



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

We bring to you once again a double issue, covering the happenings in Bala Mandir in the first half of 2021.

After a near normal first quarter from January to March 2021, most unexpectedly the second wave of COVID-19 brought back the full lockdown from April onwards. This time, however, we were better prepared, and everyone seamlessly switched to the lockdown mode – stricter bio-bubble in the Homes, online support from volunteers, etc. Even though some staff members were affected, the vaccinations helped them recover and resume work soon.

The gradual reopening of services from June onwards happened in a more systematic manner with better adherence to safety norms. In the Home, the staff and Members kept the children engaged, with the additional help of volunteers who interacted with the children online. The schools moved quickly back into online classes, and the school team began work on improving the infrastructure. Mentors continued to interact with the children alongside the teachers and made a difference to them. BMRF moved all its activities online, and successfully partnered with multiple organisations to deliver training programmes. MNC moved many of its annual events online, and these were carried out with the support of the parents and children. There was also focused attention on streamlining some of our HR policies, processes and practices across Bala Mandir during this period. The HR team worked with a newly constituted HR Advisory Committee to roll out increments for the staff in June.

It has definitely been a busy half year, and this newsletter just brings you a glimpse of all our activities, news and fun during this time. We hope you enjoy reading it!

Please do share any comments or feedback you have to the mail ID given below.

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OBITUARY: MS GEETHA R



Bala Mandir deeply regrets the passing of its long-time staff member, **Geetha R** on July 11, 2021. Fondly known as Geetha Akka, she used to be the House Mother for the boys, and was especially their favourite even after they grew older. She retired in May 2019 after over 40 years of service, and went back to her family. Her memorial was attended by many who had grown up under her loving care, which in itself is a testimonial to her remarkable impact.

NLP TRAINING IN MNC

Aram Porul, Chennai conducted a Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) Training session for the staff of MNC spread over 3 days during the last week of January 2021. The programme focused on Personal Effectiveness and was run by G Ramasubramanian, Corporate Trainer & Master NLP Practitioner, Psychotherapist and Head Training – Excel HR. The programme focused on how an individual can get the best possible results, professionally or personally. The trainer provided tips and inputs to the group to visualize their end results, and to remain flexible in order to achieve them. He also encouraged the participants to build better relationships with those around and with themselves.



MNC SPORTS DAY

MNC conducts its annual Sports Day every February. This year, due to the lockdown, the event was changed to an online format, and conducted over three days – February 22nd, 24th and 26th. The children performed the activities at home with the help of their parents. Judges from MNC watched them virtually, timed them and declared the winners.

Each group – birth to 2 years, 2 to 4 years, and 4 to 6 years – was allotted time in turns and each child took part from home. The parents and siblings of the child arranged for the Google meet for the staff and well wishers of MNC to watch online. They also arranged for the material and ensured the child was briefed on the activity so that time was not wasted on that day.



Mr. Manushya Puthran was the Chief Guest for the event and joined the programme virtually on February 26th. He addressed the parents and teachers and was all praise for the efforts of the parents. He spoke about the importance of inclusion, and how it should start at home.

VISITS BY GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

Officials from the Government often come to Bala Mandir on visits and inspections. On March 24th, Bala Mandir was happy to welcome the new District Child Protection Officer Mr Ramesh Karthick, who visited the Home along with the DMS doctor Kalpana and Juvenile Police Inspector Ms Gajalakshmi. The team carried out a district level inspection in and around Bala Mandir. They also interacted with the children, staff and Members.



In February the E3 Teynampet police visited Bala Mandir and provided awareness to the children on road safety and accident prevention measures. The children in the Main Block and Boys Section were part of this session.

On March 8th, for Women's Day, policewomen from the police station also spoke to the girls of Bala Mandir about the Kavalan app, which is meant for the safety and security of women on the road. They also spoke about basic safety measures that would help girls.

These visits often provide interesting and important information that will help the children in the future.



NEWS BITS FROM ACROSS BALA MANDIR

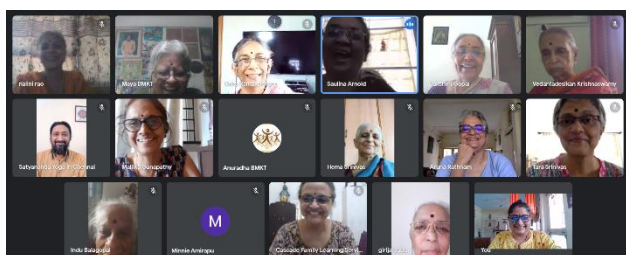
As per Tamil Nadu State directive, SMHS campus was reopened for Standard X students on January 19th and Standard IX students on February 8th. Teachers and staff welcomed the excited students, who had not been able to come to school for nearly 10 months. Due diligence was given to following safety protocols. Regular temperature checks, provision of sanitisers and masks, and ensuring social distancing in the class were followed, to ensure the safety of all students and teachers. The classes, unfortunately, had to be shut down again from March 22nd due to the second wave of COVID-19



The teachers of MNC composed a song and displayed placards to spread awareness about facilities provided by the government for the disabled. The video was made at the request of the District Differently Abled Welfare Officer.



June 13th, Balu Sir's birthday, is celebrated in the Home as **Storytelling Day**. On the occasion, the children participated in an online storytelling session by Ms Sreelekha. The children also sang Balu Sir's songs in his memory.



An online connect was established from January 2021 with the **Network for Information on Parenting (NIP)** – an initiative by BMRF. Three Chapter meetings were held in May and June 2021, with many diverse topics emerging from the discussions.

Backlit Bala Mandir logo signs have been added to many of the buildings in the Chennai units, especially the ones which are facing the public roads.



Dr. Sunder of Freedom Trust conducted a **Camp for Mobility Aids and Appliances Assessment and Distribution** at MNC to specially help the children with physical disabilities on March 25th, as he has done every year. He and a team of 5 physiotherapists spent half a day at the Centre. 32 children were assessed, and many were selected to receive splints, shoes and wheelchairs free of cost.



Anandhi B (Bala Mandir girl, who also worked as staff for many years) got married on June 28th in Hosur to Ajay, after which she has relocated to Bengaluru. Many Members and well wishers contributed to her trousseau and gifts on the occasion.



The **Study Circle** continued with the series on holidays in India, and the topics 'Holidays are Happy Days' and 'Holidays are Harmony Days' were a continuum from December 2020's topic – 'Holidays are Holy Days'. From March a new series was started, focusing on interesting tidbits from Bala Mandir's history – starting from the 'Pillars of Bala Mandir' in March, past Executive Committee Members in April, and a brief about the current Members in June 2021.



NEWS BITS FROM ACROSS BALA MANDIR (CONTD.)

The admin and HR teams facilitated **COVID vaccinations** for staff across units at the nearby hospitals / corporation centres. Over 50 staff members received their two doses of the vaccinations.

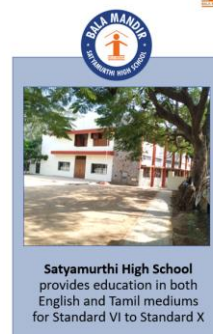
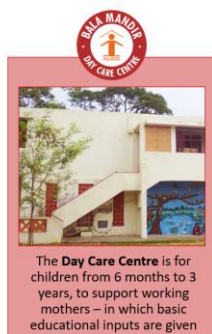


Pathashaala organized an online programme on the topic '**Mann Vasanai Kondattam – Celebrating the Scent of the Soil**'. The children in the Home participated as audience and learnt about importance of farming, roof gardening, terrace gardening, kitchen gardening, and being eco friendly in all their activities.

SAMVAAD sessions continued to be held online. Ms Jaya Krishnaswamy spoke on **Zero Rejection** on January 7th. On January 29th, Dr V R Devika of Aseema Trust took up the topic **Sevadharma as Swadharma**, as part of the annual Gandhi Speaks series. On June 17th, Dr Aruna Rathnam made an interesting presentation on **Privilege and Exclusion in our School System**. All sessions were very thought provoking for the participants.

The schools undertook many efforts to **increase admissions** for the academic year 2021-22. The teams in Vidyalaya and the Day Care Centre prepared small videos highlighting the benefits offered in Bala Mandir schools. Flyers and an overall video covering all the schools together were also prepared for circulation through WhatsApp and other social media. The teachers also spoke to parents in their neighbourhoods about Bala Mandir schools. As part of this exercise, **new logos** were created for all three schools.

About Our Schools...



The Primary and High Schools follow State Board syllabus and provide good quality education at low fees

On June 21st, **World Yoga Day** was celebrated in the Home with demonstrations of Yoga by the children across different age groups. The children are routinely taught about the importance of yoga.



The website of the Bala Mandir Research Foundation has been redeveloped and is now live at **bmrf.in**. The website carries information on the parenting programmes and resources materials of BMRF.

Training for the staff has been underway through both online and in-person sessions. The HR team conducted an induction session for new hires, covering Bala Mandir's history and current status. Caregivers and office staff went through a training programme on the Juvenile Justice Act, conducted by Ms Jenifer and Mr Arulraj. In addition to these, Ms Maya Gaitonde and the BMRF team conducted training programmes for the teachers of Vidyalaya and the Day Care Centre, as well as the Home caregivers, with special focus on 'Parenting for the Primary School Child'. Other programmes such as the NLP Training in MNC (covered in Page 2) also added great value.



REPUBLIC DAY CELEBRATIONS

For the 72nd Republic Day, it was decided to conduct a series of activities from January 22nd to 25th. The staff in the Home and Ms Hemamalini of Vidyalaya planned out the activities and trained the children for the events. On January 22nd, the primary school children played a game with jumbled words and jumbled sentences. The words and sentences were tailored according to their level. On January 23rd, the children recited Thirukkural, Athichudi and proverbs. They also competed in Mental Maths and Spell Bee. On January 25th, a storytelling event was conducted, with the children telling stories in both Tamil and English. The children completely enjoyed this event, which was followed by a quiz competition. In all the games, the winners were awarded prizes.

Republic Day was celebrated on January 26th in the Homes in both Chennai and Nagercoil, and the children put up programmes. The Chennai Home performed a song, a dance and a street play. In Nagercoil, the girls presented a pyramid formation and a dance.



Republic Day celebrations in the
Chennai Home ↑

Republic Day celebrations in the
Nagercoil Home →



PONGAL CELEBRATIONS

Pongal celebrations were held across units. On January 14th, the staff and children in the Chennai Home made sweet pongal in a traditional pot. The younger children performed a harvest dance, while the junior boys did a demonstration of Surya Namaskar. In the afternoon, traditional games were conducted for the staff and children – uriadithal, tug of war, kabaddi, musical chairs, lemon and spoon race and water filling games. This was based on an idea suggested by the staff members in the Boys Section. Both the staff and children participated with much gusto, with the highlight being the participation of Dr Reddy in all the events throughout the day. In MNC the staff celebrated the festival on January 11th with colourful rangoli depicting its various aspects.



Pongal
celebrations in
the Home
↑ and ←

MNC
celebrations
→

MENTORING INITIATIVE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

The last newsletter mentioned about the mentoring programmes in Satyamurthi High School. In this newsletter, we take a deeper look at the school's one-one mentoring programme.

The one-one mentoring programme in the Satyamurthi High School is called 'NATPU' (meaning 'Friendship') and is a 100% volunteer managed programme adopted from the 'Dosti' programme which has been running successfully in Mumbai. The mentors make audio phone calls to their mentees once a week and talk to them for about an hour. There is a well-developed curriculum which acts as a guideline for the mentors, and the process of engagement is well thought through and easy to follow. The NATPU process in Bala Mandir was started in July 2020 during the peak of lock down. It has now been extended to all the students in Standards IX and X. After a successful run of 10 months the team took off in May 2021 and now the new batch started again in the first week of August 2021.

The NATPU project has volunteer coordinators who were working with the mentors to ensure smooth conduct of the mentoring programme. From SMHS side, the project was coordinated by Mr Pradeep C, the school social worker, who worked on this with support from Mr P Natarajan.

38 mentor-mentee pairs were established. One mentor was assigned only to one mentee. Each mentor fixed up a time for a call every week with the mentee, which they tried to follow as much as they could. The mentors were encouraged to be 'friends' with the mentees and support them with the issues they might raise from time to time. Many of the mentors managed to build a strong rapport with the children, and got them to open up about their challenges with academics, hobbies and interests, and their personal lives and family circumstances.

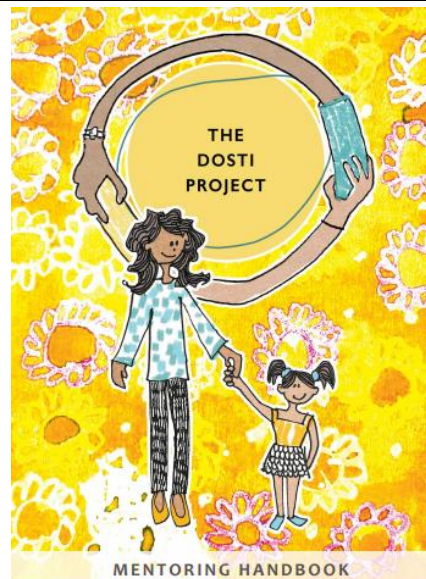
At the end of the mentoring batch, feedback was formally collected from both the mentors and mentees. The majority of the feedback from both ends was very positive.

The mentoring experiment has been a rewarding one for the children, and many of them have become more confident and have developed some new habits. One of the tangible results noted was the marked improvement in attendance when the school started in January 2021 for a short time and the improved attitude of the children towards studies. This period was a challenging one for the children due to the loss of livelihood for some of the parents and the general health related issues. The mentoring process contributed towards coping with the stress.

One of the major challenges in the project was to get the children to consistently answer the scheduled calls by the mentors, who were quite patient and supportive. The mentors also shared their experiences with each other, including the positives and negatives they were facing. This helped them support and learn from each other.

In the short period when the school was open, some the mentors got to meet their mentees in person. The mentees really enjoyed meeting them and finally putting a face to the person they had been speaking to for so long! The mentors also shared their excitement at getting the opportunity to meet these mentees after 4-5 months of speaking on the phone.

The success of the mentoring programme has encouraged the school to take up more initiatives involving volunteers. It has also helped Bala Mandir fine tune the approach for the ongoing mentorship of children in the Home.



EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR 2020-21 AWARDS

During the Bala Mandir Anniversary celebration on March 10th, 'Employee of the Year' Awards were given to recognise and appreciate employees who had gone above and beyond their role to support during the difficult year of 2020-21. The awards were given out by Mr N Kumar, President of Bala Mandir Kamaraj Trust. The Awardees received customised framed certificates with their names and the award citations.



Pradeep C (SMHS) – for excellent anchoring of key school initiatives and additional support in all areas



Bhuvaneswari A (ECCD) – for proactive approach, positive attitude, and team spirit



Panneerselvam S (Maintenance) – for initiatives and projects taken up to support the units in a tough time



Raghuraman J (Accounts) – for physical presence in office and help to ensure salary payment to all staff



Kalavathi B M (Kitchen) – for support in the kitchen and taking charge of it in a difficult period



Sumathi G (Kitchen) – for her positive and proactive handling of the kitchen with limited resources



Anandhi B (Children's Prog.) – for her 24x7 care of infants during the lockdown without medical staff



Sushmitha C (BMCLC) – for her creativity in BMCLC activities and work on BMRF resource materials



Vaijayanthi Desikan (MNC) – for contribution in Jivikam curriculum and MNC government recognition

S Vijayan (Admin) – for exceptional coordination to meet COVID protocols for safety of the children and leadership to keep the team motivated and engaged



Chitra Krishnan (Children's Programme) – for her leadership in guiding and motivating the team, and for her openness in adapting to all exigencies

NATIONAL GIRL CHILD PROTECTION DAY

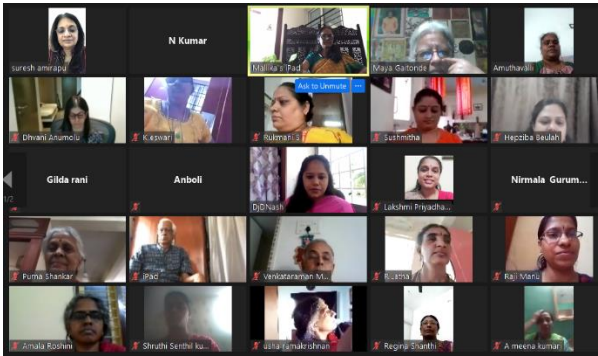
National Girl Child Protection Day was celebrated on February 24th in the Homes. In Chennai, the children drew pictures on the theme 'Empowering Girls for a Brighter Tomorrow'. In Nagercoil a quiz was conducted, and prizes were distributed to the winners. The children took a pledge on this day.



S MANJUBHASHINI MEMORIAL SEMINAR

The annual S Manjubhashini Memorial (SMM) Seminar 2020 was held virtually on February 6 on the topic **‘Implementing Inclusive Education in Mainstream Schools’**, lead by Ms Kalpana D. Kumar (Founder, Kare Therapy Centre) and moderated by Ms. Mallika Ganapathy (Educational Consultant & BMRF member). There were almost 50 participants, many of them from Bala Mandir Schools.

The seminar was specially designed to make the teachers aware of the vital role that they play in children's lives and of practical inclusion strategies that they can immediately start to incorporate in their classrooms so that no child is left out. Ms Kalpana described what inclusive education was, and what inclusive education looked like where both regular teachers and special education teachers worked together. She briefly traced the history of government regulations on disability and special education in India with all schools becoming disabled friendly by 2020. Her session was followed by questions and answers.

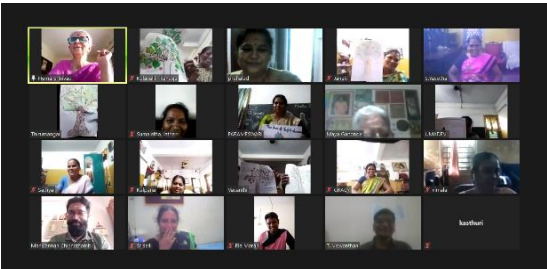


BMRF TRAINING PROGRAMMES

The BMRF team took up two training projects in the quarter from January to March 2021, with the NGOs **SOS Village** and **Suraksha** (based out of Nagercoil), in addition to its long-running Gummidipundi project. The training programmes were conducted completely online.

The SOS programme focused on capacity building training for their staff to enhance the quality of care of children placed with them. It was completely customized to meet the specific scenarios that the staff in SOS encounter. The training was conducted by Ms Maya Gaitonde and Ms Vijayalakshmi from BMRF along with three well-qualified external trainers, Ms Hema Srinivas, Ms Saulina Arnold and Ms Vidya Shankar.

The programme for Suraksha was based on the Learning Through Play calendar. Phase 1 of the programme was completed in December 2020. During the first quarter of 2021, the next phase was taken up through a 12-day module comprising concept-oriented training and implementation training, with half a day spent in training. Ms Lakshmi Gopal from BMRF, was the mentor for the project, while Ms Vijayalakshmi and Ms Nirmala were the trainers.



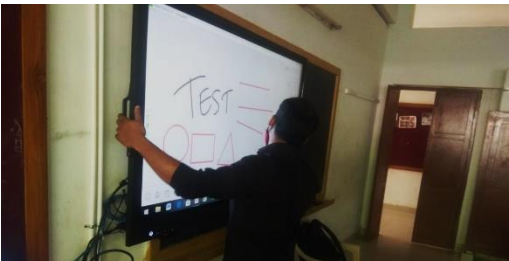
SOS Training
←
Suraksha Training
→



RANGA SMART CLASSES

During the quarter of January to March, Smart Boards were purchased and put up in all the schools. The Boards were contributed by a group of alumni from IIM Bangalore, who had collected funds for creating **‘Ranga Smart Classes’** at Bala Mandir, in memory of their classmate Mr R Rangarajan, who had passed away due to COVID-19. The fund initiative was spearheaded by one of his classmates, Mr N Ramesh, Member of Bala Mandir’s Executive Committee.

All the teachers from Vidyalaya and Satyamurthi High School were trained on how to use the Smart Board for classes. The set up has been planned out so that its use can be maximized when the schools reopen once again. The teachers were very excited by the different functionalities available.



BALU SIR SUMMER CAMP

Due to the lockdown, the Balu Sir Summer Camp was held in the Bala Mandir Home, from May 3rd to May 15th. This is held annually in memory of Mr Vishy Gaitonde, fondly known to the children as Balu Sir. The Camp began with an inauguration held on May 3rd. A group of children sang songs which used to be taught by Balu Sir, and Gowri, a matron in the Home, gave a speech on him. The children were divided into groups for activities – dance, music, mime, street theatre, arts and crafts and drawing. Each of the staff members was assigned an activity, since outside faculty were not allowed in the Home due to the second wave of COVID-19. The Camp was held everyday between 9am and 12 noon, and supervised by senior staff Veena and Shakunthala. At the end of the Camp, a valedictory function was held on May 15th. The children of the Infants & Toddlers Block sang Balu Sir's songs and performed a mono-act, with the children dressed up as different types of vegetables. The Vidyalaya children performed a song on the soul of language. A mime was performed on the theme 'Celebration', and a street theatre play on the concept of use of plastic hazards and saving trees. The Vidyalaya children performed a dance on the theme of Nature, and the High School girls performed a patriotic dance highlighting different forms of dance from across India. The Camp was enjoyed very much by the children, and all credits to the efforts of the staff who worked together to make it a success.



CHILDREN'S CORNER

Different vignettes from the lives of our children!

The High School girls attended a virtual workshop as part of The Pupil Career Talk Series – a motivational talk by Dr.Sylendra Babu, IPS, on all facets of civil services.



New Year's Day was celebrated with great enthusiasm on January 1. The children made a special rangoli and wore special clothes for the occasion and worshipped at the Bala Mandir temple.



Career counselling sessions were held every Saturday for the combined Standard IX and X during the short period they were in the school. Professionals from different fields addressed the students to broaden their understanding about the wide spectrum of job opportunities available.



The children of the Junior Choir wing of the Madras Youth Choir participated in an online music programme for Republic Day and rendered a patriotic song taught to them by Ms Leela Natarajan.



SMHS partnered with AhaGuru to conduct science experiments every Saturday for Standard IX and X, from February 27th onwards, to use hands-on learning to explain science concepts.



On March 19th, Standard X students conducted **Peer Teaching** for Standard IX students through activity-based teaching. The children and teachers were very enthusiastic about this new initiative.



Thiruppavai Chanting Competition, organized by Gokula Bhaktha Bhajanai Sabha, was conducted online. Children from Standard III to XII participated in the competition.

On February 21st, Childline conducted a programme for the children in the Nagercoil Home on psycho-social support. They explained about the child helpline, gave a motivational talk and conducted sports activities.



CHILDREN'S CORNER (CONTD.)

Different vignettes from the lives of our children!

Swachh Bharat awareness programmes were held in the Home in March. The children drew pictures related to the theme and cleaned up the premises of Bala Mandir. They also demonstrated their knowledge of the COVID protocols for hygiene. A video was shown on health and hygiene. Most interestingly, the children did wall paintings with different themes across the Home – “Keep your surroundings clean”, “Save water” and “Use dustbins properly”. It was an innovative way to ensure these important environmental lessons are understood and internalized by the children.



The annual examinations were held for the children in the High School from April 24th to 28th. In the absence of physical classes in the school, the children wrote their exams in the Main Block in the Home, while maintaining social distance.



An interesting activity undertaken was a Children's Parliament Committee meeting with the girls in the Main Block. They elected a Committee Representative, and leaders for various groups, such as Education, Discipline, Cultural Activities, Food and Sports.

READ A STORY AND LET'S TEACH ENGLISH INITIATIVES

The 2021 summer holiday for the Bala Mandir schools was unusual in many ways. It came after an academic year in which the children were at home and studied with remote guidance of the teacher, and it also came with an external situation of a stringent lock down due to the second Covid-19 wave. In this situation Bala Mandir's summer activity plan was aimed at finding the best way to engage the children.

Bala Mandir schools planned a twin initiative of **Read a Story (RAS)** and **Let's Teach English (LTE)**. RAS was for the children in primary school and those in the High School whose English comprehension skills was poor, while LTE was a one-to-one spoken English class for the other High School children with higher English comprehension skills.

RAS was an established programme run by N+One social foundation, which had run this for the tribal children in rural Maharashtra using normal phones (not smart phones or online calls). A total of 50 children from Vidyalaya and SMHS benefitted from this programme. N+One could attract 80-100 volunteers from all over the world to help the children. Each child was given a set of free story books suitable for students in Standard III to VII, and the volunteers taught the students reading, pronunciation and comprehension. Students are initially assessed to determine their current standard of English and books were prescribed accordingly.

LTE was also extended beyond the students to the staff of Bala Mandir who wanted to improve their English. The volunteer tutors were mainly students / young adults and they supported 40 children and 40 adult learners.

WOMEN'S DAY IN MNC

Indus Towers Ltd. sponsored the Women's Day celebrations in MNC on March 8th. Ms Saveetha Lakshmanan, Circle Head, came to the centre with her team and distributed gifts for the children and plants for the staff and donated half a dozen tree saplings for the centre. She also sponsored lunch for the staff on the day. She addressed the gathering, impressing on them how important women were in every sphere and that it is up to every woman to seek success in all situations. Mrs Jaya Krishnaswamy also addressed the staff about the importance of the mindset of tradition, regardless of the personal situation that a woman might be in, and how to cultivate a good attitude.



NUTRIFEST IN MNC

MNC's Nutrifest was held for the fourteenth year. This is a function held every year for building nutritional awareness, and to emphasise the paramount need for a right and balanced diet and nutritional intervention in growing children, especially for children with special needs. This year it was held on April 7th, and the theme was on recognizing the importance traditional food items during the pandemic.

The food items which were featured in this festival were turmeric, garlic, ginger, pepper, lemon, amla, drumstick leaves, etc. A cookery competition was held on the theme, and this was conducted online through Google Meet. Parents participated from their homes, and the audience (including the judges) witnessed the preparation and the presentation from the Centre. Winners were then decided and announced. All the recipes were mailed to the Centre and saved there for reference.



SMHS INITIATIVES

The mentoring of the previous year for the students in Standard IX and X of Satyamurthi High School came to an end, and new sessions were started for the students who had just been promoted into these classes. On June 27th, a PTA meeting was held at the school for the parents of these students. The meeting was attended by about 25 parents. They were briefed about the mentoring scheme and its advantages. The parents were asked to encourage their children to talk to the mentors and get their inputs to improve themselves. They were also informed about the mobile scheme that is applicable for these children.

On June 7th, 15th and 16th, dry rations (rice, dal and sugar) were distributed to the parents of the students in Standard VI, VII and VIII of SMHS. This was similar to the initiative undertaken in 2020-21. The distribution was managed by the teachers and administrators.



PTA Meeting in SMHS



Distribution of dry rations

CELEBRATIONS IN THE HOME

In addition to Pongal and Republic Day (covered in detail in Page 5), many other festivals were celebrated in the Home, as they are done annually. In addition, the children in the Home who performed well in the previous academic year received Excellence and Exemplary Awards.

Mahashivaratri was celebrated on March 11th with prayers to Lord Shiva and bhajans till midnight



Sri Rama Navami was celebrated on April 21st with bhajans and prayers



Tamil New Year's Day was celebrated with a dance performance and speeches



The children received Excellence and Exemplary Awards on Tamil New Year's Day



PYTHON CODING – A NEW INITIATIVE

Python is a computer programming language, which is simple, easy to learn and hence a perfect starting point for children into the world of programming.

The Python coding initiative was started in Bala Mandir with the support of Ms Deepa Senthil Rajan. Her husband Mr Senthil Rajan from Saint-Gobain has been supporting Bala Mandir with all its IT activities. Ms Deepa's deep interest and passion for teaching coding for children at a young age, which she had started as a CSR activity at her previous organisation with a well-etched curriculum – plus her own experience with her elder daughter Kavya, who took to this strongly – led her to offer to teach Python programming to the children of Bala Mandir.



Ms Deepa explains that teaching programming at this young age can result in many advantages, such as logical skills, improvement in communication, more confidence, interpersonal skills, learning from peers and seniors, expressing thoughts and developing a spirit of curiosity and learning – all very essential skills for the Bala Mandir Home children. Having taught Python coding to a group of young children, she had experienced how it can positively impact and accelerate learning, and was keen to help the Bala Mandir children gain from it.

Ms Deepa helped Bala Mandir partner with GUVI, through their founder Mr Arun Prakash, who agreed to provide the Hacker Kid platform (a codified gaming environment) for the children at no cost. He also offered the help of mentors from Hacker Kid to support the children on an ongoing basis for learning coding.

Ms Deepa, along with her husband and Kavya, then prepared the Bala Mandir children for the programming classes by conducting introductory sessions. These sessions (over three Sundays in March) were held in the High School computer laboratory, just before the full lockdown due to the second wave of COVID-19. During these sessions, the children were taught the basics of programming, the need for logical and clear thinking and some simple problem solving approaches. These helped the children understand and learn much better during the classes.



Once the children got their individual Bala Mandir domain mail IDs, the Hacker Kid sessions started in June, and these have been regularly going on since then. Each child spends atleast one hour per week with the mentor doing coding, and more time on their own working on the Hacker Kid platform.

The energy levels and enthusiasm of the children for the programme has been remarkable. While the classes are completely voluntary, even the children who did not sign up originally for the classes signed up for the next batch after seeing their peers enjoying the classes. Currently all the Bala Mandir Home children from Standard V and above are part of the programme. They never miss a class, and love the challenges posed to them as gaming exercises with points. There is also a healthy competition between them on who is ahead in progress to the next level of complexity.

The children were asked to share their thoughts about the programme and here are some of their responses – “I used to ask questions to the mentors before, but I am able to figure them out now”, “my concentration has improved since I started this class”, “we are learning through gaming and the achievement points are encouraging”, “I have to read and understand and do it correctly” and the most common response – “it is very interesting and jolly!”

BALA MANDIR ANNIVERSARY

Bala Mandir celebrated its 72nd Anniversary on March 10th at the Bala Mandir Cultural Centre. For the first time ever, in deference to the 'new normal', the entire event was live streamed and watched by staff, Members and friends of Bala Mandir across the world.

The programme was based on the topic '**Lock down Saval – Ethirkonda Engal Kathai**' – the story of how Bala Mandir dealt with the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The event began with a welcome dance by the junior children. This was followed by a skit put up by the children across age groups, on how Bala Mandir coped with the pandemic lockdown from March 2020 onwards. The skit combined various elements such as a puppet show, a mime on how to protect oneself from COVID, a song, presentation and videos, to present a comprehensive view of how the various units of Bala Mandir responded to the lockdown. At the end, the younger children performed a dance on nature and its importance. Interwoven into the skit were stories about how Bala Mandir created and maintained its bio-bubble, the changes it made to engage and motivate students across units, and the contribution of various volunteer groups.

Following the cultural programme, Mr N Kumar gave away awards for the Employees of the Year. The Chief Guest for the evening, Dr Girija Vaidyanathan gave her speech online, motivating and encouraging both the children and the staff to aim higher and achieve their goals. She also appreciated the efforts from them that had gone into making the programme a success.

A few glimpses of the programme are provided here.



HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES IN THE HOME

During the summer holidays, activities were conducted for the children in the Home. These included tailoring, English conversation, Python coding, traditional games, typewriting, shop activities and kitchen gardening. A new initiative was a proxy shop stall in the Montessori room to teach the children about shopping – purchasing and selling items using real and artificial money. The children enjoyed these activities tremendously.



RETIREMENT AND FAREWELL

This period saw the retirement of 4 staff members of Bala Mandir. **Ms Ananthalakshmi**, Coordinator for the Day Care Centre retired in March. A farewell function was held for her online, and staff and Members shared fond memories. Also in March, **Ms Mangala Mary** Helper in SMHS retired. The SMHS team gifted her with a memento.

Ms Janaki, a long-time House Mother retired in mid June. The Home staff got together and bid her a tearful farewell.

Mr Vedhachalam, Admin Coordinator, retired from full time service on June 30. Members and staff across units shared anecdotes about their time with him, and he was felicitated for his yeoman service.



HR NEWS

Welcome to Bala Mandir!

- Uma Lakshmi, Head – HR & Donations
- Raj Praveena, Social Worker, I&T Block
- Arockia Sharmila, Social Worker, I&T Block
- Ilakkiya, House Mother, Main Block
- Sivakami, House Mother, Nagercoil
- Paulin Dhason, Paramedical, Nagercoil

Welcome to Bala Mandir!

- Gayathri K, Teacher, SMHS
- Kalpana H, Special Educator, MNC
- Sutha S, Special Educator, MNC
- Kalaiselvi PR, Special Educator, MNC
- Lakshmi V, Special Educator, MNC
- Amala Pushpam S, Administrator, MNC

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