

## ***The Cutest Bhaskmasura***

Granted the boon by Lord Shiva to reduce to ashes anything he places his hand on, a cute little Bhaskmasura ran around the hall playing havoc and evoking laughter. Enter Mohini, Lord Vishnu in disguise, who entices the demon, challenges him to a dance, and tricks him into placing his hand on his own head thus bringing his antics to an end and had the audience cheering for more.

Performed by a mirthful and enthusiastic group of six-year olds, the eternal story taught the values of humility, self-control, and of the victory of good over evil. Proud parents stood up to cheer the children while reminiscing about hearing this story as children themselves. They were now passing on their values and their culture to the next generation.

The occasion was MahaShivaratri and the location was in the heart of Chicago on a chilly Sunday afternoon in February. Just as they had done every Sunday for three years, the families of the Chinmaya Mission Chicago City Center had come together to participate in the *Bala Vihar* classes. And just as they did for other festivals such as Deepavali and Ram Navami, the families celebrated the occasion through *pooja*, plays, *bhajans*, and a delicious potluck.

Started in 2015 by a dedicated group of parents eager to inculcate Vedantic values in their children, Chinmaya Mission's *Bala Vihar* program in the city of Chicago has grown to over 20 families and nearly 40 children. Meeting each Sunday under the guidance of trained teachers the children progress through a program designed to inculcate our cultural values. Meanwhile, the parents participate in learning the ageless wisdom from The Bhagavad Gita - bringing it into practice in their daily lives - feeling recharged and refreshed for the week ahead.

**“Children are not vessels to be filled, but lamps to be LIT” - Swami Chinmayananda.**

Children were closest to Swami Chinmayananda's heart. He believed that spiritual values needed to be sown at a very young age. To accomplish this he created a weekly gathering of children called *Bala Vihar* where children, ages 5-15, would come together under the guidance of trained teachers to learn values through stories from the scriptures - the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Itihasas.

Swami Chinmayananda trained teachers in the art of teaching values. The aim was to develop the personality of the child at all levels - physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. He laid down a prescribed curriculum rooted in logic - an appreciation and adoration of India's ancient culture, a sense of respect for life, and a vision that generates personal discipline and inquiry.

The *Bala Vihar* curriculum focuses on teaching fundamental human values of love, compassion, charity, a sense of community, and devotion in an age-appropriate manner. Beginning from the *Alphabet Safari* - A is for Aspiration, B is for Brotherhood, C is for cleanliness and so on, the

syllabus includes eternal stories from the Ramayana, Srimad Bhagavatam, Mahabharata - and Vedantic values.

Festivals such as Deepavali, Shivaratri, Ram Navami, Mother's day, and others are celebrated with enthusiasm and gusto. In addition to the festivities, stories and discourses on the spiritual context of the festival help preserve the ethos of the events. Children lead the celebrations by enacting plays from the scriptures and singing bhajans and devotional hymns.

Teachings of the Bala Vihar are further supported by the series of children's books published by the Chinmaya Mission. In fact, the mission publishes an international magazine, *Balvihar*, exclusively for children each month. Its full-color presentation, appealing design, and inspiring stories inculcate and continue to nurture the core teachings of the *Bala Vihar* classes.

*Bala Vihar* takes place worldwide - in Chinmaya Mission Centers or in private homes. The Chinmaya Mission Chicago City Center has been active since 2015 conducting *Bala Vihar* classes in the city every Sunday.

**Beginning September 16th, the *Bala Vihar* classes will be held on Sundays at the Bennett Day School, 955 W Grand Ave, Chicago. Classes run from 9:30AM to 11:30AM.**

Enrollment is open. More details can be found at <http://www.mychinmaya.org/chicagocity/> or by emailing [chicagochinmaya@gmail.com](mailto:chicagochinmaya@gmail.com).