



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

The quarter between January to March has always been an interesting one to write about. Bala Mandir is usually very active during this time, with annual visitors like our friends from Braade Stiftung, many festivals, school sports days, the annual SMM Seminar, the interesting initiative of Nutrifest, and of course, Bala Mandir's Anniversary on March 10th. These are all covered, as always, in our newsletter. This year on our anniversary, we also released a book of short stories written by our school children as part of a creative writing workshop – which you can read about on page 4!

It is our privilege to cover Bala Mandir Kamaraj Trust's Patron and Founder of MNC, Ms Jaya Krishnaswamy, in this edition. Ms Jaya stands apart as an inspiration – with a lifetime of service to children with special needs and their parents. Her innovative thinking, initiatives and the many honours she received are covered in pages 6 and 7.

We have also received some requests for the older editions of BM Connect. These are available in our website, www.balamandir.org at the link here: [Newsletters](#). Do check out any editions you might have missed!

Please share your feedback and suggestions on our newsletters at the email ID below. Happy reading!

Archana Natarajan, Editor
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OBITUARY: MS PUNITHA RAMALINGAM

It is with deep sorrow that we mourn the loss of Ms Punitha Ramalingam, a Bala Mandir Member for over 25 years, who passed away on 1st May 2023. Ms Punitha worked across various units during her time in Bala Mandir and brought her unique touch to each one. Her incredible service journey has been covered in BM Connect in the 29th edition (available [here](#)). A poem in Tamil (*reproduced below*) by Ms Chitra Krishnan, Director – Children's Home, captures the essence of her personality – her gentle and calm nature, patience, generosity, and sense of responsibility.

சிரித்த முகம்
எளிமையான தோற்றம்
வலிமையான மனம்
பொறுமையான குணம்
மாறுபட்டு சிந்திக்கும் திறன்
நயமான செயல்
சாந்தமான தோற்றம்
பாசமான மனம்



நிறைகளை போற்றும் குணம்
பொறுப்புக்களை செவ்வனே
செய்பவர்தான்
போதும் என்ற எண்ணம்
அள்ளிக்கொடுக்கும் மனம்
பேரைப் போல பண்பு
நிறைந்தவர்
இதுதான் எங்கள் புனிதா அம்மா

Editorial Board: Leela Natarajan Rukmini Amirapu Sudha Lakshmi Rao Smita Aiyar Ramesh N
Vaijyanthi Desikan Sushmitha Chandrasekhar Sangeetha Mani Archana Natarajan

NEWS BITS FROM AROUND BALA MANDIR

The annual 'Gandhi Connect' programme was held in the Bala Mandir Cultural Hall on 18 February 2023, in association with Gandhi Peace Foundation, Chennai. The topic for this year was '*How to convey Gandhian Thoughts to School Children*', presented to the Bala Mandir teachers, to empower them to bring thoughts of peace and harmony to the children. Mr Kulandaisamy and his associate Dr Senbagavalli performed a skit on how Gandhian thoughts can be taught to children. This was very well received.



Bala Mandir Annual Day was celebrated on 11 March 2023 in the Nagercoil Home with a cultural event and prize distribution ceremony for the children who won prizes. The Chief Guest for the day was Dr Theiva Prakash, Non-Official / Independent Director, Food Corporation of India.



MNC conducts periodic refresher training for Early Intervention Centres for the 32 districts of Tamil Nadu. In the month of March 2023, 5 clusters of about 150 special educators in total underwent this training in MNC.

On 16 February 2023, a Dental Camp was organised for the students and staff members of SMHS. This was organised by the Government Dental Hospital, in collaboration of Rotary Club of North East.



On 14 January 2023, the children of the Chennai Home attended the 'Margazhi Kalai Vizha Traditional Cultural Programme' – a thematic dance production on 'Andal Pasuram' and a light music show that was held at Vani Mahal.



U&I volunteers held an English programme for Standard II & III and LIFT (Life Influencing Functional Training) for Standard VIII to XII on Sundays for the children of the Chennai Home throughout the year. Graduation Day was held in March and the children were presented certificates.

On 12 March 2023, the High School children of the Chennai Home, accompanied by Ms Veena, Ms Geetha and Mr Sankar took part in Sri Lakshmi Hayagreeva and Sri Saraswati Homam, invoking the Divine Blessings of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, at Sundaram, Myslapore.



The Education Management Team had visited Isha School and Eureka School at the start of the School Reengineering Project, in 2020. Now, after over 3 years, the team repeated the visits to the two schools – Eureka School on 10 February 2023, and Isha School in Cuddalore on 28 February 2023. The visits were for getting exposure to best practices and understanding new insights on Education, especially post COVID. The new members of the Bala Mandir Education management team got to interact with the personnel of these schools, which was very enriching for them.

FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS

Glimpses into the various festivals and important days celebrated across Bala Mandir!



← New Year's Day in the Chennai Home



→ Pongal celebrations in the Chennai Home



Pongal celebrations in the Nagercoil Home (←), SMHS (↑) and MNC (→)



Republic Day celebrations in the Chennai Home (←), Nagercoil Home (↑) and MNC (→)



← On Republic Day, Bala Mandir organised an online session for children of the Kinship Care programme in Chennai as well as an outing to Vandalur Zoo for the children in Chengelpet & Kanchipuram districts



← Maha Shivaratri prayers and bhajans in the Chennai Home



→ Sri Rama Navami prayers in the Chennai Home

KINSHIP CARE EXPANDS TO KRISHNAGIRI

The Kinship Care programme was extended to Krishnagiri district in January when the new social worker Arthi joined Bala Mandir. This was the first geographical expansion, undertaken after the core processes had stabilised, including Dhruva software which helps track all the information. By the end of March, over 80 children from Krishnagiri were added to the Bala Mandir Virtual Home, and various aspects of support had been extended to them, including payment of fees, volunteer reading programme, Tabs, Counselling etc.



VISITORS TO BALA MANDIR



← Mr Lars Odd Pettersen, Chairman, Braade Stiftung, visited Bala Mandir units (here with his grandson and the children of the Chennai Home)

→ Maharishi Vidya Mandir Vocational Centre teachers visited the KG Montessori



← Ms Jeannie (Braade Stiftung) & Dr Wolfram Gaden visited Bala Mandir units

→ A group of German students pursuing teacher training visited Vidyalaya; they met the teachers and had lunch with the children



NUTRIFEST

MNC's annual 'festival for nutritional awareness', Nutrifest, was held on 9 March 2023. The theme this year was 'Traditional, Healthy, Age-Appropriate Short Eats'. To prepare for this programme, Dr Avanti Prabhakar, nutritional consultant to MNC, and her team from the JBAS College for Women, put up a demonstration of dishes on 21 February 2023. This included charts on each ingredient used and its calorific value and guided mothers on how to prepare them.

On the day of Nutrifest, a competition was held, where mothers had to prepare short eats with healthy ingredients, based on suitability for the age group assigned to them – birth to 2 years, 2 to 6 years, and 7 to 15 years. The mothers also had to create charts depicting the nutritional value and the role of traditional recipes in providing children with a balanced diet. The judges were Dr Ruchi Mittal (developmental paediatrician), Ms Gowri Ramakrishnan (retd. Principal, Chinmaya Vidyalaya) and Miss Juhi N Fathima (Junior Nutritionist with Purple Teal Inc., US). Over 50 dishes were put up by the mothers for the judges and audience!



ASSORTED SHORT STORIES: AN INITIATIVE

On 25 November 2022, a creative story writing workshop was held for the students in the schools, from Standard V to VIII. This workshop was facilitated by volunteers from Deloitte. During the workshop, with the help of volunteers, each of the 30 children wrote a short story. After this workshop, it was decided that the short stories would be published as a book. Ms Snega R (Vidyalaya PT Teacher) and some students created pencil sketches relevant to each story for the book.



The publication of the book was taken up by Jouve India Pvt. Ltd., an e-publishing company, through the support of Ms Premamala Ramalingam (Managing Director, Jouve India) who has been involved with Bala Mandir for many years as a donor and well-wisher. Jouve did the typesetting and additional graphics work, and also undertook the publishing of the book at their own cost, as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

The book – called 'Assorted Short Stories' – was released on Bala Mandir's Anniversary on 10 March 2023. Present at the function were Ms Deepa Senthilrajan from Deloitte, who had coordinated the creative writing workshop, and the team from Jouve including Ms Premamala and Mr Kumaran G (Chief Operating Officer).

The book has been greatly appreciated by those who have seen it, and the children were very happy to see their names and stories in print. Each student author and other contributors were given their own copy of the book. This initiative should encourage the students to improve their English and write more stories like this.

SPORTS DAYS CELEBRATIONS

Sports Day was celebrated in Vidyalaya, SMHS and MNC during this quarter. Here are some glimpses into the games and fun by the children!

Vidyalaya Sports Day – 4 February 2023



SMHS Sports Day – 26 January 2023



MNC Sports Day – 10 February 2023



SMM SEMINAR

The annual S Manjubhashini Memorial Seminar was held virtually on 25 March 2023. The topic for this year was ‘The Role of Creches – ECCD and Women’s Welfare’. Ms Sakunthala Sharma, Secretary of Children Garden School Society, delivered the opening remarks about the need for creches, and best practices. This was followed by a video talk by Ms Sridevi Raghavan, Sr. Vice President of the Babilou family (France) about functioning of Creches in Europe as an essential service. Ms Preethi Krishnan, Member of Bala Mandir, made a presentation about Bala Mandir’s Creches. The Mumbai Mobile Creches shared a couple of videos about the work they do for the children of migrant construction workers. The floor was then opened up for discussion, and various participants shared their experiences with running Creches. Ms Lakshmi Nair of Bala Mandir and Suraksha shared about the Creches being run in Nagercoil. Ms Padmaja, CEO of Kanchana Paati also shared her experiences. At the end, Ms Sandhya Maheswari, Assistant Director – Creches, ICDS, Government of Tamil Nadu, talked about the Government’s schemes for ECCD. The open sharing of experiences and ideas by participants made this seminar an interesting one indeed!

MEET OUR PATRON: MS JAYA KRISHNASWAMY

Hon. Joint Secretary Leela Natarajan traces the service journey of Ms Jaya Krishnaswamy, Founder of MNC

It was a great pleasure to meet with Ms Jaya Krishnaswamy (JK), who spearheads the Madhuram Narayanan Centre for Exceptional Children, which she founded along with her husband, Air Vice Marshal V Krishnaswamy, in 1989. Currently JK is a Patron of Bala Mandir Kamaraj Trust and was, till recently, a Member of the Executive Committee. Age has not dimmed her enthusiasm, and she is still very passionate about helping society, especially the cause of children with special needs.



How JK began the Centre is an interesting story. While JK was doing her B.Ed., she was exposed to the concept of children with disabilities as part of her course. When she and her husband moved to Chennai from Delhi in 1986, she had just retired as Headmistress from a leading school. Mr Krishnaswamy, who had retired from the Air Force, became part of Indchem Electronics Limited, just at the time when the company was exploring possibilities of using technology for the benefit of society. The couple took up visits to various educational institutions as well as schools for children with disabilities to explore the usage of technology in the disability sector.

It was a great moment when the couple met Ms Vasanthi Pai, President, Federation of the Welfare of the Mentally Retarded, who introduced them to the Portage Early Intervention Programme. This was to train people to care for and manage intellectual disability from infancy. JK was advised to adapt Portage to the Indian situation. Looking for guidance for taking up this project, JK and Mr Krishnaswamy fortuitously met Professor P Jeyachandran, who was also involved in the study of this programme. JK says, thanks to Prof. Jeyachandran, they were able to consult many professionals, including developmental paediatricians, for developing their programme. The Indianisation of the programme went through 19 revisions. Field testing was done with children, by involving parents and special educators. Thus, UPANAYAN was born – a tool for detection, identification and early intervention for children with developmental delays from birth to six years. Recognised by the Rehabilitation Council of India as part of their curriculum for Special Education courses, Upanayan is being used in many Early Intervention Centres, particularly in Tamil Nadu, and also all over the country.



It was decided to establish a research and demonstration centre, and Mr N Kumar of Indchem Electronics immediately offered his help. It was named Madhuram Narayanan Centre (MNC) – in memory of the mother of Mr N Kumar and Mr N Sankar of the Sanmar Group. The Centre started with three children and by the end of the year there were 30 children. Slowly over time, parental involvement strengthened, and time spent by the children at the Centre increased. Yoga and Therapy were introduced. The functioning of the Centre has been a wonderful combination of parent, child, therapist and teachers. MNC, which began in 1989, has provided its services to the cause of special needs children for the past 33 years, and has been mentoring the Tamil Nadu Government Early Intervention Centres in the 32 districts.

It gives great joy and a sense of fulfilment to JK that, over time, parents have become the backbone of the Centre – involving themselves heart and soul, along with the teachers. This has led to the empowerment of the mothers. Even women in rural areas have realised their potential and feel glad that they know what is required for their child and feel confident to deal with it, as well as help other parents who have children with disabilities.

JK is very happy that the awareness of special needs has grown. She recalled the huge challenges they faced when they were looking for a place to rent since the awareness was low at that time. There was great resistance to renting out places to run a Centre for children with intellectual disability, who were unfortunately considered “mad”. Eventually, when they approached Bala Mandir’s Founder, Ms Manjubhashini, for a place for classes in the institution, they were welcomed wholeheartedly. Thus began a partnership between Bala Mandir and MNC, which lasted over 25 years, and has now culminated in MNC merging with Bala Mandir Kamaraj Trust in 2018.

Continued on the next page...

MEET OUR PATRON: MS JAYA KRISHNASWAMY (CONTD.)

Following the merger, JK was able to start up a new initiative in June 2020 – Jivikam, targeted at children above 6 years. In this unit, she is exploring the possibility of training children with pre-vocational skills, which may lead to internships or vocations the child may be able to pursue later in life with the help of parents, siblings etc.

Ms Jaya Krishnaswamy, dedicated to her life's mission in spite of her age, is an inspiration to all of us, and a shining example of how goals can be achieved, by overcoming challenges, through determination and hard work.

Some of Honours and Recognition Received by Ms Jaya Krishnaswamy & MNC

- 'Chief Minister's Special Award for Best Institution' in 1996
- National Award for the Welfare of Persons with Disabilities in the "Best Institutional Category" by the Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for the year 2004
- Sadguru Gnanananda National Award 2005 for "Families in Social Work" instituted by Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhini Trust, Chennai
- Sakhi Mandal Sahyog of Chennai – Award for her "Extraordinary contribution in her Specialized field of Spreading Awareness on the Importance of Special Education and Early Childhood (Mental Retardation), presented by Tamil Nadu Governor Dr. K Rosaiah on Women's Day 2016
- Tamil Nadu State's Best Social Worker Award in the field of Disability in 2012



CHILDREN'S CORNER

Different vignettes from the lives of our children!

Children from Vidyalaya and SMHS, who are being trained in choral music by the Madras Youth Choir (MYC), sang as part of the MYC Golden Jubilee celebrations, along with children from other schools also trained by MYC



Javate – a cultural talent show for children with special needs – is conducted annually by Lady Andal School and Sir Mutha School, Chennai. Children from MNC participated in art (drawing) and music solo competitions. Jovan Kaspar of Jivikam won the second prize in drawing. The children and staff enjoyed this event very much!



Scouts and Guides (S&G) Programme was inaugurated by Mr Purandaran, (District Commissioner, S&G), in SMHS. He shared details about this initiative, while Mr Sarathy (Assistant Secretary, S&G) spoke about how the programme will help the children develop themselves and help society.



On 18 February 2023, a team of engineers from Boeing organised a one-day session on aircraft and aerodynamics for the students of SMHS from Standard VI to VIII. The session was conducted in the Vikalpa Lab, and made interesting with practical experiments using aeroplane models. The children thoroughly enjoyed the workshop. Following this, a team of employees from Boeing have also started volunteering as mentors for the school children.

BALA MANDIR ANNIVERSARY

The 74th Anniversary of Bala Mandir was celebrated on 10 March 2023 in the Bala Mandir Cultural Centre. The theme for the event was 'Culture Through The Lens of Bala Mandir'. The event featured performances by the children, including a prayer song on religious unity, a skit on environmental protection by the Vidyalaya children, Oyilaattam by the senior girls of the Chennai Home, a mime on three themes – helping one another, conservation of water and cleanliness – by the SMHS students, an action song called 'Vilangin Thanithuvam' by the students of MNC, a medley of folk dances by the younger children, and a traditional dance by the girls from Nagercoil (through video). Long Service Awards and Employee of the Year Awards were also given away to staff members. The Chief Guest for the event was Dr Lalitha Balakrishnan, Principal, MOP Vaishnav College, who exhorted the children to follow their dreams with discipline and hard work.



Comperes for the programme



Song on religious unity by the children



Action song by the children from MNC



Oyilaattam by the Chennai Home senior girls



Vidyalaya skit on environmental protection



Dance by Nagercoil Home girls played on video



Mime by the children of SMHS



Folk dances by the younger Chennai Home children



Group picture of the event team and performers



Long Service Awards were given away to staff



8 staff received Employee of the Year awards



Dr Lalitha gave an inspirational speech

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