



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

During the quarter between October and December 2015, there was major impact on Bala Mandir because of the floods that affected Chennai in November and December.

As an organisation however, the highlight for Bala Mandir was the resilience that its children, its staff, its volunteers and its well-wishers demonstrated in a very tough situation. Stories of determined volunteers who made sure the children had enough food and water, and of the staff who safeguarded the children will be told for many days to come.

The importance of planning for disaster management was further reinforced during this natural calamity. Bala Mandir is gearing up for a significant infrastructure improvement project through the Bala Mandir Rebuilding Fund. This has seen donations coming in from all over the world to help in this effort. Do see our website, www.balamandir.org for more information on this.

Despite the trauma of the floods, normal activities continued during the quarter, with new initiatives that had been taken up for completion. Some of these, such as speech therapy and skill development sessions for the VTC trainees, have been talked about in this newsletter. More such initiatives are expected in the next few months.

We hope you enjoy reading through this newsletter. Do write in with your feedback as well.

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COMPETITION PARTICIPATION

In the quarter between October and December 2015, the children are encouraged to participate in different competitions, held by different organisations. This is to give the children opportunities to showcase their different talents in many ways.

One of the competitions the children participate in every year is the yearly Neeta Talent competition, held by the Rotary Club, including music, dance and drawing competitions. This year they participated as well, and won many prizes. They also won prizes in the Geeta chanting competition held by Chinmaya Mission. The choir group also came in for praise for their participation in the Choral Music Competitions held by Madras Youth Choir.

While it gives Bala Mandir a lot of happiness when the children win prizes, the biggest takeaway is the exposure that they receive to other children and different environments. The competition helps bring out the best in the children, and helps greatly in their personality development.



NEWS BYTES: OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 2015

Christmas Celebrations

Christmas was celebrated as per the usual tradition, with the children putting on the nativity play and singing carols in Tamil in the evening. A special prayer was also held in the morning. The highlight of the celebration was a drawing by a Bala Mandir girl, Abitha (Standard IX) of Jesus (shown here). The children also performed a dance at Madras Seva Sadan in honour of the festival.



Study Circle Sessions

Study Circle sessions for different categories of staff continue to be held on Thursdays. In October, the sessions focused on understanding the work in each unit of Bala Mandir, and the inter-relationship. In November, the concept of 'Unity of Faith' was taken up for discussion. In December, during the session, special thanks were offered to God for the overwhelming support received during the flood.

Infrastructure Improvements

A new project was initiated post the floods to create a water outlet system, which would reduce the yearly flooding in the Bala Mandir main complex by water from outside (as seen here). A new toilet block with separate facilities for boys and girls was also created in the new Bala Mandir English Medium school Vidyalaya. One of the donors for the project was the Rotary Club of Madras, North West.



Sessions for the Vocational Training Centre

Training sessions were held for the trainees in the Vocational Training Centre, on spoken English and etiquette. The sessions were conducted through Tata Consultancy Services, over a period of 11 hours. The sessions also covered the topics of motivation and confidence building. Supplementary sessions were held by the social worker as well.

Festivals and Functions in Nagercoil

Bala Mandir's Nagercoil unit celebrated Navaratri by arranging a golu. Diwali was celebrated with great joy and enjoyment. The children took the initiative to organise a Children's Day cultural programme in November. December saw the celebration of Karthigai and Christmas as per the traditions for the festivals.



FLOODS IN BALA MANDIR

In December 2015, Bala Mandir suffered terrible floods, thanks to unprecedented rains over Chennai, and release of water from reservoirs around Chennai. Water gushed into the grounds, collecting in various parts of the institution, over the period from December 1 to December 5, and was neck deep by December 3. The children were moved with great promptitude to the first floor of the buildings to keep them safe, thanks to quick thinking from the staff and senior children. The institution was not approachable in many parts, and the schools were shut down. No electricity, no connectivity, marooned on the first floor – but the children were comfortable and happy!

Despite the tough situation, Bala Mandir was fortunate to have incredible support from members, well-wishers, donors and friends, who stepped up to help the staff and children who were stranded inside. They braved the dirty waters, wading in and supplying food and water to the inmates. The institution was covered in a news report by Times Now as well, which led to offers pouring in for help and donations.

The second week of December was focused on cleaning out the sewage water and garbage collected, and the destroyed furniture from the buildings. The conservancy staff of the Corporation were a great source of support at this time, as were the volunteers, helpers and children of Bala Mandir. There was significant work to be done in clearing up files as well – the BMKT main office was flooded, and unprecedentedly, the Research Foundation was flooded too. Support in terms of donations in kind started pouring in.

The third and fourth weeks saw resumption of many activities, with many of the staff returning to work as well. The losses they had suffered were tremendous, and so Bala Mandir decided to reach out a helping hand to them, by collecting vessels, sheets, clothes etc. for them too. A series of post disaster trauma relief sessions were held for the children in the fourth week by Dr. Aruna Balachandra, psychologist, to ensure the children still felt secure in the home environment.

It has been very heart-warming for Bala Mandir to see the generosity of not just donations, but spirit, that the floods brought out. Many thanks go out to the well-wishers and donors who have extended a helping hand in a time of need. Some pictures from the floods are provided here.



RECOVERY FROM THE FLOODS



INAUGURATION OF THE INFANT-TODDLER BLOCK

The Hospital Block, as the block for babies and toddlers is commonly called, was refurbished recently. The renovation was carried out thanks to the generosity of the family of the Late Mr. A. Ramakrishna, ex-Trustee of Bala Mandir, with a contribution from Mitsubishi Elevator India. The project was anchored by Ms. Dhvani Anumolu, and was executed with advice from a team of engineers from IIT Madras. The concept behind the project was to create a warm and engaging environment for the young ones, that would stimulate their development, based on eight core factors – health, safety, comfort, convenience, child size space, flexibility, movement and choice.

The renovations included raising of the two-storey hospital block floor to reduce the impact of floods, complete wallpapering of the rooms in the block with attractive themes and designs (that are already greatly appreciated by the children!), mosquito netting, complete revamp of the plumbing, and water proofing of the second floor.

During the period from May to September when the renovation was underway, the babies and toddlers were shifted to the Main Block, and were housed with the older children. It was a great experience for the children, who were able to now play together to their heart's content, and get the feeling of a real joint family. Also appreciable in this time was the commitment and dedication of the caregivers and helpers, who were able to manage the children within a smaller space very well.

The inauguration of the new block was held on October 23rd, 2015. Many dignitaries from Mitsubishi participated in the event, including Mr. Masahito Endo (Managing Director), Ms. Kaori Takahashi (Director & CFO), Mr. K. Sam Mammen (GM – HR & Admin), and CSR members from the company. Following the inauguration ceremony, the visitors also visited the other units of Bala Mandir. The children of the Day Care Centre surprised them by greeting them with a few words of Japanese, which was greatly appreciated. A glimpse into the event is provided here.



EVENTS IN BALA MANDIR

Bala Mandir usually conducts various cultural and learning events targeted at children and teachers from other schools, institutions and NGOs every month. The months between October and December are usually no different, with the S. Govind Swaminadhan Legal Seminar (October), Voices in Unison – the Choral Music Workshop, in partnership with the Madras Youth Choir (November), and the S. Manjubhashini Seminar (December). However, in 2015, heavy rains began in November and continued through December, delaying both the events in November and December. The Choral Music Workshop and the S. Manjubhashini Seminar both stand postponed currently.

The S. Govind Swaminadhan Legal Seminar, however, was conducted as per schedule on October 31, 2015. Each year the seminar is targeted at building awareness about an important topic among the young children. This year's topic was 'Women's Rights – A Burning Issue'. The seminar saw participation from many legal luminaries, with six city schools presenting their thoughts on the topic. The Honorable Justice, Mr. M. Jaichandren, Judge, High Court of Madras, was the chief guest for the function, and addressed the gathering. Mr. CA Diwakar, Advocate, shared his memories of Mr. S. Govind Swaminadhan. Ms. Geeta Ramaseshan, eminent lawyer and an expert on Human Rights Law and Women's Empowerment wrapped up the day with her comments on the presentations and the topic.



Mr. CA Diwakar shares his reminiscences of Govind



A glimpse of the audience



The Hon. Justice addresses the gathering



School children present their views on the topic



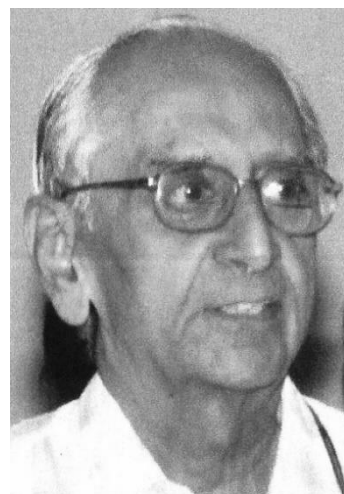
Ms. Geeta Ramaseshan provides her insights

OBITUARY: MR. M. RAMJI

In December 2015, Bala Mandir was unfortunate enough to lose one of its own. An ex-Trustee, Mr. M. Ramji, passed away on December 13, 2015. He served as Trustee, and President of the Education Sub-Committee for a number of years, until recently, when he resigned from the posts due to ill health.

Mr. Ramji worked in the Indian Railway Account Services for over 35 years, holding the post of Advisor (Finance) to the Railway Board during his career. Post retirement, he was associated as Secretary and Trustee of P.S. Educational Society, Mylapore, Chennai, in addition to being associated with various charitable interests.

Mr. Ramji is survived by his wife, Mrs. Leela Ramji, who is a Member of Bala Mandir's Executive Committee, and by his three sons. Members, staff and children of Bala Mandir offer the bereaved family its deepest condolences.



DIWALI CELEBRATIONS

Diwali is the festival of lights, celebrated in October – November every year. The festival signifies the victory of light over darkness, symbolising the triumph of good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance. Lamps are lit around the home, using light taken from the shrine of God – embodying how God’s presence illuminates and creates happiness in the midst of the darkness surrounding mankind. Prayers are offered to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.

In Bala Mandir, the celebrations were conducted in a traditional manner. All the children received new clothes. It was a special occasion for the Standard X girls, who went shopping to choose their first ever sari. In the evening, staff and children got together to burst firecrackers. The children also enjoyed a Diwali Mela, organised by the Lions Club of Madras. Staff members receive gifts and bonuses on this occasion.

Bala Mandir celebrates Diwali every year, thanks to the support of donors, who donate clothes, help purchase firecrackers, and sponsor the special meal with sweets. This year the donors shopped for clothing in different colours, giving the children a wide choice in selecting their new clothes, providing them great happiness.



SARVA DHARMA DAY

Sarvadharm Day is celebrated every year on November 23rd, on the birthday of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. The theme of the day is the unity of every faith. The five values which Baba taught – Satya (truth), Dharma (right conduct), Shanthi (peace), Prema (love), and Ahimsa (non-violence) – are highlighted. Children sing songs and perform dances about the oneness of all religions. This teaches the children about the value of every religion, and how all of them are equal. A secular outlook is an important facet and value of Bala Mandir, and it is reinforced among staff and children. Prayer sessions, held every Thursday, include a Sarva Dharma bhajan that teaches the children to sing names of God in different religions with equal love and respect.

2015 marked the 90th birthday of Baba, and the children performed a colourful dance about the five values in lotus formation. However, the celebrations had to be cut short due to sudden and extreme flooding of the dining hall. This was the first time the children had experienced curtailed celebrations. However, they and the staff immediately switched to emergency mode, moving the young children back into their block and organising dinner for all inmates from the ground floor to the first floor. Though the celebrations could not be completed, the response from the children – with no worry or concern – and the responsibility they showed in dealing with the situation showed the true essence of Bala Mandir.



TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

One of Bala Mandir's values is Continual Improvement and Striving for Excellence, and one of the ways in which the institution builds this value is by providing training and development programmes for its various staff members. Important initiatives in this regard include training on spoken English and communication, and sessions on written English and report writing. The Study Circle sessions conducted on Thursdays are also targeted at professional and personal development.

The category of staff who receive the most opportunities for developmental and skill enhancement programmes are the social workers of Bala Mandir. In this quarter, in addition to the internal training programmes conducted, the social workers had the opportunity to attend the following workshops:

- Awareness programme on Adoption conducted by Karna Prayag Trust
- Montessori Methods conducted by Ms. Uma Shanker
- Orientation programme on Child Rights and Protection for Social Workers and Counsellors conducted by National Institute of Public Co-operation and Child Development (NIPCCD), Bengaluru
- Protection of Children from Social Offences (POCSO) conducted by Tamil Nadu Commission for Protection of Child Rights (TNCPCR)



TELE SPEECH THERAPY

An interesting new project was launched in the month of October, with the inauguration of tele-speech therapy sessions. These are targeted at children who have speech impairments. This is a service offered by Sri Ramachandra Medical College, and is very much a need of the hour. While face to face therapy is ideal, it is not always feasible due to low availability of speech therapists. Researchers from the college took up a three-year project to study the use of tele-audiology to help such children in need. Their success led to them launching Webex based tele-speech services at Bala Mandir. Bala Mandir has extended its use also to neighbouring Madhuram Narayanan Centre for Exceptional Children.



The services were inaugurated in October by Ms. Vimala Kannan, the Director of the Madhuram Narayanan Centre. The first child in therapy was a student in Standard I, and many children have been added to the list. Effects of the tele-speech therapy are slowly starting to show, with the children improving their speech. The efforts from Bala Mandir are being coordinated by an ex-Bala Mandir girl, Meenakshi, who is a trained speech therapist.

HR NEWS — OCTOBER TO DECEMBER

Welcome to Bala Mandir!

- Ms. Sangeetha Surendiran, Coordinator, Donations and Sponsorships
- Mr. K. R. Rajagopal, Admin Officer, VTC
- Ms. Santhanalakshmi, Teacher, Vidyalaya
- Mr. Prabhudas, Cleaner

Welcome to Bala Mandir!

- Ms. Kavitha, Management Teacher, Satyamurthi High School
- Ms. Sivasakthi, Matron
- Mr. Suresh, Auto Driver
- Ms. Maheswari, Accountant (rejoined)

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