

## Reconstructing a hallowed past

Lavanya M.



A section of the 'Stellarchive' at the Stella Maris College —Photo: R. Ravindran.

A hand-written appointment order signed by the first principal of Stella Maris College, Mary Lillian reads, "Miss. Margaret Gnanaiya is hereby appointed physical director, Stella Maris this 23 June, 1952... Salary Rs.100 + DA Rs. 124." The paper, safely preserved between two sheets of acid-free paper, is among the materials being collected for the 'Stellarchive' that is being set up in the Stella Maris College.

It is important to preserve the history of the college that started in 1947. And more importantly, the archive will help students and faculty know the history of the college and the departments, says Geetha Balachandran, chief librarian, who initiated the archive. "Things have changed a lot with time and it will be interesting for students to trace them," she adds. The smell of herbs and lemongrass oil, used as insect repellent, fills the room where the temperature and humidity is constantly monitored. Some of the hundred-year-old library books, college magazines, department journals, newsletters and photographs are among the carefully preserved print materials. "Every page of the book is opened and wiped clean. We take the help of students in the 'earn while you learn' scheme for this, as this is also a job on campus," says Ms. Balachandran.

Notebooks containing lecture notes in French prepared by some of the earliest faculty are also on display. 'Material pour la eleves' (material for the students) reads the book written in impeccable handwriting by Sr. Maria Silvestra who came from France, one of the first few faculty members in the department of Fine Arts. The notes are accompanied by drawing and illustrations.

Among the other objects on display are an old typewriter, a side-shelf used by the first principal and a library card-catalogue, to give students who are technology-savvy an understanding of how books were located years ago.

Ms. Balachandran is taking the assistance of Sr. Helen Vincent, a former principal and secretary of the college, to locate some archival material. She is also collecting materials from retired professors who visit the college during reunions. A database of all the department faculties, students, student thesis and projects is being prepared. Students from the department of Fine Arts have been asked to make paintings of the past principals of the college, as many photographs are unavailable.

The archive has not only helped preserve materials but revive some of the old initiatives of the college. The Department of Hindi was planning to start a department magazine when Ms. Balachandran came across the magazine 'Chathurangam' with contributions from all the language departments in 1972. "Now we have decided to revive Chathurangam instead of publishing a new magazine," she says.

To safeguard the materials, particularly the print data, the college is creating a digital repository of all the resources. "This will provide students better access and help preserve some of the ephemeral materials," says Ms. Balachandran on the initiative that began earlier this year with the support of the current principal Jasintha Quadras.

*Appointments orders, teaching plans,*

*100-year old books – 'Stellarchive' provides a glimpse into another era*

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## It is a stellar initiative by Chennai College

**Attempt to create a repository of documents**



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