

THE SECOND ANNUAL BAL MELA

29 Feb. 2004

Once the date for the Bal Mela was finalized, during the month of January things started falling into place and everyone in the team began chipping in with their efforts, individually as well as through weekly meetings. The way we perceived it, the Bal Mela this year was to be a litmus test for the dictum "how we do a task is more important than what result we bring out from it". To put this belief into practice, we tried to ensure that a large part of the arrangements for the event were taken care of by the teachers and the village level workers. The role of the Samrakshan coordinators was limited to tying the loose ends and overall coordination. It was really invigorating to see the village level workers and teachers allocate responsibilities among themselves and diligently note down their pending tasks. Following the same dictum at another level with the children, we decided to concentrate on eliciting participation from the greatest number of children, and the events for the Bal Mela were planned with precisely this in mind. As opposed to last year, we also decided to do away with any ranking of schools based on their performance, and just focused on giving each child a fun-filled and memorable day.



Preparing lunch packets for the Bal Mela



Children arriving in tractor-trolleys



Settling down for a day full of fun

A total of 295 children and 7 teachers from the 5 Asha Shalas were a part of the event, and the Samrakshan staff, their families and numerous villagers joined them. This year too we deliberately stayed away from inviting any 'dignitaries', local or from

outside, believing that the event was meant for the children and no one else should share their limelight. The children arrived at Agraa in the morning in tractor-trolleys, scrubbed shiny clean and with anticipation written on their bright faces. They brought their own school's mattresses for sitting, which they meticulously laid set out on the "shamiana"-covered Samrakshan campus. As soon as they settled down, they were served hot tea and biscuits, which they very happily munched till all the schools arrived. It was great fun helping the children open their biscuit packets. Once all the schools arrived, we briefly introduced the programme for the day, after which the morning session of the Bal Mela commenced.



Tea and biscuits to welcome the children



A lively song by girls of the Durredi School



The Laddar School stages a satirical skit

We had planned that in the morning session each school would get around 30 to 35 minutes to present cultural activities revolving around the chosen theme - "water". The presentations could include songs, poems and skits. Also the children in each school were asked to prepare a model, preferably based on this theme, which the children were to present at the Bal Mela. The children of the Khallai School constructed an elaborate windmill based water pump. The Jakhoda School made a model of a ferris wheel using local material (including metal wire, which they had scavenged from our campus). The children of Laddar and Durredi schools made a map of the river Kwari on cloth. On the whole, each school outshone our expectations, especially given the fact that many of the bright students could not attend the Bal Mela due to seasonal migration by their families.

The children sang local folk songs in groups, accompanied by the beats of a dholak (local musical instrument), and in the case of the Khallai School, to a lively dance. There were enthusiastic renditions of poems, either drawn from their school syllabus, or (as happened with the Laddar school) created by the teacher and the

children together. The skits varied from a typical local drama (which is performed in the villages with the characters adorned in colourful costumes) by the Badi Khajuri School, to a satire by the Laddar School on the water related problems faced by the villagers after their displacement from the Kuno sanctuary. The common themes emerging from these activities were the need to preserve forests, build water harvesting structures, bund agricultural fields, and plant trees to improve the water situation. Presented by the children in their inimitable style, the message went home loud and clear.

This session was followed by lunch, where packets containing puris, aloo-ki-sabzi and ladoos (local sweet) were handed over to children. While most children finished this in no time, some toddlers were seen clinging to their boxes to take home what they could not finish, or even stuffing food in their pockets! As happened last year too, the children diligently took their paper boxes to the dustbin without littering the campus. We had planned to allow the children some time off after lunch to relax, but seeing their eagerness and energy we decided to have an impromptu music session. The interested groups of children came to the dais to sing folk songs on Holi (the approaching festival of colours). This session too became very dynamic amidst dances, dholak beats, clapping and cheering by the children.



Painting on the walls of the campus...



...And decorating earthen water pots



The organizing team shares a light moment

At around 2.30 pm, we began the afternoon session, where we had planned to organize group painting activities with the participation of all the children present. The children were divided into 3 groups according to their inclinations and age. The first group opted to draw pictures on the walls of the campus, which had been freshly whitewashed for the purpose. Sections of the walls of our campus were allocated to children from each school for painting. They had come with jars of colour that they had themselves prepared from locally available resources, ranging from locally grown

vegetables to used battery cells. They used dried stems of bajra (a locally grown millet) as paintbrushes.

The second group was to paint and decorate earthen water pots, which we had procured from the local 'kumhar', and the children were provided with colours and small mirrors to decorate the pots. These pots were then to be taken to schools to be used for storing water during the long summer months. The third group, mainly consisting of the youngest students of the Asha schools, was to draw and paint on chart papers, and we provided them with crayons and pencil colours to use for their artwork. The painting session continued for about a couple of hours, and the atmosphere on the campus then was wonderful. It was heartening to see the children paint the walls and the pots with intense concentration and that sparkle of joy in their eyes, something that would stay with us for a long time, besides of course the campus walls that are now bright and uniquely cheerful.



Enthusiastic artists scale new heights...!



Young artists at work on the campus walls



Wall painting and models made by the children

In the final session of the day, the children of each school formed a queue and went around the campus examining and appreciating the artwork that each of them had done during the day. Each child was given a small parting gift, consisting of a notebook, a colourful pencil box and a packet of lozenges. They said their farewells, and were then escorted to their respective tractors with much cheering and clapping, and their teachers then accompanied them back to their villages.

The Bal Mela is an annual event organized by the Education Initiative of Samrakshan Trust at its campus in village Agraa, district Sheopur, Madhya Pradesh, India. It is supported by the Silicon Valley chapter of Asha for Education, USA, as well as generous donations in cash and kind by many friends and supporters. For more details of Samrakshan's work, please visit us at www.samarakshan.org.