

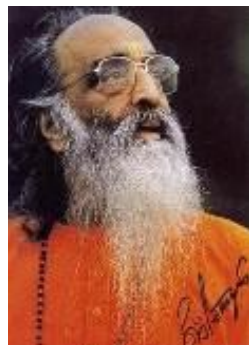


Chinmaya Pradipika

CMSD Quarterly Newsletter



Apr 2015, No. 14



The Master Speaks:

The future is not in the Sun, Moon and the stars; it is not in the planets. The future is the past modified in the present.

- **Swami Chinmayananda**

In this issue of *Chinmaya Pradīpikā*

After welcoming the New Year 2015 with the blowing of the conch, *Śrī Jyoti Vināyaka pūjā* and chanting of the *Viṣṇu Sahasranāma stotram*, this first quarter at CMSD was filled with a variety of programs.

The very first observance of Saint *Tyāgaraja Ārādhana* day in January was soon followed by a week of grand celebrations of CMSD's 14th Anniversary - India's Republic Day, *Jñāna Yajña* and *Bhajan Sandhyā* - with none other than our beloved Swami Prakashananda from CM Trinidad & Tobago.

Śivarātrī and *Rāmanavami* festivals were celebrated with *pūjā* and student presentations. CMSD students writings on *Bhagavad Gītā* and CORD service experiences are also included.

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CMSD celebrates 14th Anniversary with *jñana yajña* by Swami Prakashananda

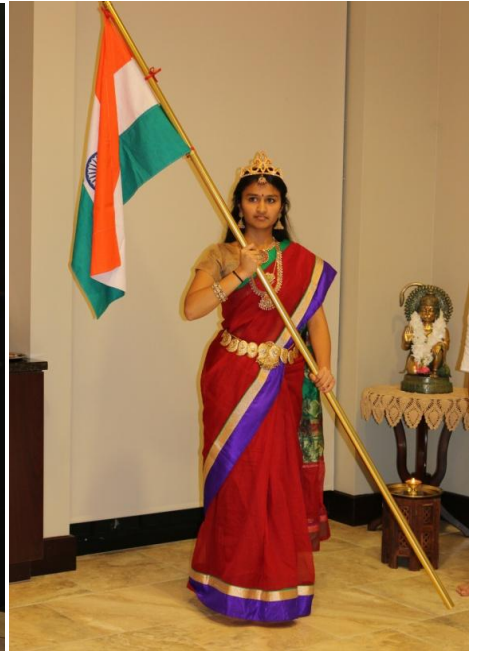
January 28 this year marked CMSD's 14th anniversary, and we were honored to have Pujya Swami Prakashananda of CM Trinidad grace *Chinmaya Jyoti* and celebrate the occasion.



Swamiji's clear discourses on *Kaṭhapaniṣad* in the mornings, beautiful recitation and explanations of *Śrī Rāma Gītā* in the evenings, melodious *bhajans*, and joyful interactions with children, youth, and adults made it a memorable and elevating week for all.



The 5-day *jñāna yajña* commenced on January 26-India's Republic day- with celebrations in a unique fashion. Swamiji accompanied a solemn youth march from upstairs into *Pranava Nilayam* below, with the soul-stirring *Vande Mātaram* in the background. The march was followed by a fine rendition of the national anthems of both the United States and India by the CMSD youth band that was appreciated by all. .





During the week, Swamiji's melodious recitation of the *Tulasī Rāmāyana* provided a beautiful emotional complement to his vedantic insights from the text. Using stories, *bhajans*, jokes, Kabir's *dohā*-s, and even examples from the Sesame Street, Swamiji explained the *Rāma Gītā*, which comprises Lord *Rāma*'s answers to *Lakṣmaṇa*'s five spiritual questions.

Lord *Rāma* answers with appropriate emphasis on each question, and asks *Lakṣmaṇa* (and us) to listen carefully and whole-heartedly. The first answer is about *māyā*. *Māyā* in brief is "me and mine" and "everything perceived". Swamiji explained how *māyā* can bind, but the right knowledge obtained while in *māyā* also provides the means for release. The Lord's next answer is about *jñāna*. *Jñāna* is that, knowing which one loses one's individuality, because The One is seen everywhere. *Virāga*, or detachment, is next, and is exemplified when one is able to mentally renounce all accomplishments, because one sees herself only as an instrument. The difference between *jīva* and *Īśvara* is explained next; the *jīva* does not comprehend *māyā*, while on the other hand *Isvara* is the controller of *māyā*. In the end the Lord explains and describes *bhakti*. Following one's *dharma*, and dedicating the results of actions to the Lord leads to detachment and inner peace. With practice, such an attitude deepens *bhakti* (devotion) which draws the Lord's grace and compassion while bringing great joy to the *bhakta* (devotee). The *bhakta* also has great reverence for the guru who shows the way.

It is Swamiji's special ability to communicate deep messages in a simple and convincing fashion while giving practical advice for all seekers on the path of happiness. He explained how one should follow the Lord's teaching with sincerity and grow in devotion. While there are many modes of devotion, one can reach fulfillment by holding fast to any one mode. It will be complete in itself, just as the 4 legs of a table come to you if you were to pull any one of its legs. Swamiji's divine music during the discourses showered the listeners with a devotional ambiance that felt truly precious.

A cross-section of our members share their feedback from the memorable week:

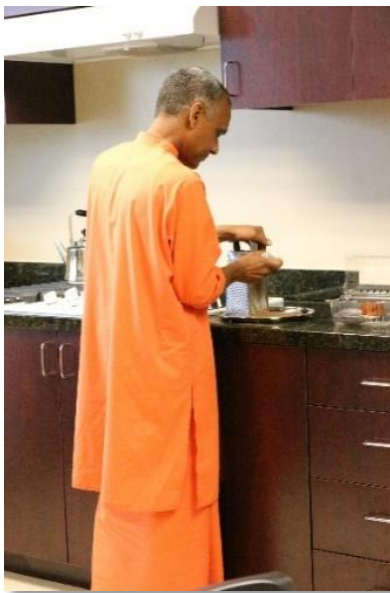
"... Swamiji captivated audiences of all age groups, and every evening we were drawn to the talks like starving honeybees to a colorful flower. Swamiji shared wonderful teachings dotted with fine examples and ways to incorporate these in our day-to-day life. We reflected on these in all our family conversations be it at the dining table or car ride. Our family feels very blessed to have had this opportunity. What a fine way to start 2015."

- **Rhea, Sanil, Nikhil & Sheetal Gandhi**

"... Swamiji is very humorous, and loves to talk about cartoon shows. He is able to pick out instances during these shows which reflect Vedanta, providing an easier way to understand what are otherwise complex concepts... (Also), his melodious voice transports the audience to a different world. The Caribbean *Guru Stotram* is truly amazing with a catchy tune that kept me humming it for days. I even had the chance to play tabla while he was singing the *chaupais* during one of the lectures and that was a very unique experience..."

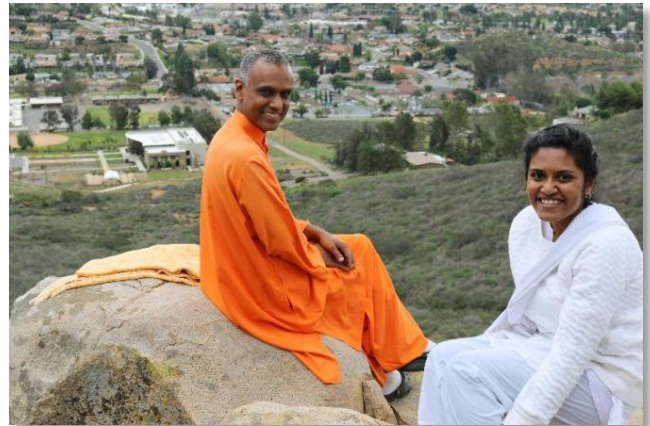
- **Sanil Gandhi, Grade 9**

"... I love hearing him sing, and laugh. He makes such complex topics seem so simple that even I can understand them. We are told to live in the present-- be in the moment. Swamiji does just that. He is happy and full of energy. He is disciplined in his eating and everything he does. Being around Swami-s like him is such a privilege! This is yet one more thing that makes me grateful to CMSD and the Sukumars for giving us the rare opportunity, in America, to be with these great people who live by example and really inspire us. Thank you for this honor!" - **Bhuvana Garcia**



After the morning lecture Swamiji made cocoa for all from the actual cocoa pods from Trinidad. Swamiji loves to cook and especially cook for others.

Swamiji, Brni. Akalka and others went on a hike up to Tapovana Giri.



After lunch *bhikṣā* he also went for a hike to Torrey Pines State Park accompanied by a few CMSD members.

On Sunday, Feb 1st, youth and adults were treated to a special morning session where he drew many life lessons from the first meeting of *Śrī Hanumān* with Lord *Rāma* and *Lakṣmaṇa* on the *ṛṣyamūkha* hill.

Throughout the week, Swamiji made himself accessible and easily mingled with members during day-to-day activities. For example, on the evening of Super Bowl Sunday, Swamiji watched the game in Chinmaya Nivas, while regaling those around him with jokes and cricketing incidents from his childhood.

Thus another memorable anniversary for CMSD came to a close and we are grateful that Pujya Swamiji was able to make it so.

Bhajan Sandhyā with Swami Prakashananda

The finale of the anniversary program was the *Bhajan Sandhyā* with Swamiji. *Sevak-s* and *Sevika-s* created an inviting atmosphere by decorating *Pranava Nilayam* with *rangoli-s*, and the picture of *Śrī Rāma Parivār* with flower garlands.

Lakshmiji and **Sukumarji** and many CMSD members, CHYKs and children lined up along the path from the parking lot and welcomed Swamiji into *Chinmaya Jyoti* to the accompaniment of Guru Stotram in the Trinidadian style. The CMSD Youth Band played the chorus. Sukumarji then greeted everyone and made a slide presentation on our building plans, our progress, and the funding status and current needs. The joyous mood continued into the evening as Swamiji's soothing voice brought a lightness to the heart with many captivating bhajans. Swamiji had an able group of accompanists including Chinmaya Dhvani vocalists, **Maya Sukumar** on keyboard, **Asha Sukumar** on violin, and **Amarnath Puttur** on tabla and **Djembe**, a pair of West-African drums. The music also got a Caribbean flavor with Sukumarji's accompaniment on **Dhantal**, a Caribbean metal rod-based percussion instrument of Indian origin, and **Kar Tal**, a wood and metal clapper played with the fingers.



Many children had also made and brought their own innovative percussions such as cardboard boxes, jars of *chana* and so forth, with which they accompanied Swamiji while singing the Guru Stotram, the Trinidadian way.

At the conclusion of the *bhajan sandhya*, members enjoyed a hearty pot-luck dinner organized by our coordinator **Beena Senthil** and her team of volunteers.



CMSD observes Saint *Tyāgarāja* Ārādhana day

CMSD observed **Saint *Tyāgarāja* Ārādhana day** on **January 10th**, for the first time, with ***Tyāgarāja* aṣṭottara pūjā** and individual renderings of some of his compositions by our own Bala Vihar children and our local community musicians. The event coincided with the annual **Ārādhana** day observed in the Saint's hometown of Tiruvaiyaru in South India.

A **grand Carnatic music concert** in the evening by our CHYK musicians, **Devesh Vashishtha** (vocal) and **Ajay Ravichandran** (*mṛdaṅgam*) accompanied by **Aravind Seshadri** (violin) was a fitting tribute to the musical genius—one of the trinity of Carnatic music.



After the *pūjā*, **Nagesh Nookala** explained the history of **Saint *Tyāgarāja*** and his great accomplishments. He also read the meaning of every song rendered by the musicians.

Devesh Vashishtha commenced the morning session with the last composition by Saint ***Tyāgarāja***, followed by others singers of all ages from the San Diego community, including our own BV student-**Vrishank, grade 2**, on the violin and the melodious rendering of "***Marugelarā O Rāghava***" by **Aditi Puttur, Grade 9**. UCSD student, **Naveen Basavanahally**, accompanied the singers on the *mrdangam*.

The morning session concluded with a harmonious composition on the *Vina* by **Smt. Veena Kinhal**, a well-known musician and teacher in San Diego, whose many students presented vocal and vina music.

".....The enthusiastic support shown by the San Diego community was impressive..." **Sridevi Akkala**





The event was "inspiring and magical" to paraphrase one of the attendees, and left memorable impressions on many; some of these are recorded below:

"...We were told that there are 24,000+ compositions to (St. *Tyāgarāja's*) credit, but that only a few hundred are documented today. Why? Because, this musical genius sang for his beloved *Rāma*, wherever and whenever he could. And these moments were seldom recorded, because they arose on-the-spot, out of pure abandonment to love."

It was that same spirit with which the *Ārādhanā* was celebrated in our Ashram. What a privilege it was to sit there, hearing young children and seasoned performers sing in front of Lord *Jyoti Vināyaka* and the framed picture of the great Saint Himself! How can I describe the music? The memory pales in comparison to the experience.

That concert was phenomenal. These young men performed with the utmost artistic skill and integrity- and they did it out of devotion, and for the upliftment of all the listeners. And that is exactly what happened. World-class performers, whose music came straight from the heart. And since it came from the heart, it went straight into our hearts! It was AMAZING!

These kinds of events are what makes CMSD, and the stupendous work it is doing, special. Where else can we be reminded exactly why music is so important to us? We were reminded that music is the window through which we can glimpse the Lord -- a window that opens in our own hearts. It was a wonderful experience from morning to evening, a tribute that Saint *Tyāgarāja* is surely enjoying." - **Brni. Akalka**

"...We could feel the divine energy flowing in Pranava Nilayam. You could see Gurudev smiling with pride. It was humbling to watch these young artists deliver master-piece after master-piece with nothing but humility!"

-**Yogesh Babla**

"... Nagesh Nookala read the meaning of the pieces before they were performed. Knowing the meaning of the compositions helped me appreciate them.

The evening concert was divine. All three are very talented, professional musicians. They are young, and passionate about their music and so energetic! It was a delight to see how they appreciated the talent in each other, by often audibly expressing their feelings. They were so immersed with their music, I truly believe that at many instances they left the audience and were on another plane. This was "*Svara to Īśvara*" in action. It is truly inspirational to see the youth of America keeping alive this ancient, classical art form. I feel blessed to have been able to be a part of this occasion. Hari Om!" **Bhuvana Garcia**

Mahā Śivarātrī Celebrations

Mahā Śivarātrī celebrations at CMSD this year was multi-faceted- with clay *Śivaliṅga* idol making workshop, skit presentations by 2nd grade and 9th Bala Vihar children on the legends and significance of this special day, and *pūjā* and meditation on the actual night of *Śivarātrī* - Feb. 17.



Bala Vihar children enjoy making
Śivaliṅga-s with guidance from sevika,
Swaroopa Kalva.

Śivarātrī Legends and Significance at the Sunday Assembly - Grades 2 & 9 on Feb. 15



Śivarātrī Pūjā – Feb. 17



The evening concluded at midnight with meditation, *ārati* and *mahāprasādam*.

Śrī Rāma Navami Celebrations at CMSD

CMSD celebrated Lord *Rāma*'s birthday in great grandeur on Saturday, March 28. Bright *kolam* adorned the front porch and the central courtyard around Mother Tulasi. The Ashram is home to several families of birds that also seemed to have broken into special songs on this special day of Spring.



Śrī Rāma navami pūjā was conducted with Śrī Rāma abhisekam, aṣṭottara pūjā, followed by bhajans by Chinmāyā Dhvani. Śrī Rāma Janma Caupai was sung at noon at the time Śrī Rāma was born. A morning filled with devotion concluded with arati and prasadam lunch.

Faith Prasad reveals – “.... The day was beautiful, the roses were blooming, the sky was blue and even the birds were singing. Every opportunity to be in the ashram makes me feel calm and peaceful, but taking part in pūjā -s and celebrations always feels more blessed with the energy of all who attend. It was a joy to worship and sing Ram Bhagavān's name on his birthday.”



Grade 3 students taught by **Sridevi Akkala** and **Nita Halker** beautifully enacted the story of the birth of the Lord. The enthusiastic presentation by the students and the melodious rendering of *nāmarāmāyaṇa* was appreciated by all.

CMSD Bala Vihar students display artwork for Parent conference nights



CMSD On-Going Events

Monthly Sundarakāṇḍa pāṛāyana

Yajaman-s for this quarter were

January-Tunuguntla family

February -Akkala family

March - Garcia family



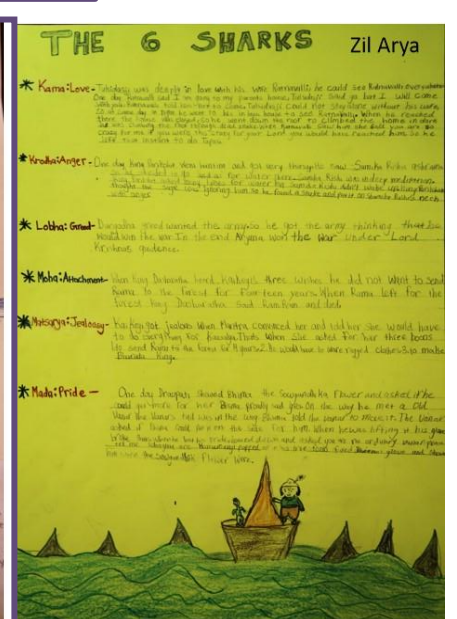
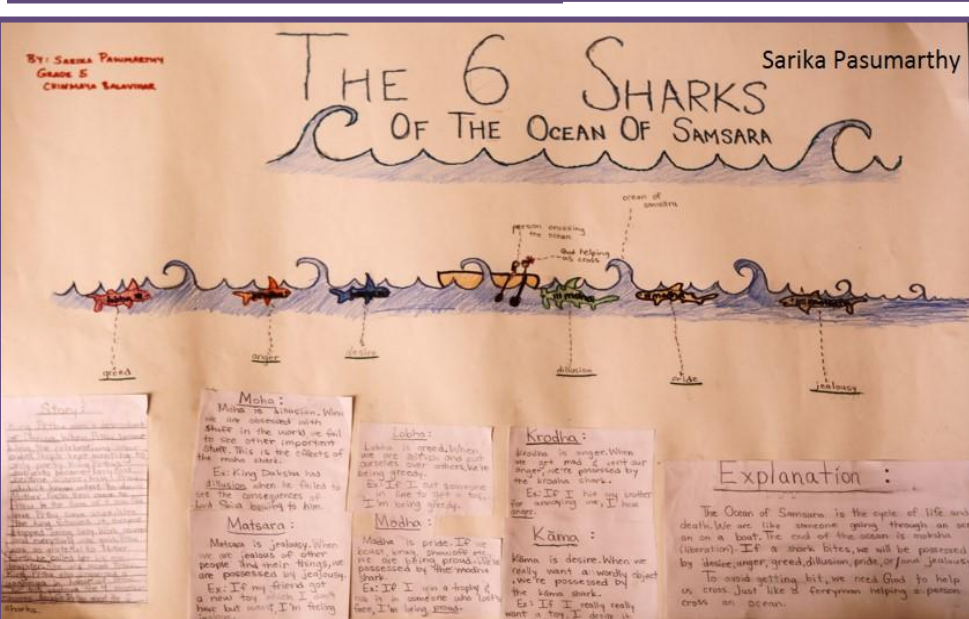
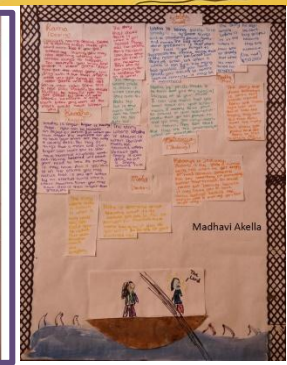
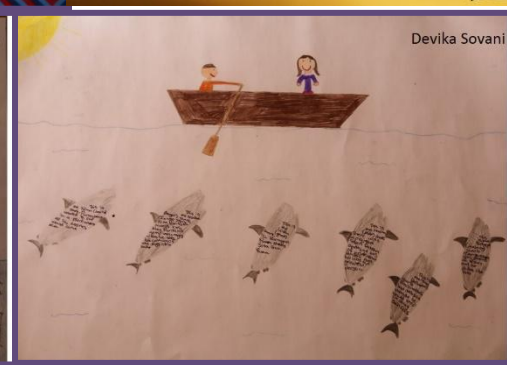
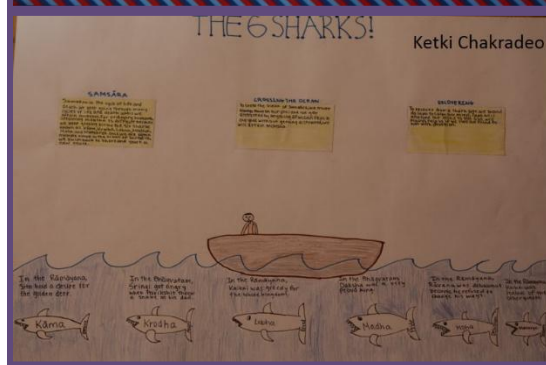
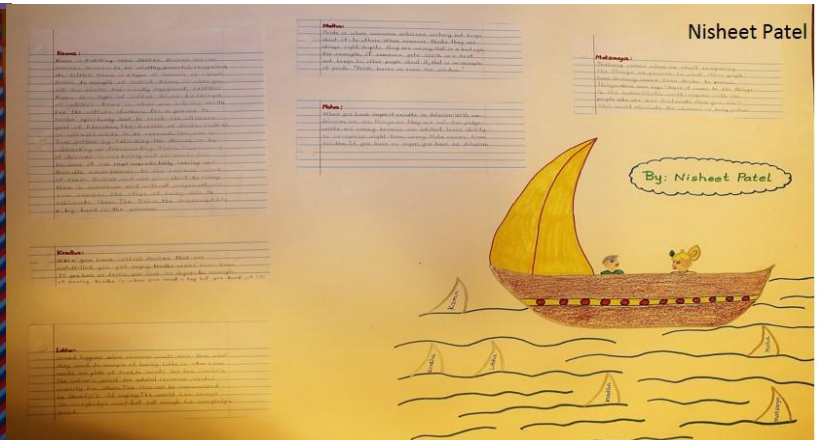
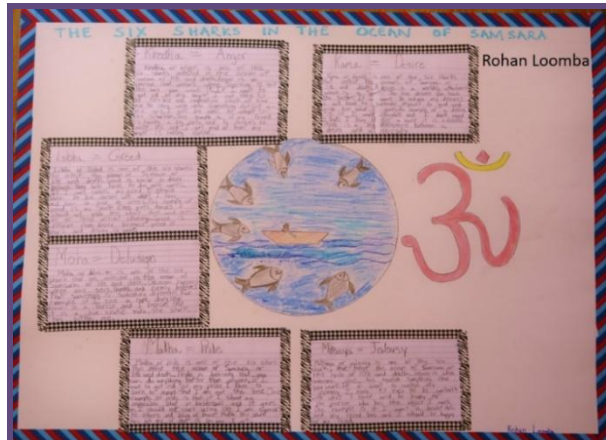
Fourteenth Annual Bhagavad Gītā Chanting Competition- Chapter 14



20 children and 9 adults participated in this annual competition. The judges noticed great improvement in the children's pronunciation of the *Gītā* and the fluency in chanting.

Bala Vihar Youth Corner

5th Grade Posters on the “Six Sharks in the Ocean of Life” from Śrīmad Bhāgavatam



CMSD Youth Workshop: "Raise Your GPA"

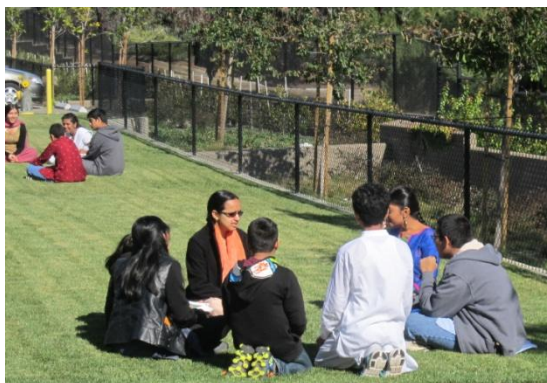
A special Youth Workshop titled "**Raise Your GPA**" was conducted this year on Martin Luther King Day- Jan. 19th by Smt. Lakshmi Sukumar and Brni. Akalka. 5 CHYK mentors also worked with the youth from grades 7-12. Here are some perspectives from a few of the attendees:



"The only way to achieve permanent happiness in life is by doing everything with an attitude of gratitude. Even if I am faced with problems along the way, I know that they have been put there to enhance my mental strength.I must also have a sense of humility. Even if I am the best in what I am, the Guru and God are still greater, and I must never forget that. Worldly wealth has an expiration date, and once my happiness is independent of it, I will be pointed in the right direction: God-Pointed. Once I have **God-Pointed-Awareness**, my 'grade-point-average' will not matter as much." - **Divya Bhatia, Grade 9**

"...To overcome obstacles and raise my academic GPA I must first have one goal: be the *second* best. This means keeping the Higher above me at all times. To do this I must have gratitude toward God when studying and working, .. By keeping God above me at all times, and having gratitude toward him, I will attain perfection at whatever I do and I will strengthen my GPA: **God Pointed Awareness.**"

- **Mihir Pandya, Grade 9**

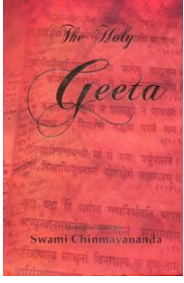


"... **GPA in school may stand for Grade Point Average, but GPA in life stands for God-Pointed Awareness.** Once the GPA of life is higher, the GPA

of school/work will automatically increase. When the mind is available, there are no distractions, so roadblocks to a higher GPA will be eliminated. Finally, I learned that everything must be done with gratitude towards God, so that the GPA of life can be raised." - **Pratik Rungta, Grade 8**



Lessons from *Bhagavad Gītā*



CMSD offers weekly Sunday lectures on the *Bhagavad Gītā* for adults by Smt. Lakshmi Sukumar. This year, high school students also have the opportunity to attend the lectures with the adults. We present two reports from the students compiled from the lectures.

Reflection on Chapter 16 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*

by Divya Bhatia and Karishma Shah (Grade 9) and Surabhi Kulkarni (Grade 10)

In this chapter, Lord *Kṛṣṇa* describes the divine (*daivi*) virtues of a noble man and the demonic (*asuric*) tendencies of a demon. All of the good traits are essential to reaching the ultimate Self, but we have chosen three significant qualities to reflect on.

Fearlessness is one of the first virtues of a noble man that Lord *Kṛṣṇa* touches upon. He states that when the mind and heart are pure, there is no fear. We can only walk the path of truth when we are fearless, or have *abhayam*. The basis of our anxiety comes from the unknown, which boils down to fear of death. For example, my greatest phobia is of heights. Each fear such as this that a human experiences is because of the idea of dying. So how do we overcome this fear? The only way to conquer our agitations, is to completely accept that although this body will die, the soul, which is my true identity, is everlasting. After realizing this, the mind will see the oneness in God and be expelled from fear.

Purity of heart boils down to doing good actions with a good intention. Although America is the leading country in giving to charity, a lot of this money is given to get tax relief. Yes, this may be a form of giving but it is definitely not with a pure heart. ..Overall, doing kindhearted actions with a pure heart can lead to many benefits.

Ahimsa is usually interpreted as nonviolence, but there are many levels of *ahimsa*. The first is in action, which means not doing any harmful acts toward others. The second is at the speech level, where speech is controlled. The third and final level is the thought level. This involves not thinking any harmful thoughts. So why does it matter if the thoughts are harmful or not? The answer is given in this quote: "Be careful of your thoughts, for your thoughts become your words and your words become your actions, and actions become your destiny." Indirectly, your thoughts are responsible for our destiny and so if we think good thoughts, the result is beneficial not only to us, but also to others. So how do we determine the difference between *himsa* and *ahimsa*? The difference lies in the motive behind the thought, actions and words. If the motive is for a good cause it is *ahimsa*. For example, a doctor using a knife for surgery and a thief using a knife to rob people is different.

This is what Lord *Kṛṣṇa* teaches us in chapter 16 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Fearlessness, purity of heart, and nonviolence, all contribute to the development of one's character. In addition, by embodying these three characteristics one is able to overcome their desires and reach *Om*.

Life "in Threefold" (Chapter 17 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*)

by Mihir Pandya, Aditi Puttur, and Divya Bhatia (Grade 9)

The Scriptures are an ocean of knowledge. Only with the Guru's guidance can we truly understand this knowledge, as represented by *Gaṅgā Devī* in Lord *Śiva's* matted locks. However, mastering spiritual knowledge can take lifetimes. Sometimes the question arises: *If I don't know the meaning of the Supreme Knowledge of the Scriptures, but I still live my day-to-day life with faith, is that considered Sāttvic, Rājasic, or Tāmasic?* In fact this is Arjuna's question to *Bhagavān* in the first verse of the 17th Chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Bhagavān answers this question in detail, starting with the topic of faith. Faith, or *śraddhā*, falls into three categories: *Tāmasic, Rājasic, and Sāttvic*.

People with *sāttvic śraddha* worship in proper ways, as told in the *śāstras*. They worship wise men, gurus, and the Lord. People with *rājasic śraddha* worship *yakṣas* and *rākṣasas* for wealth and power respectively. People with *tāmasic śraddha* have no value for *śāstras*, and they worship *bhūta-s* (ghosts) and *preta-s* (spirits). Now, some of these descriptions may seem out-of-place in today's world, but in fact people like us do fall into these categories. The *sāttvic* pray out of pure devotion to the Lord, asking for nothing in return. The *rājasic*-minded people pray for materialistic results only such as the next job promotion or for a good test grade. Lastly, the *tāmasic* -minded people pray for the destruction or failure of others. This is how faith and worship tend to express within all types of people.

Next Lord *Kṛṣṇa* explains how that this threefold division also expresses in the food we eat. *Sāttvic* food has natural juices and essences from the moon that gives life, makes one happy, adds color to one's plate, and is satisfying to our taste buds and our body. So, vegetables and fruits fall perfectly in this category. In contrast, *rājasic* food is too salty, too bitter, too spicy, and too unsettling. This includes our favorite potato chips. Lastly, the *tāmasic* category includes stale, dead, putrid, and smelly foods such as meat and old leftovers. Anything left out for more than 3 hours is considered *tāmasic*. There is a key point to make here. People inclined to a certain *guna*, such as *sattva*, eat *sāttvic* food. But this does not mean eating *sāttvic* food will automatically make one *sāttvic*; however, eating *sāttvic* food will make it easier to develop *sāttvic* qualities with the right effort. While eating *rājasic* or *tāmasic* foods, it will be more difficult to develop *sāttvic* qualities.

Yajña, or sacrifice, also has three aspects to it. Sacrifice is defined as dropping lower tendencies for higher and nobler qualities. *Sāttvic yajña* is sacrifice for the goodwill of others. This includes charity and service. *Rājasic yajña* is sacrifice to gain something for oneself, such as power or money. This could be 'charity' done while expecting recognition or a gold plaque. And last, *tāmasic yajña* is sacrifice done for the wrong purpose, even if there is no personal/any gain. This includes giving up certain things just for causing harm to others.

Bhagavān says next that *tapas* also has threefold categories. The opposite of *Tapas* is *Pata*, or "to fall." So literally, *Tapas* means "to rise." In other words it is to rise, evolve, or grow through your actions. Before *Bhagavān* describes the three *guṇa-s* (attributes) of *Tapas*, he states the three types of *Tapas*: bodily *tapas*, mental *tapas*, and the *tapas* of speech. We may misconceive bodily *tapas* as fasting, but it is more than that. Body-level *tapas* includes integrity and nonviolence in our actions, and the regulation of our attitude. At the speech level, it is important that we always speak the truth. Though, we must also convey the truth in a pleasant way so the person we are telling it to does not get hurt by it. As Gurudev says: "We must watch not only what we say, but how we say what we say." Most importantly, it must be beneficial to the other or else no need to speak at all even if the Truth.

Another important part of speech-level *tapas* is that we do regular *sādhana* every day. Usually after taking bath, daily chanting at the altar is important in speech-level *tapas*. Lastly, there is *tapas* at the mind-level. This includes self-restraint, purity, and cheerfulness. Now that we know the three types of *tapas*, we must also know the expression of the three-*guṇa-s* in *tapas*. Simply put *sāttvic tapas* is done purely out of devotion and faith. *Rājasic tapas* is done in hope of getting something in return, as shown by the example of Ravana doing *tapas* to please Lord Siva in return for a boon. *Tāmasic tapas* is done through torture and tormenting of the body with the goal to inflict failure and bring about downfall of others. It is important for us to maintain *sattva* in our *tapas* at the body, speech, and mind levels.

Finally, the last way the faith expresses in our day-to-day life is *dāna* or charity. True *dāna* does not necessarily depend on how much we give, but the motive with which we give. *Sāttvic dāna* is given at the right place, at the right time and to the right person, cheerfully and to the full extent possible, without expecting anything in return. A *sāttvic* -minded person simply feels blessed to be able to help and give back. One need not give material wealth alone, but could also give time, talent, or emotional support. *Rājasic dāna* on the other hand, is given in hope of receiving something in return, and once a *rājasic* minded person gives, they might feel pain, or regret. *Tāmasic dāna* is that which is given at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and for the wrong cause. It could also be given with the wrong understanding, and could harm rather than help the beneficiary.

As Lakshmi auntie said, the energy conserved from *tapas* can be used in *yajña*, and the result of *yajña* can be shared as *dāna*. Each of us has some amount of the three-*guṇa*-s in our personality. Life can be a twisty road, but if we direct our minds toward *sāttvic* or noble qualities as described by Lord *Kṛṣṇa*, our path to the supreme will be made very easy.

Field Project at CORD Siruvani

Each year in the past few years, some of our youth have visited Chinmāyā Organization of Rural Development (CORD) centers in India to contribute their effort in ongoing field work. Each year they have returned enriched by the experience, and the most recent visit was no exception. **Over the December holidays five 10th grade students, Ananya Krishnan, Madhumita Senthilkumar, Namrata Sampath, Solana Garcia, and Surabhi Kulkarni visited CORD Siruvani (Coimbatore, TN).** Three of them share their experiences:

Namrata Sampath:

"CORD Siruvani is run by Dr. Meera. The main mission of CORD Siruvani is women's empowerment within the rural villages around the Siruvani community. For so many generations, women have been told that their only job in life is to produce children and take care of the household. What Dr. Meera is trying to do, and has succeeded thus far, is to teach women that they can be the change in their communities. The way she teaches these women is by creating *Mahila Mandals* in each village of Siruvani (approximately 55 of them), and teaching them skills to become self-sufficient.

We were in Siruvani for nine days, December 22 to December 30, and we participated in a lot of different activities. Dr. Meera split us up into three groups so that we could experience the different ways of life of the people of Siruvani. For the first three days, we went to three different Assamese villages. The Assamese were in Siruvani as temporary Paan workers. The common theme in these Assamese villages was that many children and women had protruding bellies and prominent ribs. Dr. Meera told us that this was evidence that they are malnourished. We also checked their eyes to see if they were anemic. Dr. Meera gives the people information about the medicines that they should take and what she was doing. She also gave them the vaccinations for Hepatitis B. During those three days, I also taught some of the village kids conversational English. We got out storybooks and the kids would read through them. However, it was also their vacation and they wanted to play more than they wanted to learn. So, I devised a plan that could help them learn English, as well as having fun and playing games. While they were playing games, I would tell them that they could only speak in English to talk to each other. This was hard for them because; a) they are fluent in Tamil and do not speak English around their family or friends and b) because they are so used to yelling at each other in Tamil. This was definitely a challenge, but by the end of the trip, they had progressed to speaking some English...."

Surabhi Kulkarni:

"...Gratitude. That is the one word that comes to my mind when someone asks what I gained from this trip. Going from a technologically advanced city to a rural village is like going from one end of the spectrum to the other...or so I thought. This was the mindset I had while leaving San Diego on a flight to Coimbatore. I'm sure that there are some people out there like me that have thought this way too. But now, after coming back from a rural village, I can say, that contrary to my belief, rural villages are not lacking anything at all. In fact, those people have just as much as we do, and even some more. Through teaching English and Bala Vihar classes, doing farmwork, hearing about Assamese villages and staying in an ashram I gained much more appreciation for everything in my life and I learned to get out of my comfort zone and be more outgoing.



Through the farm work, I learned to stretch the limits of my comfort zone. On Christmas day, I woke up, got ready and ran downstairs just like most kids that day. However, what I did was very different from opening presents. That day, we drove to a farm to help out with some composting. I had no idea what this meant. I didn't even know the process of composting. Luckily, no one kept me in the dark for too long. We sieved the soil and picked the earthworms out to be used for further composts. These two things don't sound like a lot of work but they were tiring. ... For me personally, it was physically exhausting work. I could barely hold a basket for a minute and a half and squatting was a very uncomfortable position. Throwing the compost was the hardest job for me because I would often miss the grater and hit someone's face instead. Throughout all this, I definitely expanded my comfort zone (Did I mention we didn't get gloves?) and the limits of my mental and physical strength.

After the work in the day, I got the opportunity to teach Bala Vihar in a couple of villages. My very first Bala Vihar made a lasting impression on me. The Bharat Mata Bala vihar had been started up by Dr. Meera, but because of a lack of volunteers, no one taught this Bala Vihar. Instead, two eighth grade girls stepped and took control of the class. I observed them as they took attendance in a notebook and assigned everyone a prayer to lead. Even the youngest kid (about 5 years old) stood in front of the whole class to lead prayers. The girls were extremely organized and creative and even made up games to play in class. All of these kids were extremely eager to learn new things and I saw this as something in common with the kids that came to the NGO office too.

I taught English in the NGO office for one day, but in that one day I saw a lot of kids that were eager to learn. I realized that when you do not have much of something, you value it more. For example, an education. All of the kids would listen to me and remember what I had told them. For kids their age they were very focused and did not run off even though it was their break. They would learn and soak in the things they learned and then go off to play their favorite game: Carom."

Solana Garcia:

"...The first Bala Vihar class we went to was self-run by two girls who assigned different kids to lead *śloka*-s and *bhajans*. The dedication shown by the two girls was impressive. We taught the children a few bhajans and told them a few stories. Dr. Meera later told us that most of the children in that village go to Christian schools and she was worried that they would lose connection to Hindu culture and she wanted us to teach them the love of God. I found it very interesting that I had something to offer children in India about Hindu culture.

In the other villages where we taught Bala Vihar classes I made sure to tell stories about *Kṛṣṇa*'s love. I taught 5 Bala Vihar classes in 5 different villages. I also noticed that their Bala Vihar classes involve chocolate and games like ring toss. This was very different from the games we play in CMSD like knockout and Hari Home which are both fun and educational. We tried to keep their attention but sometimes the children got distracted. I think I got the most out of teaching the Bala Vihar classes because I gained a better appreciation for teachers, but mostly I began to appreciate the Bala Vihar education I receive in San Diego.



At the end of the trip we led a *bhajan sandhya* and saw the Coimbatore premier of "On a Quest," the movie about the life of Swami Chinmāyā nanda. This was a great experience because not only was the movie amazing, but we saw it with the CHYKs who were at the CHYK camp. I found it inspiring to see that Chinmāyā Mission left such an impression on the CHYKs that they continued to be a part of it even as they continued their life. This was truly a wonderful experience.

Another person who inspired me was Dr. Meera herself. She is an incredible woman. Dr. Meera is so invested in the work that she does, and she is overall a wonderful person. Dr. Meera truly made me feel like I can do anything if I invest myself in it. Overall, I got so much out of my time in CORD Siruvani. I learned a lot about the world and myself through *seva*, and I felt very inspired by the people I met. Even though I may not have been able to make a huge difference in Siruvani, my experience made a huge difference in my own life. I feel blessed to have had this opportunity and I hope I will be able to return in the future. I went to CORD Siruvani to learn and have a great experience. My mission was accomplished."

Saṃskṛta Vihar classes at CMSD

Saṃskṛta Vihar classes were started at CMSD in 2005 to offer students the benefit of learning this divine language to better understand the scriptures in their original. To date, many students have discovered the joy of reading, and studying the scriptures in depth with the right knowledge of *sandhi-s*, prose order etc.



Hold yourself responsible for maintaining standards greater than what others expect from you.

-Swami Tejomāyānanda

