

Archana Natarajan, Editor
archana@balamandir.org

CONTENTS

<i>From the Editor's Desk</i>	1
<i>Safety Norms</i>	2
<i>Fast Forward on IT</i>	3
<i>The Power of 'Virtual'</i>	3
<i>Online Education</i>	4
<i>Around Bala Mandir</i>	4
<i>News From the Lockdown</i>	5
<i>In Conversation: COVID Warriors</i>	6
<i>Celebrations in Bala Mandir</i>	7
<i>Obituary: Mr V Sethuram</i>	8

SAFETY NORMS

As soon as the lockdown due to COVID-19 was announced, the first priority was to ensure that the government guidelines were followed, and the employees and staff were kept safe from the pandemic. As per guidelines, the parents were requested to take the children home. While in the Nagercoil Home only two children remained, in the Chennai Home 108 children remained. This meant a large number of staff members were needed to take care of them.

To ensure safety, it was decided that the Home in Chennai would be converted into a bio-zone, insulated from the outside world as much as possible, with strict norms about how people come in and go out. Many matrons and helpers stayed back in Bala Mandir to take care of the children 24x7 and avoid movement in and out. Advice was also taken from Dr Reddy (Bala Mandir's paediatrician), Dr Suchitra (who handles the girls and women staff), and from Dr Mohan Kumar (an epidemiologist from the National Institute of Epidemiology) to arrive at norms and protocols for safety. All these norms were followed within the Home, and records were maintained of the daily health of the children. The children and staff were also given immunity building supplements.

Those coming from outside were asked to undergo thermal screening and their names and temperatures were logged in a log book. The purpose of the visit was also recorded, and only the most critical visitors were allowed during the complete lockdown. They also had to provide a self-declaration of health and exposure to COVID. A sanitization schedule for the commonly used areas was drawn up and followed.



All the different areas of Bala Mandir were disinfected regularly, including the walls outside and inside the rooms ↑



Chennai Corporation carried out sanitization exercise periodically ↑

Thermal scanning was carried out for those entering Bala Mandir and temperatures were recorded →



Hand sanitizer and trays of Dettol to wash feet were placed in each block as well as at the entrance →

Thermal scanning was done for the children for the health records ↓



Milk packets, vegetables and fruits coming from outside were washed on receipt ↑



Social distancing was maintained during TV times and meal times ←

FAST FORWARD ON IT

The lockdown led to a forced acceleration in adoption of IT in many areas of Bala Mandir. One of the first challenge was payment of salary to all the employees on time. Also the food donors needed to know status of booking of food slots. To access the HR, payroll and Donation software from outside it was decided to move quickly on the planned shift from on-premise server to cloud server. This happened very early in the lockdown and turned out to be a timely move, since the server in the main office crashed but work continued with virtually no impact on the work. A dedicated team worked hard to ensure that the salary was paid on time to all employees from March 2020.

In the month of April a decision was taken to start online Spoken English classes for the children at the home. This needed computers to be set up inside the Bala Mandir Home with capability for video calls. Since the school was closed, available computer systems could be moved from the SMHS Maths Lab to the Home and integrated with purchased speakers, webcams and microphones. Since many classes needed to be held simultaneously to cover more children, the systems needed to be placed in different rooms in the Home and this needed power and network cabling for internet access. All this work was completed during the peak period of lockdown, while following all the safety precautions.



The Child module software which was developed 4 years back had many limitations and a decision was made to develop a totally new software for tracking the individual home children's records with possibility of accessing the data and updating the information using mobiles. The lockdown period helped in accelerating the software development since the team could focus on this and now the system is ready for use. In the same way it is also planned to develop a school software which would be linked to the Child module to enable seamless access of child information.

THE POWER OF 'VIRTUAL'

The lockdown allowed the Bala Mandir team to harness the power of the 'virtual' in many ways. Many of the employees across different units were suddenly forced to work from home which they had never done in the past. The members in charge, coordinators and unit heads kept in touch with their staff members through conference calls and online meets, to plan out how to share inputs for academic improvement and reach out to students and teachers. This enabled the teachers to start reaching out to the students and provide daily lesson over WhatsApp and calls. One indirect fallout of this initiative was the significant improvement in the quality of content and especially the audio and video files shared with the students. However the challenge of response level remained a problem.

Ms Sumathi Sudhakar was the first to start her spoken English classes for the senior girls of Bala Mandir. This was followed by volunteers from CHAI who started taking spoken English classes for all the other girls in the high schools. These classes were held on a daily basis over 6 days a week, which is lot more than the normal inputs which the children would get under in the normal circumstances.

The children could keep up with not just their studies, but also their extra-curricular activities such as Madras Youth Choir's online classes for the junior choir from June.

The Sub-Committees held their meetings online and finalised plans for the way forward. The Executive Committee and the Board of Trustees also held their quarterly meetings online. The meetings were focused and productive.



In this virtual setting the training and evaluation activities of the Bala Mandir Research Foundation continued to take place. An internal evaluation was conducted of project implementation by Integrated Women Development Institute (IWDI) in Phase VI of the Michelin-sponsored ECCD project in Tiruvallur district. Staff enhancement through the monthly Study Circle initiative could also be continued in an online format through mail. The first one captured the effect of coronavirus on the psyche and on the environment. The response was excellent.

One other positive development was that the social workers, caregivers and members could work online together to create Individual Childcare Plans (ICPs) for each of the children in the Home with added inputs of the psychologist. This exercise required data about the children's background, academics, medical record, and other activities. Each child was discussed in detail and the individual care plan was documented.

All the education units of Bala Mandir were shut down during the lockdown. At first efforts were made to keep the children of Standard X engaged, since their exams had been rescheduled. But slowly, as it was seen that the lockdown was extending further, each educational unit began planning how to get back in touch with the students and restart classes through calls, online classes and Whatsapp. The process was strengthened through constant review and feedback. While the units could not have normal online classes, each unit had their own version to suit their situation.

In the High School, WhatsApp groups were created for each section and class from VI to IX. Teachers provided the students with worksheets along with audios and videos to ensure that they understand the concepts clearly. Daily lessons were given, and evaluations were carried out. A lot of effort also went into reaching out to the children and parents who were not responding and convincing them to join. Response to the online classes improved significantly.

The Primary School had similar groups to send worksheets, videos, and other content to students. A set of activities and worksheets are sent at the beginning of the week and the children are given flexibility to complete them at their pace. The formal process for the transition of Standard V students from the Primary School to the High School with information on each child, was completed online.



The teachers in Vidyalaya and BMPS worked together to take forward the Ahaguru / Eureka method. This is a methodology by which the skill levels of each child is assessed against a target for the specific standard (e.g. understanding and writing three-letter words, then four-letter words, etc.), and then plan made for improvement in the skill level. An orientation programme was conducted on this Eureka method for the teachers. A first assessment was conducted on spoken English for the children. The Eureka content on 'English Bytes' and 'Fractions' was also shared with the High School children to strengthen their basics.

The team of the Madhuram Narayanan Centre for Exceptional Children unit (MNC) was actively in touch with parents during the lockdown to continue the children at home, to prevent regression and provide order and structure, which children with special needs require. Parents made a list of recreational activities like TV and music, indoor fitness activities like yoga, important skill goals for therapy such as target words or sentences in speech, and household chores in which the child would participate. Time slots were allotted for each of these, along with who would be with the child to supervise the activity. When the child achieved something, a photo or video was taken to boost self esteem. Parents made videos of the children and sent them to the teachers and group heads for feedback.



Kindergarten teachers sent worksheets on WhatsApp to the children. The ECCD team also completed their assessments based on the Child Observations Reports and IMOW tools.

It was very interesting to see the engagement levels of the students rising as the online classes went on. While they were hesitant before, they became much more comfortable with the online classes, and began feeling very excited about them. While participation levels were at about 50% at the start, it moved to closer to 80% by the end of the quarter.

AROUND BALA MANDIR

Many of the infrastructure projects had to be halted for this time period. They were slowly restarted from June. Gardeners could not come and go, so the security personnel, who had to live in-house during the lockdown, and the children helped with gardening. One of the positive effects was the growth of trees and plants in profusion.



NEWS FROM THE LOCKDOWN

A decision was taken by the Bala Mandir management to support the parents of the day scholars by providing a small provision bag for each of them. About 245 parents received an assorted dry ration packet consisting of 5 kg rice, 1 litre oil, ½ kg thur dhal, ½ kg wheat flour, ¼ Kg tamarind, sambar powder, chilly powder, semiya, turmeric and salt. These were distributed through a two day camp held in the schools. For those who could not attend the camp, the provisions were sent across to their homes. Provisions were also given to the children in the Home who had gone home during the lockdown.



MNC also reached out to regular donors and well wishers to get provision bags for the needy. Many of the regular donors were very supportive and helped by personally donating for provision bags for the MNC parents who were daily workers and lost their jobs during this lockdown period. The Bhoomika Trust was a great source of support, and provided not just basic ration items but also protein rich pulses, jaggery and other such items which are important for healthy meals for special children. The Trust's Managing Trustee Mrs. Aruna Subramaniam's philanthropic help was deeply appreciated. In addition to this, the Rotary Club of Madras Besant Nagar, Dist 3232 donated two dozen provision bags containing 14 items which are staple for the diet of special children.

A number of migrant workers from Orissa who were working on the erstwhile Vocational Training Centre building were stuck in Tamil Nadu due to the lockdown. Bala Mandir provided them with a place to stay and supported them till they could get passes to move out to their hometowns.

The Standard X exams were cancelled this year and all the children were promoted to Standard XI based on marks from internal assessments and attendance. Three of the girls who were in the Home, Bharati, Kavitha and Mariya, shared their experience. "Exams were to start from end March. They were first postponed to May and then June. We continued studying throughout this time with lessons on WhatsApp. We were given a time table of what we should be studying and when. The teachers expected us to study for atleast 6 hours. In June they announced that the exams were cancelled. There was some happiness that we did not have to write exams, but we were more disappointed! We had studied so well in this gap, and had gained a lot of confidence. People like PN Sir and Thiagarajan Sir made sure we learnt everything and were ready to face the examinations. We did not do that well in internal assessments and we would have done much better in the final exams. This was something all of our classmates in the school also felt. We were very confident about subjects like Maths and Tamil especially. Mentors were assigned to us to teach us all these subjects, and this was a good initiative that really helped us learn well. They made us study and explained to us in detail. This should be implemented from the beginning of the year for all children."



We were actually disappointed to not write our exams! We had studied so well and would have got better marks in final exams.

During the lockdown, the children were kept occupied with many activities. The children had library sessions everyday, where they read interesting story books. They enjoyed their usual games. They also had art classes conducted by Ms Abitha, a senior Bala Mandir girl, and learnt national songs and bhajans taught by Ms Swapna, another senior girl.



BALA MANDIR'S COVID WARRIORS IN FOCUS

BM Connect had a tête-à-tête with the leaders of the COVID Warriors – Ms Chitra, Coordinator, Children's Programme and Ms Veena, Superintendent, Main Block – to find out more about the experience of the lockdown.

Ms Chitra: In the beginning we had no idea that the lockdown would go on for such a long time. We usually have day and night duty for the staff in the Infants and Toddlers Block, and we knew that people could not come and go, so we spoke to the staff and asked if they could stay over for the period of the lockdown. Most of them said yes. In a few cases we had to speak to their families to ensure them that our staff would be safe in-house. However, the lockdown kept getting extended and the staff continued to stay to take care of the children. Normally the number of children is reduced in April and May, so the staff takes annual leave. Due to this lockdown, the staff had to forego their well-earned leave and stay back to take care of the children.



I could not come to the Home since my residential area was impacted early on. It was the same with Arulraj, our senior social worker, who is familiar with handling crisis situations in Bala Mandir, and with government rules and how to report. Our main points of contact in the Home were Anandhi in the Infants and Toddlers Block, Veena in the Main Block and Praveen in the Boys' Section, all of whom were a little new to this. I was on call with them all the time. But I was giving suggestions, and it was they who went ahead and implemented these and they did a wonderful job. We had continuous communication with the DCPO and SARA, and we provided daily reports with complete transparency.

There was a great deal of planning required in many different areas. We had to speak to our regular vendors for fruits, vegetables, milk, etc. to ensure they would continue to deliver to Bala Mandir. Most of the staff in the kitchen could not stay over, so the residential helpers would complete their duty for the day / night and go over to the kitchen to help out. We did not have a nurse during this period also, so Anandhi did that duty as well.

I could finally start coming from mid April to Bala Mandir. To avoid contact, I used to stand outside the building and talk to the staff and children through the gate. I felt so guilty at times that I could not pick up the children or help the staff. I told the children they could not come near me while I was wearing a mask and it became almost like a game with them! Of course, being cooped up inside meant that there were small tiffs between staff members, and I tried to smoothen things. We genuinely shared our appreciation with each of them for the work that they had been carrying out. We could not have done anything without them – their dedication and care, and their support and understanding.



Ms Veena: We did not even know what a lockdown was when they announced it! We just thought we need to remain safe and remain indoors. To the children it felt like a summer vacation in the beginning. During this time we had to manage by ourselves. No one was allowed to come inside. We were lucky to have many children and senior girls from Bala Mandir who had gone through similar crises in the past, and hence knew how to keep the morale of the children up during this exigency.

Throughout this time we never lacked for anything. While people outside the Home were struggling for basic necessities, we never had such problems. Our children did not have to miss a single meal – from their morning milk to evening dinner. We made sure we stocked up on sufficient provisions. The management asked us to go ahead and purchase things when we needed them. Our routines were also set after some time.

PN Sir used to come everyday to the Home, and he engaged the children by taking Maths classes. We then decided to start online spoken English classes by volunteers. For this a lot of planning was required. In the beginning, the children were helping out very much in the kitchen. This was great, because it meant that they learnt a lot of basics about cooking, which they wouldn't have learnt otherwise. However, once their online classes started, we felt that it is better for us to buy food from outside. We sourced food from Mr Mahadevan, the restaurateur who was also involved in supplying food to many other institutions hit by the lockdown as a service. Coordinating online classes was a major challenge because we had separate schedules for each child and had to make sure systems were available. But it was a great eye-opener for us to identify the abilities of our staff members. They were able to take care of the children, coordinate online classes, and also receive updates on WhatsApp and make the children study. Many thanks to them, and to the management who completely supported us in this time.

CELEBRATIONS DURING THE LOCKDOWN

During the lockdown, Bala Mandir children in the Home continued to celebrate different festivals and special days, while following the norms of lockdown protocol. During this quarter, four days were celebrated – Tamil New Year's Day, Sri Rama Navami, Storytelling Day and Yoga Day.

Tamil New Year's Day and Standard X farewell, celebrated with a mime and dance on coronavirus awareness



Sri Rama Navami was celebrated with bhajans and aarti



Storytelling Day on June 13 (Balu Sir's birthday) was celebrated through videos by Ms Sreelekha



World Yoga Day was celebrated on June 21, with the demonstration of asanas



OBITUARY: MR V. SETHURAM

Mr V. Sethuram, former President of Bala Mandir passed away on July 4th at the age of 93. Sethu Sir, as he was fondly called in Bala Mandir, belonged to the Vupputur family, who ran the stationery company V. Perumal Chetty and Sons and the printing house Hoe & Co. He met the founder of Bala Mandir, Manjumma, when she was the District Commissioner, and he was a scout as a young teenager under her. He came into Bala Mandir through Mr. E.L.Viswanathan, who was the Office Secretary then.

Sethu Sir became the first Hon. Joint Secretary of Bala Mandir in 1963 to help with the day to day administration and supervision of Bala Mandir. He shared during his interview for BM Connect in February 2015 – “My main role was as a stopgap for handling difficult situations with people.” He fondly told stories of the days when Manjumma used to call upon him to come from the office to handle certain issues which were too difficult to be entrusted to anyone else. He also talked about the strong ethical history of Bala Mandir that continues today, and how Manjumma used to question donors before accepting their donations.

In 1977, Sethu Sir was elected to become the Hon. Treasurer, and in 1993, he became the President of Bala Mandir Kamaraj Trust.

During this period Sethu Sir also got involved with the Indian Fine Arts Society, and was eventually the President of the Society. Their programmes were held in Bala Mandir’s German Hall. The children of Bala Mandir attended many of these programmes and were able to enjoy different art forms. Sethu Sir was also able to get jobs for many of the boys from Bala Mandir in his family press.

Sethu Sir saw Bala Mandir almost from its inception and he felt that Bala Mandir has been able to adapt to change reasonably well. He spoke with interest about how he found small changes very fascinating – like the Arya Samaj weddings for the orphan girls, where the rituals are explained in detail. “Things are different from when we were all working here, but the changes have been positive. One of the main good things in recent times is how there are many Members involved in the running of Bala Mandir, taking charge of specific Units and running them. It is important that the right people are involved and working. It is good for the future of the institution”, he said during the same interview. The example that he set himself – of availability, care and concern at every stage – will remain a huge inspiration to the other Members of Bala Mandir. His presence will be missed very much.



With Sri Kamaraj at a function held in 1965



One of the early meetings with Manjumma



Unveiling Sri Kamaraj's bust in 1998



Trust Meeting with Braade Stiftung



45th Anniversary of Bala Mandir



60th Anniversary of Bala Mandir

Published by: Bala Mandir Kamaraj Trust,
Phone: +91 44 4867 9207

No. 8, G.N.Chetty Road, T.Nagar, Chennai 600 017
Email: main@balamandir.org Website: www.balamandir.org