



**Prema Rangachary Reports:**

- Addition of 23 new children to the school.
- Graduation of the first batch of early school teachers.
- Project Day held on Dec 9th inaugurated by Aruna Roy.
- Received accreditation for open basic education and vocational stream.
- The school has had numerous workshops and interactive classes to improve their learning

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**UPCOMING EVENTS:**

- Annual Day February 2014.
- Beginning of gardening classes at the Niligiris biosphere.
- Worshop on self development
- Dance Camp (summer)
- Graduatoin of the second group of teacher trainees

**Highlights**

- The main school block is now functioning under solar power and we are not affected by the daily power shortages. The solar unit was donated by Mr. Vardhman Jain of Chennai.
- We have installed a Biogas plant which has reduced our usage of compresses propane gas by 50% and we anticipate a further reduction.
- Vidya Vanam acquired a previously old 32 seater bus to replace the van. This has reduced the number of trips needed to bring the kids to school.
- Saturday morning classes are being offered for students who need remedial help



Raman and Laxman (9years), named after the mythological brothers in the Indian epic, Ramayana are 9 yrs old, one of the six pairs of twins studying in our school. They live in Mangarai a small village of 15-20 households, about 15Km from the school. After one year in Vidya Vanam, their parents decided that their education will be better served in the Government school, located near their village. Raman and Laxman studied there for about little more than one week. On the tenth day year and without informing their parents they both showed up at Vidya Vanam. They both had taken the public transportation and wanted to be re-admitted. When asked the reason for their decision they told me, "teachers there re- other students use punching.– their very in Bhavani group. Jeeva is also studying group.



day year and without in- they both showed up at both had taken the public came to the school, admitted. When asked decision they told me, main out of the class and bad words and are words" Presently they are Their younger brother in Vidya Vanam in Neem

Their father Dass is a daily wager in a rice mill- he carries sack full of rice on his back to upload or unload the truck and mother at a brick factory and both make barely minimum salary and are illiterate. Laxman measured how big their home is by enacting it. He got up and went half a way through the classroom length-wise and breadth wise. A family of five people is living in that one room home.

"Vidya Vanam is very a beautiful school" was their first response when asked "Why do you like Vidya Vanam?" They went on, "We like Vidya Vanam because we get Kanji (a nutritious drink), lunch and milk. Students here don't use bad words. And we have lot of other activities and we learn. We like playing football, Art class and assembly too." Laxman said he likes the Tae Kwon Do class in which he learns elements of martial art. He again got up and kicked and punched in the air with "whhoof whooof" sound.

Their main after-school activities are to play dragon ball and fire games with other children. But they highlight their trips to a waterfall in the woods as one they look forward to. Again Laxman enlivened their whole Sunday excursion in the classroom saying, “Anna (addressing Rajesh the school teacher; Anna and Akka are the words used to address the teachers. In Tamil the word means, elder brother and elder sister) on Sunday, we go home, bag put, dress change and we run to waterfall and take bath there.” “We also collect a lot of mushrooms and we eat them with rice and curry. It’s very very tasty.” But surprisingly they were aware of poisonous variety of mushroom. They said we don’t collect them and we don’t eat them too. Nobody has taught them but they learned from their home and societal environment.

When asked about their plans Ram states, “I will become a lorry (lorry= truck) driver. I will drive big lorries whrrroom whroom.” But Laxman whispered to me, “No Anna, the other day he was telling he wants to drive an airplane (be a pilot). He pinched his brother playfully. Laxman said when he becomes big he says “I want to help my father” - obviously moved by the pain he sees in his father of being a day laborer. He said quickly, protruding his lower lip and closing his eyes and bending his head . Once again he enacted this scene as if he is carrying a sack full of rice on his back. Both were extremely shy when they joined Vidya Vanam two and half years ago. Now they stand up and ask questions, tell stories, jokes take part in drama etc. even if their English it not fluent. They don’t seem to have stage fright nor inhibited to speak in English while recognizing their limitations in the vocabulary and grammar, asking in Tamil “This is how everyone learns, right?”

*Prema Rangachary comments: Vidya Vanam is keenly aware of the limitations of the government school programs. While some are good and serve the needs, many like the school in which Ram and Laxman were enrolled were woefully inadequate and with limited accountability. Vidya Vanam offers remedial helps to students from government schools who need help by offering classes on Saturdays. However, this is limited since, many of the parents are not able to bring the children to the school.*

Sajan Sindhu and his friend Sunilkumar volunteered to do a workshop on an animation movie. Sajan and Sunil Kumar are recognized animators for TV and movies and have made a number of documentaries on nature and environment.



**Sajan and Sunilkumar (cartoon graphic specialists) with students of Vidya Vanam**



First four days in October Sajan spent the day with the students on cartoon movie making and use of computer animation. Students learnt the history of animation movies by watching movie clips, ranging from very to the most current ones. This was the first introduction of multi media to the children.

Afterwards, he divided the class into groups and assigned story writing to each group. The relevant story was selected. It was written by Archana P. Then, he explained three stages of production- pre-production, production, and post-production.

For the first two stages, the extensive work was done by students with continuous help from Sajan and Arun . Rajesh (English teacher) did all the scanning of the drawings made by the students and coordinated the workshop. In the post-production stage, students observed how the still drawings were made into motion pictures and they were thrilled.

The movie we made is called Nature Make Friends and is available on you tube. <http://youtu.be/3ccAvNNA-WA>. The entire production was made by the students.

Dr. Bhanumathi from Pavai Centre for Puppetry, Chennai came to Vidya Vanam to conduct a Puppetry Workshop.

On 17/10/13 , upper and lower school children were trained on how to make animal and insect puppets from chart papers. They cut the figures after drawing them on chart paper and coloring them. They glued the different parts together to make their designer puppets. They used the puppets as their medium of communication telling their stories of their life—strategy which enables them to overcome their fear of English.



Vidya

**Dr Bhanumathi demonstrating how to make base drawings to make them into puppets. And Children proudly showing the puppets they have made.**

## Kids for Tigers—Presentation

**Vanam's children roared together to save Indian tigers.**

In India there are 1400 tigers and they are getting extinct rapidly. Vidya Vanam made a vow to join national level Kids for Tigers project to save the tigers of India from extinction. Vidya Vanam invited Mohammed Saleem, in charge of Sanctuary Asia magazine Kids for Tiger project, to educate our students on the importance of tiger conservation. He gave a detailed story of the lives of the Tiger in India. The students asked a wide range of questions. We will be doing number of activities to spread awareness about this very serious issue and to work towards it. In discussion which ensued, the children's point was that equal protection should be given to all animals! We agree.



**Left: Saleem giving a power point presentation to the students while Rajesh (English Teacher ) looks on. Right: The children holding the Save the Tiger Banner and roaring like “Tigers”**

## Workshop on personal growth



**Left: Students, Manikandan and Archana giving a summing up of their learning to the group ; Right, Group photo of children to participated in the workshop**

Mohan Despande and Anjali Mhasme from Pune Visited Vidya Vanam to conduct a workshop with students on the topics of anger management, gender discrimination, health, hygiene and personal growth.



**Left: Children enacting the Vidya Vanam logo; Above: Anjali reciting Marathi poems**

They were here for two days on 2 & 3rd of December but their work is not finished . They will be visiting us again in January 2014. There was extensive discussion by students on gender discrimination in their villages and on their personal issues, especially anger management.

## **Meeting of Like-minded schools**

Puvudham Centre for Learning, for marginalized children, is situated in Nagarkoodalul (Dharmapuri Dist) . Meenakshi Umesh their director visited Vidya Vanam for two days on 4 and 5 December 2013.



**Left: Madhavraj and his students talking to the Mridamgam teacher ; Right: Prema Rangachary showing Meenakshi Umesh around the campus.**

Meenakshi Umesh came with Madhavraj one of their teacher along with 15 children. It was two days of intense interaction between children of two different schools, albeit with similar backgrounds. The children of Vidya Vanam interacted with teachers and worked with them. Puvudham's children learnt hands-on details on how we learn here both in the class room and in the art room. The children all watched the movie, "Absent Minded Professor" on big screen in the audio-visual room.

### Living Libraries—ongoing chats and discussion at noon

Once in a week during our mid-day 12.15 pm assembly, we invite guest to present 'living libraries' - snap shot of their lives. They talk about how they reached the phase of their lives at which they are presently, their childhood, the problems they faced and how they navigate them. Students also ask questions to one another and the presenter and they vary from the philosophical to hilarious and one would marvel at the range of their questions. They get so much engrossed with it that they forget that they have to go to lunch at 12.45 pm. Their FOOD FOR THOUGHT appears to appease their biological hunger!



**Visitors sharing their life experiences with the children followed by questions and answers**

Dr. N. Uma (internist from Apollo Hospitals Chennai and board mem-



**Dr. N. Uma checking for anemia in the school**

ber of Vidya Vanam) conducted her annual medical check up. The screening test this time included blood tests for anemia and examination of dental and skin hygiene. The screening blood tests showed anemia in about 5 children and when they were further checked they were found to have an inherited form of sickle cell disease, which has been previously reported in the Irula tribal population. These children will be followed more closely

by Dr. Uma and her team. These children will be more closely monitored and followed by Dr. Uma and her team.

## Making ties with the Government school

The local Government school is down the road from Vidya Vanam. They invited our Director Prema Rangachary as a chief guest to their sports day. The government school had never had a sports day, but having seen the program at Vidya



**Prema Rangachary viewing the march past and the sport events**



Vanam they organized one in which most of the government school children participated. Vidya Vanam also extends help to the Government school by way

of inviting its students for special classes at Vidya Vanam during week ends

## Teacher Enrichment Programs

Every year Prema Rangachary takes her teachers to other schools to learn about their methods of teaching and how examine their styles of teaching and learning. This year we visited Mitraniketan situated at Velanad near Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala. The teacher studied the school and other establishments under Mitraniketan for two days and interacted with the teachers and students.



**Vidya Vanam staff interacting with Mitraniketan founder Vishwanathan, an ardent Gandhian and the teachers learning the art of baking (right)**

After the visit we held a meeting here in Vidya Vanam to plan out what and how to take the experience of the visit and follow up.

## Vidya Vanam on National Stage

Nai-talim Samiti, Wardha Sewagram, Azim Premji University, Bangalore and Gujarat Vidyapeeth organized a week long workshop in Ahmendabad, Gujarat. It was on preparing OER- Open Education Resources keeping to the Nai Talim (basic education) philosophy expounded by Mahatma Gandhi. They invited Vidya Vanam to attend the workshop. Rajesh Barasara and Prema Rangachary participated the program and P. Rangachary was invited to chair a session. The national workshop sought to examine how Gandhiji's philosophy can be implemented in schools with a strong emphasis on hands on learning (activity based learning) with respect and stewardship of the land and water. It was clear to the audience that the Vidya Vanam curriculum stressed the Gandhian principles without the exclusion of current technology.



**Prema Rangachary addressing the gathering in Ahmedabad**

This was amply demonstrated by the cartoon movie made by the students in which they understood the protection of regional resources using modern technology—computers and animation (see page 4).

**New Infrastructure at Vidya Vanam**



**Solar panels on school roof and the biogas plant next to the kitchen**

Vidya Vanam is no longer under the capriciousness of the state power supply. With the installation of a 1.5KW solar panel we now have uninterrupted power through the day and the ability to use our audio– visual equipment. Also, we have installed a Biogas plant

which makes methane from cow dung and supplies the needed gas for the kitchen.

**Pfizer Donates Laptops and Printers**



Thanks to a generous donation from Pfizer we now have replaced the old CRT monitors with laptop computers. This not only reduces the power usage but is more user friendly for the students. It is connected to the internet and students now have one hour of instruction in the use of computers every week. Thank you Pfizer!

