

STATUS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN CHENNAI

The Covid-19 pandemic in Chennai continues to rage unabated though during the last few weeks Chennai has reported a slight decline in the number of daily cases. The figures as reported in the press and television media keep fluctuating but this much is clear. The virus is not going away anytime soon. The neighboring colonies around the TS estate too had several cases of infection during the last few months but however, this appears to be declining. One can never tell though, as there may be a sudden spike in cases, anywhere, anytime!

This being the case, the TS management continues its measures to prevent the infection from spreading within the campus — which is especially dangerous considering the average age of the residents living within — by restricting entry of outsiders and allowing only essential Departments to function, as in the earlier months, since the lockdown began in March 2020. It looks like being a long haul but there is no choice but to wait it out and hope for the best, while taking all the necessary precautions.

A few staff from the Vocational Training Centre (VTC) have been working in the forenoons to stitch reusable masks in cotton fabric for the workers in all the Departments. The *Bhojanasala* staff miraculously continue to provide fresh, hot, meals daily to all the residents. The Security, Maintenance, Garden, Housekeeping and Sanitation Departments also function to the best of their abilities. The Treasury, led by our able and hardworking Treasurer, Ms Nancy Secrest, has also been putting in long hours to catch up with all the pending work. The Dispensary, run under the watchful eye of Dr Revathy, caters to the medical needs of the residents and workers. And so, life in the TS estate goes on, inexorably, though at a slower pace than usual.

While the TS roads wear a deserted look with very few people to be seen, this appears to be offset by the high visibility of wildlife, which is more abundant than usual. Shy birds, like the hoopoes, orioles, woodpeckers, prinias, flowerpeckers and sunbirds, which usually hide in the trees and bushes, are calling loudly and flying around, while jackals are seen fearlessly wandering on the footpaths, and mongoose accompanied by their young, boldly intrude into human-occupied spaces.



Green grass carpets the ground under the Great Banyan tree

The vegetation in the campus which had dried up in the hot summer months from April to June, magically sprang back to life, with the welcome showers of the southwest monsoon in the latter half of June and beginning of July. The parched earth soaked up the life-giving drops of rain and blossomed forth in all its glory. Colourful wildflowers have carpeted the previously dried-up areas, trees jauntily sport fresh cloaks of green and tall stands of waving green grass have sprung up phoenix-like, from the earth, blistered and burnt by the scorching summer sun. The season for butterflies has begun and the winged beauties are everywhere, to the accompaniment of the sleepy drone of the bees and wasps. In the midst of Nature's glory, one cannot help but feel hopeful.

PANDEMIC SCARE AND THE CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS

Following the pandemic scare, all the schools in the country, including Chennai city, have been closed from mid-March 2020. The swift spread of the infection across communities has resulted in the prolonged closure of all educational institutions and unless the situation improves, keeping in mind the safety of the children, there is little or no prospect of their reopening. The two schools functioning on the TS estate, namely, the Adyar Theosophical Academy (ATA) and the Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School (OMHSS) have followed the government-mandated guidelines to shut down and continue to remain closed. However, mindful of the adage that an idle mind is the devil's workshop, they have been involved in developing many innovative programmes and delivering them online to keep the children usefully engaged during this period, as is detailed below.

News from the Adyar Theosophical Academy (ATA)

The ATA caters for the very young (pre, lower and upper kindergarten) to young (Grades 1,2,3) children, who are filled with restless energy and while being high-spirited and inquisitive, are also easily bored. To keep these tiny tots creatively occupied by involving them in a number of 'fun-learning' activities was initially challenging for the teachers. However, they rose gamely to the task and came up with online programmes, successfully making the sessions truly interactive and engrossing for the little ones.

Each class carved out its own customised course schedule to cover various subjects and the children logged in from the comfort of their homes to participate in these online programmes. The children created a gratitude jar where children thought up activities to thank Nature, the farmers for the food on

their plates, their parents, grandparents, siblings, and so on. Time was also allotted for teaching the alphabets, numbers and imparting curriculum-based knowledge. Children also had activity-based learning projects like how to make a salad, to cook without fire, and to grow plants from seeds, stems and bulbs, and other interesting hands-on activities.

There was a dance class as well to conclude every session when a song was played — and all of this online, with every child participating from his/her respective home — with joy and vigour.

The ATA's first birthday

The ATA's first birthday was celebrated in the midst of the lockdown. Alarmed by the steep increase in the Covid-19 cases reported daily, the government had announced and enforced a strict lockdown in the city and affected districts. But unfazed by all that was happening in the world outside, the staff and students of the ATA celebrated the school's first birthday by going online, with great gusto and enthusiasm. There were a slew of activities showcasing ATA's achievements over the last year, through pictures and videos. Children made birthday cards for the ATA and the celebrations ended with a lot of singing, dancing, story telling and the presentation of gifts.



A birthday card for ATA made by the children

News from the Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School (OMHSS)

Like the ATA, the OMHSS was also closed as per the government orders. Due to the extended closure of the school, the classrooms and the school grounds required extensive cleaning and this was done in the month of June. Recognizing its importance in terms of its location and availability of space, in July 2020, OMHSS was selected as one of the potential government-run institutional quarantine centres in Chennai. It has not been made operational till date because the Corporation has been able to manage with their existing health care facilities elsewhere in the city.

To teach the students effectively, it is important for the teachers to be well-trained and equipped with the necessary knowledge base. During these trying times, with the prolonged closure of schools, it has now become necessary to adopt online teaching methods to ensure that the students are kept usefully engaged and schooling is not adversely impacted. This required that the teachers upgrade their computer and technical skills to enable them to handle online classes effectively. With this in mind, some teachers of the OMHSS enrolled themselves in several online training programmes to prepare themselves for changes in the teaching-learning process. They have also been attending Spoken English classes conducted by a teacher based in the USA.

The poor socio-economic background of the OMHSS students poses a challenge to online teaching as most of the students do not possess a computer at home and many also do not have a smartphone. Lack of educational support from their parents means that additional responsibility has to be shouldered by the teachers to encourage and motivate the students to study. Currently, online classes are underway. For the senior

classes (Class IX to Class XII) there are three online classes of 45 minutes duration each, every day, while middle school (Classes VI to Class VIII) has two online classes per day. For the primary Classes I–V, the teachers send two videos per day related to the lesson through WhatsApp to the parents of the students requesting them to pass it on to the children. But sadly, this will reach only those who have smartphones. To help overcome this difficulty, an NGO has come forward with a timely proposal to provide e-tablets to the teachers and students of the senior classes to facilitate online learning. We hope that this will be implemented very soon.

For the slow learners in every class, bridge classes are being conducted to help them to catch up with their peers. In addition, rice and pulses are being provided to students under the Government-mandated nutrition scheme. Free books were distributed to the students of Class VI to Class XII. Many new projects are on the anvil like revamping the school website.

It is indeed praiseworthy that during the year 2019-2020, the academic performance of the students in the XII Class Board Examination has been excellent with a 98% pass. Considering the many challenges faced by the students and teachers, this achievement is really commendable.



Free distribution of foodgrains to students

THE BESANT MEMORIAL ANIMAL DISPENSARY (BMAD)

The General Manager of the Theosophical Society, Mr Jaikumar Kannan, inaugurated the newly renovated in-patient unit at BMAD on 8 August 2020. This was on the cards for a long time but the lockdown delayed the implementation of the project. Fitted with anti-skid tiles, there are 22 in-patient kennels, with sizes varying from 15–20 sq.ft., each with its own individual drainage system for easy cleaning.



Mr Jaikumar Kannan, General Manager, inaugurates the new in-patient unit

Rescue of the beach ponies

One of the really tragic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the collapse of vast swathes of the economy resulting in the vaporization of millions of jobs. Among those impacted are the pony owners who eked out a meagre living by hiring out their animals for beach rides and events. With the closure of the beaches and ban on celebrations of all kinds, their income has dried up and many ponies have been abandoned on the roads. BMAD has rescued seven ponies from the nearby Besant Nagar beach.



The rescued ponies

INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATIONS

15 August, India's Independence Day, was celebrated at the Adyar Theosophical Academy (ATA) and the Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School (OMHSS) with great enthusiasm notwithstanding the pandemic prevailing in the city. The chief guest at the OMHSS function was Dr Abinaya, Medical Officer, Greater Chennai Corporation, who hoisted the flag and delivered a short talk on how to stay safe during the pandemic. The programme concluded with a vote of thanks by Mrs Lalitha, Headmistress of OMHSS, and the distribution of sweets to all present.

At the ATA on the other hand, the celebrations went online, with each class gathering together to celebrate this day. The chief guest for the function was Ms Marja Artamaa, and other guests from the TS also attended.

Children told stories about the struggle for independence, and spoke about persons who were part of the freedom struggle like Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore and others.



Flag hoisting at the OMHSS by the chief guest, Dr Abinaya

LEAVES FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Story of the White Elephants

Ever wondered who was responsible for the design of the iconic eight, white elephant heads in *bas-relief* on our historic Headquarters building? And who actually executed the same? And the choice of the colours? — terracotta, white and cream — which beautifully meld together to create such an unforgettable vision!

Answers to these and other questions can be found in the precious records available at the Adyar Archives and we take great pleasure in sharing this information with all of you:



It is well known that when the property at Adyar, then called Huddleston's gardens, was bought in 1882 by the Founders of the Theosophical Society, it consisted of a large bungalow, and two smaller riverside bungalows. The title deeds show that even at that time, the building was at least eighty years old which means that come 2020, it has been standing strong for over 218 years! In addition, there were 28 acres of woodland and gardens. After many alterations and additions, the large main bungalow has become the present Headquarters building. When first acquired, it had one large reception hall in the centre, with smaller rooms on both sides, and a large drawing room facing the river front. There was another room upstairs which Madame Blavatsky occupied. The 'elephant heads' portion of the building was not a part of the original structure but was added on by Colonel Olcott at a later date.

Colonel Olcott's dream

*The child of my brain,
the hope of my heart!*

These stirring words of Colonel Olcott, sum up his dream to have a fine library, immense and useful, worthy of our world-wide organization, and stock it with books, both oriental and occidental, along with palm-leaf and other manuscripts, so that in the days to come, there could be no rival to it anywhere on earth. After much discussion, at the Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in 1885, Colonel Olcott finally gave the clarion call to set up an Oriental Library. To house this library, a new wing was added by him in 1886 on the eastern side of the Headquarters Hall. The entry to this wing was through the great doors of carved teakwood depicting the age-old story of evolution taught by the ancient Hindus — 'From Fish to God'. These doors were a gift

from Prince Harisinghji of Bhavnagar. The library functioned in these premises till 1969, when it was shifted to a new, stand-alone building in the southern part of the campus. The wing, originally occupied by the erstwhile library, now houses the TS Museum.



The Headquarters building in 1887 after the first rebuilding of frontage with the Library wing but before the installation of the elephant heads



The huge carved teakwood doors leading to the erstwhile Library presented by Prince Harisinghji of Bhavnagar

Turning our attention back to the Headquarters building during the late nineteenth century, the façade of the newly constructed library annexe in the eastern wing was initially a plain grey with no embellishments of

any sort as can be seen in the photograph above. However, the clue to the origin of the elephant heads is to be found in N. S. Rama Rao's book on Adyar wherein he says: 'The students of the art school at Madras requested the Colonel that they would like to give some decorative finish to the plain Library wall. The Colonel, kindly man as he was, readily consented to their demand and they designed these elephant heads which give an additional charm to the otherwise plain façade.'



The Headquarters building after the installation of the eight *bas-relief* elephant heads

Colonel Olcott then went on to personally execute the design created by the students by making the huge elephant heads in *bas-relief*. There is also another interesting story connected with the colours chosen to paint this wall, recounted by Bishop Leadbeater in his book on Adyar:

I am told he [Colonel Olcott] personally superintended the construction and mounting of these casts, and that they were done in sections, and joined only as they were placed in position. As may be seen, there are eight of these massive adornments . . . When I first saw it (HQ Building) in 1884 it was an indeterminate greyish colour, but a few years later Colonel Olcott, somewhere in his travels, saw a particular shade of terracotta which went admirably well with the deep dark green of the tropical foliage. He immediately had a tile painted of that colour, and when he returned

home, he took much trouble to get exactly that shade reproduced for his beloved Headquarters. That hue remained for many years . . .

At that time, one Marie Russak Hotchener, lived at Adyar. She was an acclaimed opera singer, who became a member of the TS in 1898, giving up her singing career to become secretary to Colonel Olcott. After his passing, she became Annie Besant's secretary. When Dr Besant was away on her travels abroad, Mrs Russak decided to change the colour of the Headquarters building as a surprise for Dr Besant. What happened next is narrated by Bishop Leadbeater as follows:

One day it occurred to Mrs Russak to have the building repainted as a welcome to Mrs Besant on her return after one of her tours. The colours chosen were blue, white and yellow, and the effect though brilliant, was by no means bad. It soon began to be apparent, however, that the garment of Headquarters was not to last as long as the old one had done. Flakes began to peel off and the Colonel's old colour came through with such remarkable persistency that, after several efforts to suppress it, we have had to yield the point, and while I write the Headquarters is being restored to the hue which the President-Founder chose for it.

So runs the fascinating narrative behind the design and construction of the elephant heads and the colours chosen for the world-famous façade of our cherished Headquarters building.

DONATIONS TO THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY (TS)

1 June to 17 August 2020

	<u>Rs.</u>		<u>Rs.</u>
GENERAL DONATIONS		Ms S. Hamsa Priya, India	90000
Mr B. K. Satyanarayana, India	10017	Mr Shiva Shankar & Mrs Prabha Shankar, India	100000
BESANT MEMORIAL ANIMAL DISPENSARY		Mr L. Muthu Selvam, India	10000
Ms Meena Seshan, India	10000	Mr E. H. Kasturi Rangan, India	24250
Ms Seetha Lakshmi Gokulamani, India	30000	Ketto Crowd Funding India/Foreign	1497537
Mr T. Ravindar, India	100000	Mr B. R. S. Sreenag, India	25000

DONATIONS TO THE OLCOTT EDUCATION SOCIETY

1 June to 17 August 2020

	<u>Rs.</u>		<u>Rs.</u>
INDIAN DONATIONS		Mr Balaji Ranjan & Ms Santha Ranjan, India	22000
Mr Arunkumar Sridhar, India	5000	ECS	15100

Cover Picture: R. R. Chari

Purple-rumped Sunbird (*Leptocoma zeylonica*) belongs to the family of sunbirds and is endemic to the Indian Subcontinent. They feed mainly on nectar, but sometimes eat insects, particularly when feeding young. They can hover for short durations but usually perch to suck nectar from flowers.

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