

Epic effort

The young cast of *Ramayana* and an incredible mountaineer starred on Newtown School's annual day

Rooted in Indian tradition but keeping up with modern global trends. This was the message on offer for the audience about itself at its annual day programme at the Science City auditorium from The Newtown School, which got its CBSE affiliation last December, less than a year after it received the state no-objection certificate.

Technology was at the heart of the speech delivered by the school principal Satabdi Bhattacharjee. "We are the first school in eastern India to start a robotics laboratory with Lego Mindstorm. While students of classes III to V use it in their science, technology, engineering, mathematics (Stem) lab, senior students learn principles of programming," she said, adding that the school would host the zonal leg of the World Robotics Olympiad on August 19-20.

The school, it was announced, also has a mind-boggling array of technical tools to equip its students — a 3D printing lab, two I-Pad labs, an I-Theatre lab (which allows instant animation of children's drawings in story-telling sessions), a 3D audio-visual lab and an art first lab (where they learn art history through audio-visual projections and get down and dirty with colours and paintbrushes).

For the programme, the school had chosen nature and mythology as the central theme. The centrepiece was an enactment of *The Ramayana*, in which about 600 students of the four-to-eight-year age group participated.

Ramayana retold

It was a grand and colourful show

starting with sage Valmiki coming on stage to set the context. King Dasarath realised his throne was too far back and dragged it forward. Then he sat smugly as the court dancers entertained him. Next to him sat his three little queens looking cute draped in bright saris.

Rivalling this in grandeur was another courtroom scene that followed soon after, where Janak was seeking a suitable match for daughter Sita. It was a long scene. Possibly that is



why when the slinging of the bow done, Ram finally departed with his prize, Janak did not look too sad to let his daughter go. Sita too looked quite happy to leave.

The use of pictures as backdrop on a giant screen reinforced the effect. While the courtroom scenes had pictures of architecturally splendid halls, the scene where Manthara, the hunchback domestic help, poisoned the king's second wife



Manthara plants a wicked plan in Kaikeyi's mind. (Below left) Hanuman holds an umbrella over Ram and Sita. Pictures by Sudeshna Banerjee

Kaikeyi's mind had an illustration depicting the same scene.

The most powerful presence on stage was Ravan's. With his curling locks, thick moustache and energetic steps, Anant Santhaliya of Class III grabbed eyeballs and received huge applause when he dragged Sita away, fighting Jatayu. The next scene introducing the monkeys had tots in saffron hoodies come swarming in, brandishing plastic bananas. Hopping about, some of them would not leave and had to be coaxed away by teachers. "They are looking for their parents in the audience," laughed the principal, seated in the front row.

The final encounter had a slender Ram (Aryaman Hati of Class III) cowering before a boisterous Ravan, till following the script, the latter had to concede defeat.

Hanuman held a decorated umbrella over Ram and Sita as they returned to Ayodhya, to yet another round of group dance. Tail tucked in trousers, Avaneesh Singh of Class IV, then made off for the foyer outside and returned his mace. "This was not my first time on stage as I have participated in dance performances before. I do not mind being Hanuman as he is a god, like Ram,"

said the boy who is the tallest in his class. Sweating heavily, he had to be careful not to rub off the coat of lipstick that was used to give shape to the monkey lips.

Avirupa Das, who choreographed the act along with another teacher Paromita Chakraborty, was relieved and elated. "We had divided the acts between ourselves. Even then, the toughest scene was the Ram-Ravan battle in which about 25 other children took part as soldiers. So involved would they become in the fight that even after 'dying' they would get up and start over. I had to repeatedly tell them how odd it would look," she laughed.

The *Ramayana* show was followed by a prize distribution ceremony where chief guest Arunima Sinha handed over packets to little ones, many of whom immediately got busy trying to check what was inside theirs as well as their neighbour's.

Arunima Sinha hands over a prize to a young student

Height of grit

Earlier in the day, Sinha delivered a rousing address on her journey from the railway tracks where the national level volleyball player was thrown off by dacoits from a running train to the top of Mt Everest and the other peaks she has summited since. All with a leg that had to be amputated to save her life.

"I was in so much pain after the train ran over my leg that I begged the doctors to go ahead with the operation even if they did not have anaesthesia facilities. When I declared from the hospital bed that I would climb Mt Everest one day, people thought my mind had come unhinged. 'How can she carry three-four kilos up a mountain when her amputated stump bleeds from the weight of her body?' people wondered."

She also spoke of impossible situations in the mountains which she had pulled through. "Mountaineers carry two oxygen cylinders for the summit attempt, one for each way, but because I take more time than the able-bodied to climb, I exhausted most of both on the way up. Still I went ahead ignoring my sherpa's advice to abort the attempt and go back. On the way down, when my oxygen supply was almost over, we spotted a British climber. Since the weather had deteriorated, he decided to turn back and left his second cylinder to reduce load. My sherpa rushed down to pick it up for me, exclaiming how lucky I was."

She urged the students to keep their focus on their goal and work for it. "Focus so hard that the Lord above becomes compelled to grant you your wish. Luck sides only with those who try," she said to rousing ovation.



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