



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

The continuing COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown forced the teams across all units of Bala Mandir to think of interesting new initiatives for improving the quality of the educational and other inputs provided to the children. Many of these have contributed to a very different kind of experience for the children in the Home, and has improved their computer abilities, spoken English, and reading and comprehension levels. This has been a wonderful outcome of this difficult situation.

However, despite the hard work and efforts of the team, day scholars in the schools have not been able to benefit to the same level, and it has been an uphill challenge for their families to cope with both social and economic issues which have resulted from the pandemic and the lockdown. Initiatives, such as the mobile scheme and mentoring programme are targeted at easing this situation. These, and many other initiatives, have been covered in this issue.

On a personal note, it gives me great pleasure to mention that BM Connect is now entering its seventh year. Thank you all for your support – and hope you enjoy reading our issues going forward as well!

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FOUNDER'S DAY

On September 24, Founder's Day was celebrated in the Cultural Hall. The Bala Mandir children performed a Villupattu depicting the life history of Bala Mandir's founder Manjumma. Long service awards were given to Mr. Simon (20 years), Ms. Bhooma (20 years) and Ms. Thilagavathi (25 years).



THE CONTINUING IMPACT OF THE LOCKDOWN

As the lockdown continued in Bala Mandir, most of the work continued as it did in the first three months, especially in the Home in Chennai. Most of the non-residential helpers who had stayed in the Home during the lockdown, extended their stay willingly. Staff went on leave on a rotational basis, and got back to work after following proper quarantine procedures. Some of the children who came back to the Home from their parents in both Chennai and Nagercoil also followed quarantine protocols, and were admitted only after testing COVID-negative.

In the Home, the children in the Infants and Toddlers Block continued to be engaged with fun exercises, rhymes, indoor games, and storytelling sessions. The kindergarten children revised what they had learnt earlier. Due to the uncertainty about when school would reopen, it was decided that classes would be conducted for LKG and UKG children, with worksheets prepared by their teachers. For the older children, studies continued through WhatsApp. Senior girls and college-going girls also continued to keep attending online classes and submitting their required work. Some more computers with internet facilities were fixed for online classes in the Main Block and in Boys' Section.



Following the partial relaxation of the lockdown in August 2020, classes started on August 10 in the Bala Mandir Cultural Centre for the primary school children in the Home. Teachers taught the children for half a day, strictly adhering to the safety norms. WhatsApp classes for the Primary School day scholar children started on August 5. Weekly syllabus plans were made and covered via audio & videos to children.

The High School also started operating regularly, and the teachers / office staff also started coming to office on a rotation basis. WhatsApp groups were active for both the English and Tamil mediums for Standard VI to X. In some case subject wise groups were also formed.

In early September the High school was opened for doubt clarification. Lessons sent on WhatsApp were stored in the school computers and students who did not have access to phones, and had other problems, were encouraged to go to the computer lab for self-learning. This approach helped over 20 children who were not able to benefit from the WhatsApp classes till then. However, this was later stopped on the advice of the DEO. Efforts were made to keep in touch with all the children through WhatsApp.



The teachers in the Madhuram Narayanan Centre defined a 24-hour home based programme keeping in mind the necessity for a structured environment for the children even at home. Parents were consulted about each child's daily routine during the lockdown, and a baseline of how children were functioning was arrived at. Based on this, class teachers prepared a schedule of activities for each child with the parent or caregiver acting as carry-over agent. 141 children received inputs under this programme. Each child interacted with a Special Educator and Therapist in 3 sessions a week and received a schedule of activities for the whole week to be followed. The parents' reaction to the programme was extremely positive.



Most of the staff in the office returned to work, since the government allowed 100% staff back from September 1. But, keeping in mind the difficulties faced by the staff, Bala Mandir continued to pay full salary to all the employees without any leave deductions, and providing flexibility in work hours. These will continue till December 31 atleast.

As norms for lockdown keep changing, Bala Mandir is ensuring that the safety and wellbeing of the children and staff is given the highest priority, as always. At the same time, Bala Mandir is continuously exploring ways to continue the educational inputs to all the children under its direct or indirect care. This is proving to be a challenge in many cases, but the teams across units are trying to come up with creative solutions to help the children during this difficult time.

CELEBRATIONS IN THE QUARTER

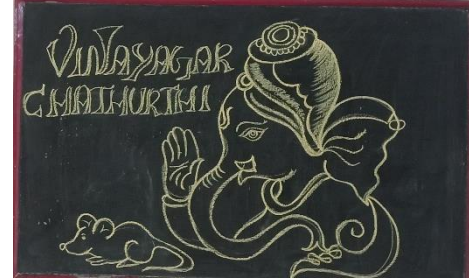


← Independence Day was celebrated on August 15 in the Nagercoil Home



→ Kamaraj Day in the Chennai Home on July 15

Independence Day celebrations in the Chennai Home on August 15 ↓



The board in the Dining Hall was updated with drawings relevant to the celebration ↑



← Vinayaka Chaturthi was celebrated in the Chennai Home on August 22



→ On August 3, Mass chanting of the Gita was held for world peace, in memory of Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda



Varalakshmi Vrutham was celebrated in the Chennai Home ↑



→ Onam celebrations in the Nagercoil Home

← Krishna Jayanthi dance in the Chennai Home on August 11



INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

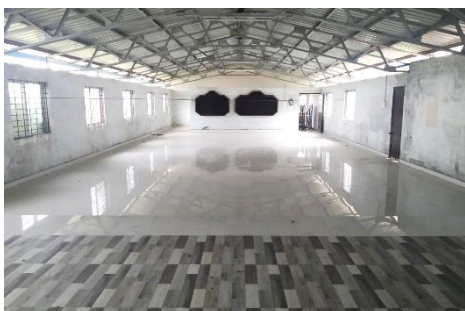
Many of the projects that were begun for improvements in infrastructure were completed in this quarter.

The erstwhile Vocational Training Centre has been modified internally to convert it into Vidyalaya English Medium Primary School without change in the building footprint. This involved converting the 4 workshops into 16 classrooms resulting in a school with capacity of 350 children - double of current Vidyalaya size.



The baby room in the Infants and Toddlers Block has also been refurbished by combining two rooms to create one larger room, which will give additional space for the children.

Paver blocks were laid in the internal roads of the Bala Mandir main complex.



In the second floor of the Diamond Jubilee Block in Nagercoil, work was completed on the stage and the floor in the auditorium, and the toilets were also renovated.

The auditorium work was completed with funds from the non-recurring grant received from the DCPU.



EXCELLENCE AND EXEMPLARY AWARDS



Awards and certificates were given to the children for Excellence in conduct. The certificate highlighted the child's abilities and potential, academic excellence and exemplary behaviour. The children who had completed their Standard X, and were rehabilitated, were given a farewell gift.



ONLINE EVENTS FOR INDEPENDENCE DAY

Within the Home, a series of activities were held on Google Meet from August 12 to 14 on the reading and comprehension skills of the children, as a lead up to the Independence Day. All the events were completely in English, which made it a first of its kind in Bala Mandir. The events were coordinated by Ms. Hemamalini, and volunteers from CHAI and CTS and Members in Charge of the Children's Programme were involved in these activities. The events were passage reading activity (on which questions were asked), rhyming word activity, picture comprehension activity, free drawing by children with explanation as to why they chose to do it, and listening comprehension. On August 15 evening, the children gave speeches on the leaders, and did mono acting and skit online. The children displayed great enthusiasm to participate, which increased day by day. These events helped the children dispel their apprehension of public speaking, and also provided a platform to gauge their English reading levels.



MOBILE SCHEME FOR THE SCHOOL

In these unprecedented times when online learning has become the need of the hour, Satyamurthi High School decided to roll out a mobile scheme for the parents of their students to help the Standard X students stay abreast with the syllabus. Android phones were provided at a highly subsidized price to the parents of children in Standard X, so that their children could attend WhatsApp classes that were being conducted by SMHS teachers, ensuring continuity in their education. Additionally, a loan facility was also provided to parents who were unable to pay even the subsidized rate. The scheme was also extended to Bala Mandir helpers whose children are studying in Bala Mandir schools. A total of 25 students benefitted from this scheme.



GOVERNMENT VISITORS

On August 13, Juvenile Justice Board [JJB] Magistrate Ms. Shanmuga Priya and a Member of the Child Welfare Committee made a sudden inspection of the Chennai Home as per the directions given by the Honourable Supreme Court of India. They expressed their satisfaction that the Home was being maintained well.

On August 17, two policewomen from E3 Teynampet visited Bala Mandir and provided awareness on COVID-19.



NEWS BITS FROM ACROSS BALA MANDIR

Children belonging to the Junior Choir wing of the Madras Youth Choir performed in online concerts on Zoom celebrating Independence Day (on August 15) and in memory of the Choir's founder Sri M.B.Srinivasan (on September 19).



Mr. Dhanabalan from T.Nagar, who had lost his sight, had approached the institution for support for his daughter Ms. Priyadarshini's education. Today she is a successful Sub-Inspector in the Mount station.

6 special educators from the Madhuram Narayanan Centre attended an e-Conference conducted by the Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University. Mrs. Jaya Krishnaswamy presented on "Early Childhood Special Education – Praxis and Challenges".

Bala Mandir members and staff attended a Zoom programme on Master Training in ECCE, conducted by TN Forces. It was held over a month on Wednesdays and Saturdays from August 26 to September 26. The participants were Ms. Lakshmi Gopal, Ms. Punitha, Ms. Bhuvana, Ms. Vijayalakshmi, Ms. Jennifer and Ms. Preethi Karthik Krishna.

In the year 2019-20, the Michelin Tyres project was managed by a local NGO, IWDI, with the support of BMRF trainers. Phase VI has been completed and Phase VII is currently in progress. A refresher training for IWDI field staff was conducted for six days by the LET trainers and organised by Ms. Viji from BMRF.

Spoken English training classes were started online for all the teachers in the Primary and High School through CHAI volunteers. For the first time, the teachers from all three Bala Mandir schools were combined and divided into groups as per their skill levels. A total of 25 teachers in 5 groups have regular weekly online classes.

Arabhi Panchapakesan (originally Charumathi) was admitted to Bala Mandir as a 10-day old baby. She was later adopted when she was nearly 6 months old and taken to the United States by her adopted parents. Recently she donated pressure cookers and mixies to the kitchen, and also donated 525 reusable cloth masks. She made sure that the masks were suitable for Bala Mandir by checking samples and getting the masks done in different sizes based on the requirement in the Home. The Donation team coordinated this with the manufacturers in Vellore.

ONLINE STUDY CIRCLE

With social distancing norms are still in place, online Study Circle sessions are continuing, with themes based on the month. Documents are sent in Tamil and English to employees group wise, and responses are invited through mail.

Themes for this quarter:

July: Kamarajar's ideals that he practiced throughout his life and inspirations from him

August: Health and hygiene (to coincide with Medical Day celebrated in August) through fun activities and exercise videos

September: More about Bala Mandir's founder Smt. Manjubhashini and her relationship with Bala Mandir



The founders with BM's registration letter

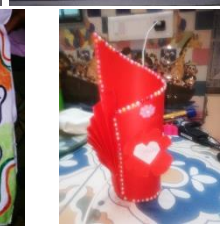
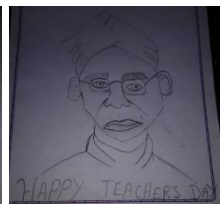
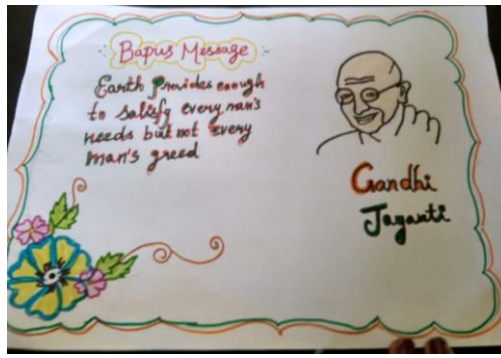
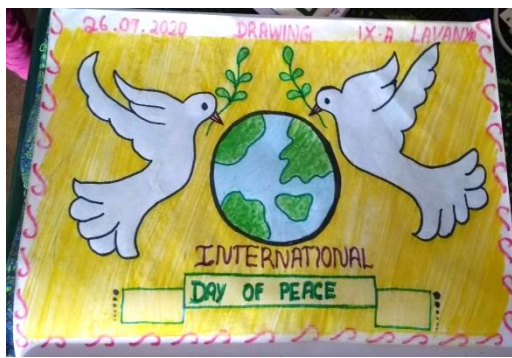
AHAGURU TRAINING FOR TEACHERS

It has been decided to work with the organization AhaGuru to improve the effectiveness of learning for children in the Primary Schools. A team from Bala Mandir visited a school being run by them in a rural area and was very impressed with their processes. Based on this, a decision was made to seek their help. As part of this, AhaGuru conducted an online training for the teachers in the Primary Schools on 'Teaching English, Maths and Tamil'.



ARTWORK BY SMHS STUDENTS

A new WhatsApp group was created to help students in Satyamurthi High School express their thoughts and feelings. In these trying times, art is a great way to relieve stress and ease the tension on a child's mind. Thus, this platform was created for students to process and express their emotions. The children's art and craft was based on the topic given to them every Saturday. Some of their drawings and artwork are showcased here.



SUPPORT FROM VOLUNTEERS

During the lockdown, many volunteers have been conducting online sessions for the children.

- Volunteers from CHAI have been conducting spoken English classes for the children from Standard V to XII, and for the college going girls.
- Volunteers from Cognizant Technology are holding spoken English and Maths classes for Vidyalaya children.
- Volunteers from U&I have been taking basic mathematics classes for High School children on Saturdays.
- Three special needs Bala Mandir girls are getting weekly inputs from Ms. Gayathri from Bangalore. Multi skill based activities have been started as a result of this.
- In High School, under the 'NATPU' project, one-to-one weekly structured mentoring sessions on phone have been started for 40 children. The mentors are all well-placed individuals in Chennai.

The sessions by the volunteers have helped the children tremendously, building their self-confidence and knowledge.

REWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Staff members in the Home in Chennai received a special reward in recognition of their service during the period of complete lockdown, especially the first three months. A total of 34 people were given a cash award along with a citation about how they have contributed to Bala Mandir. Their total dedication in staying back in the Home to take care of the children – some of them even sacrificing their leave – was sincerely appreciated.



RETIREMENT — Ms. PRIYA RAJKUMAR

After 25 years of meritorious service, Ms. Priya Rajkumar retired from her role as Principal in the Madhuram Narayanan Centre for Exceptional Children with effect from June 30. She had managed this responsibility for over two decades.

Ms. Priya is a post graduate in Home Science, and has a B.Ed. degree. The birth of a special child nudged her into getting into Special Education. She approached Madhuram Narayanan Centre with her son, seeking early intervention for him, and joined the institution as a Special Educator in 1994.

Ms. Priya obtained a Diploma in Special Education (Mental Retardation) from the National Institute for the Mentally Handicapped, Hyderabad, standing first in the country and bagging the Dr. B D Menon Gold Medal. There was no looking back since then. From a Special Educator, she became the Principal of the Centre.

Ms. Priya will be missed very much, and Bala Mandir wishes her the best for the next part of her journey – retirement and grandmotherhood!



HR NEWS

During the lockdown, Bala Mandir continued to pay full salary for all employees without deductions or loss of pay. Salary rationalisation was also carried for a few select employees across units.

There were many retirements of employees above the age of 60 during this time period in Bala Mandir. Some of these employees are continuing their service with Bala Mandir on a retainer basis.

During this quarter Bala Mandir published newspaper ads in Tamil for the 'Learn While You Earn' scheme to recruit new caregivers. Three people were selected to join Bala Mandir under this scheme.

Hiring restarted across units of Bala Mandir and the team was able to fill vacancies for teachers in the High School and Primary School, and for a nurse in the Children's Home in Chennai.