

## Abilities Mela 2009

### **Introduction:**

India has some 40 to 80 million persons with disability<sup>1</sup>. But low literacy, few jobs and widespread social stigma are making disabled people among the most excluded in India. Children with disabilities are less likely to be in school, disabled adults are more likely to be unemployed, and families with a disabled member are often worse off than average. In the years to come, the number of disabled people in India is expected to rise sharply as age related disabilities grow and traffic accidents increase. Combined with poverty & growing disparities, increase in prices and cost of living income generating work and livelihoods are the only option to a life of dignity. .

India has a growing disability rights movement and one of the more progressive policy frameworks in the developing world. But, a lot more needs to be done in implementation and “getting the basics right”. Newer thinking and better coordination of programs is called for. Preventive health programs need to be deepened and all children screened at a young age. With better education, training and more access to jobs, people with disabilities can become an integral part of society, as well as help generate higher economic growth that will benefit the country as a whole. Most importantly, persons with disabilities should themselves be made active participants in the development process. Groups working in Disability need to come together on common platforms to lobby for jobs in the private & public sectors, accessible infrastructure & removal of barriers. In this process they need to be joined by other influential players such as corporates, local state government agencies, media groups & mainstream development agencies.

Business & Community Foundation (BCF) a national non profit working in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility launched a disability platform called ‘Abilities Mela’ in 2004 in Delhi with a mission to facilitate and promote inclusive opportunities for people with disabilities. As part of a very timely and critical funding support provided by Cordaid, BCF has been working on the project ‘Linking People with Disabilities (PWDs) to Markets and Job Opportunities’ since 2007. At the completion of the second year of the project the Abilities Mela initiative has spread to 11 states across the country with a vibrant partnership with other non profits & institutions.

In year one of the project the Abilities Melas were held in eight states of Kerala, Delhi, Tamilnadu, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar & Andhra Pradesh. The year two of the project witnessed a further follow-up and consolidation of the initiative in the given states as well as the disability platform spreading to new states like Haryana, Karnataka, Jammu & Kashmir.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘People with Disabilities in India: From Commitments to Outcomes’, World Bank Report 2009

## Objectives:

In year two BCF organized the Abilities Mela in six states in order to further consolidate the following objectives:

- The primary objective of the project is to provide a common platform to NGOs and networks working on disability issues to come together to interface rather than working in isolation of each other and lobby for an inclusive society
- Provide a single window of information, diverse opportunities for training, livelihoods, self employment such as in the tourism industry for disabled, introduce new skillsets of computer literacy, English speaking skills, making waste to wealth products etc.
- A platform to exhibit the skills and capabilities of the differently abled as well as to market their products, obtain customer feedback, improve packaging, etc
- To empower PWDs among rural marginalized communities and to achieve a better quality of life for them by giving them exposure to information, opportunities, inputs available.
- Design inputs and training on improving upon the quality and marketability of the products made by the differently abled.
- Sensitizing companies, students, civil society organizations (CSOs) & the public on disability issues and enable cooperation to fulfill the corporate responsibility.
- Capacity building of the differently abled communities / non profits through interventions like computer centres, websites, connectivity with other groups, etc.

## Impact of the Abilities Mela in six states in 2009:

- **Sensitization and providing a platform:** the Abilities Mela has paved the way towards sensitizing the local NGOs, CBOs, Governments and corporate on the scenario and issues pertaining to PWDs, showcasing their potential and also providing a successful platform for them to come together.
- **Documentation of success stories** over the last two years the Abilities Mela platform brought to the limelight a number of extraordinary persons with disability who have conquered multiple challenges in their lives and become role models not only for other PWDs but for any human being who has faced adversity in his or her life. The Abilities Mela really belongs to such persons, and their success stories were documented to be showcased and shared.
- **Improving product design and marketability:** The Abilities Mela has been successful in giving impetus to improve the quality and range of products made by PWDs through facilitating a series of direct customer feedback and trainings .
- **Livelihood opportunities for PWDs:** The initiative facilitated showcasing of the skills and talent of PWDs, and those who have found productive means of self and wage employment, actively access markets and lobby for jobs in the private, public and other sectors. The melas have sensitized and equipped the PWDs on employability factors: resume, interview preparation, body language as well as funding mechanisms for self employment proposals.
- **Strengthening Partnerships:** Regional partner organizations of BCF were able to generate interest and got tremendous support from local organizations, civil

society, public and private sector in organizing the mela in terms of volunteer support, mobilizing the public, disseminating information, etc. Over 120 organizations participated actively and put their stalls in the melas. The initiative has helped in sensitizing non disability partner organizations, motivated them to integrate disability in their programmes.

- **Abilities Mela Brail Manual:** The Abilities Mela open resource manual was developed by BCF in year one of the project. The manual serves to be a guiding tool for disability organizations, groups to organize the initiative on their own, sensitize people for advocacy to mainstream issues around disability. The manual was also translated in other regional language e.g. Telegu. In year two of the project, BCF has come up with the **braille version** of the manual in order to ensure a wider reach of the guiding tool among the visually challenged.
- **Post Mela Linkages:** The initiative has been very successful to link the disability organizations in smaller towns with the network and agencies in metropolitan cities and open up diverse opportunities. The groups have been able to get exposure to schemes and dialogue with organizations like Indian Red Cross Society, UN Information Centre, Faridabad Chambers of Commerce, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Maximizing Employment to Serve the Handicapped (MESH), Community Friendly Movement, National Trust etc.

For instance Mohd Iqbal, President of People Action Group for Inclusion and Rights (PAGIR), a disability network in Ladakh. Could meet with the Secretary, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment to understand the schemes that could be availed by PAGIR. The Urdu Media: Kamara Samaj, Indinon, Tasveer – e Hind, Sahafat, Jamia Radio & others like Yojana Magazine featured Mohd Iqbal's interview and work done by PAGIR.

### **Abilities Melas 2009**

**BCF & Lakshmi Shankar Narayan (LSN) Foundation, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2009 conducted for the second time in year two of the project**



BCF & LSN Foundation with the support of Vocational Rehabilitation Centre (VRC), other leading NGOs and Government Institutions organised the Abilities Mela 2009 on 2nd and 3rd May 2009 at Vocational Rehabilitation Centre (VRC) premises in Hyderabad. There were 44 stalls of both products and information

Government schemes and services provided by the disability sector organizations. The stalls were put up by disability NGOs, Government training Institutions such as VRC and a few corporates showcasing work done by them on Disability to encourage others.

### **Key Highlights & Outcomes**

### **Corporate Presentations**

HR representatives from many corporate organizations took sessions for PWDs and the NGOs facilitating employment opportunities for them. They explained about requisite qualifications, skills required and opportunities and facilities for PWDs in their respective companies. The other topics on which the speakers spoke include: motivational talk, resume preparation, how to face interviews, body language, readiness to work in shifts, training programmes etc. In addition to the private sector, the PWDs were also made aware about the employment opportunities in the PSUs.

### **Self Employment Module**

The Mela also reached out to those PWDs who have an inclination for self-employment. Experts from financial institutions were invited to explain about the funding possibilities and funding mechanism for self-employment proposals. Mr. Jayada Raju of AP Backward Cooperative Finance Corporation informed that under the Rajiv Abhyudaya Yojana PWDs can avail loans to the tune of Rs 1 lakh with 50% subsidy. Dr. Mohan Rao, State Coordinator, Khadi & Village Industries Commission (KVIC) explained that loans to the tune of Rs 25 lakhs can be availed for larger enterprises for the urban and rural PWD beneficiaries. As large number of PWDs attended this was useful information.

As a prelude to the Mela, Aarohan Foundation organised a Business Plan Competition for the PWDs in a few communities within Hyderabad. During the mela, the winning proposals were given awards & their work disseminated & highlighted.

### **Panel discussion on Legal Entitlements for PWDs**

This session was a discussion on the PWD Act 1995 by experts representing lawyers, NGOs, Government organizations and PWDs themselves. The discussion touched upon legal provisions and entitlements, rights of PWDs, advantages and disadvantages of the PWD Act, problems faced in the implementation of the Act, etc. This led to the preparation of a set of recommendations to the Government for further follow up. (*Annexure 1*)

**Seminar on Health, Nutrition and Wellbeing:** the session was marked by expert advice on health, nutrition and stress management, wellbeing aspects for the PWDs.

**BCF & People's Council for Social Justice & Shilpa Society in Palluruthy, Kerala, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2009: conducted for the second time in year two of the project**



BCF with People's Council for Social Justice, Ernakulam and Shilpa Society, Palluruthy, jointly organized an 'Abilities Mela' on 4<sup>th</sup> August, 2009 at Ernakulam Women's Association, Ernakulam.

20 Special Schools & NGOs and 162 students and teachers representing special schools

participated in the mela and displayed products made by their students. The mela was attended by participants from corporate sector, educational institutions, civil society organizations, etc. The media covered the event highlighting issues that posed constraints. The Mayor of Cochin inaugurated the Mela & many state dignitaries attended. It acted as a eye opener for them to see the range of skills & talents exhibited.

There were different varieties of items like trays made of wood carved to perfection, frosted and coloured candles in a variety of shapes and sizes, checkered aprons and hand painted handkerchiefs etc, all made by the students of special schools from the city, their disabilities ranging from cerebral palsy and autism to multiple disabilities and degrees of mental retardation. A large number of food products was on sale & parents of children with Disabilities participated volunteering their time & efforts, networking with other parents, learning from one another. Boutique owners visited looking at orders for products

“It is a misconception that mentally challenged people can’t be made to do anything well. In fact they are the most productive, as they will do things which they are trained to with perfection”, said an instructor from the Raksha Special School. “We have students of all ages, ranging from 10 to 45, who learn different crafts at the vocational training unit of the e school”, said instructors from the Chavara Special School.

### **BCF, Charkha & People’s Action Group for Inclusion & Rights (PAGIR) in Leh, Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> September 2009.**



Charkha is a non profit organization that works to empower the rural, marginalised and disadvantaged communities through appropriate medium of communication mechanisms and access to information, making creative use of media.

PAGIR a disabled people’s movement recognized that economic empowerment is the first step towards social empowerment and inclusion,

PAGIR designed a unique initiative called *Jungwa Shungskyob* (Ladakhi for protecting the four elements – earth, water, fire, air) to engage artists with disability by teaching them the creative skills to transform waste such as paper and cloth into handicrafts and other useful products. These are presently being retailed through two sales outlets in Leh town. In addition to promote livelihoods of persons with disability, the initiative helps in reducing and reusing waste to protect the fragile ecosystem of the Himalayan region

### **Key Highlights**

The Abilities Mela was scheduled to coincide with the annual Ladakh Festival, an initiative of the Department of Tourism, J&K Government, which draws visitors from across the world. Held during September 1-15 each year at Leh, the festival displays

exhibits made in Ladakh by NGOs, government and private individuals, in addition to promoting the art and culture of Ladakh. The Abilities Mela benefited greatly from larger crowds due to the presence of these visitors at Leh. More than 5000 people attended the mela & this gave visibility to the work of PAGIR which works across disabilities led by Mohd Iqbal who is physically disabled but a soaring spirit & courage.

About 30 varieties of products (amounting to 1500 in number) were displayed. These included cloth bags, folders, newspaper bags, paper mache products, roll mats, pen stands, storage boxes, cushions, greeting cards and mobile phone pouches.

To create adequate stocks of the paper-based products, Charkha collected several hundred kilograms of newspaper from various sources in Delhi and requested *Air India-Cargo Division* to transport the bundles to Leh at no cost, to support the initiative

PAGIR played a pioneering role in bringing different disability-rights groups under one banner through the 'Abilities Mela'. The visually-challenged teachers and students of the Mahabodhi School were invited to exhibit and sell their products; they brought Braille books and other equipment; and were enterprising to set up, at short notice, a fruit juice and fruit salad stall.

### **Outcomes**

- The objective of building links between PAGIR (and its wide base of persons with disability) and potential markets, resources and people who can help with gaining access to other livelihood options and training was met
- The Abilities Mela also served as a platform to spread awareness about PAGIR's work among visitors, local and tourists alike, to explore support avenues
- PAGIR used the opportunity successfully to showcase their advocacy work and the products created by the group using raw material like waste paper and waste scraps.
- The approval for shipments of newspaper received from Air India – *Cargo Division* would meet PAGIR's requirements of waste paper for the next 18 months. This will enable them to expand their network and ensure sustainability by increasing the number of members who learn the productive and creative skills involved in making the products. This has freed the group from the dependence on local purchase of newspapers from junk dealers at exorbitant rates
- The link with institutional supporters is critical to the sustainability of the initiative. Large organizations like *The Express Group* (supplied a large quantity of newspaper free of cost for making products to stock for sale at the Abilities Mela) and Air India (shipped the large quantity from Delhi to Leh free of cost) were involved to enable PAGIR to maintain the support base.

### **BCF & SWASTHA Centre for Special Education & Rehabilitation in Kodagu, Karnataka, 25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> September 2009**



SWASTHA Centre for Special Education and Rehabilitation is a non profit based in Kodagu, Karnataka working to provide special education

and vocational training for children and youth with disability. The children across all disabilities at the Centre are taught envelope & file making, screen -printing, making greeting cards, tailoring and other paper products. The products of Swastha have been well received and are catering to the stationery needs of Tata Coffee through a sheltered workshop providing gainful employment to young adults.

### **Key Highlights & Outcomes**

**Workshops & Presentations:** Resource persons from various fields gave talks and presentations and also conducted workshops. Mrs. Meena Kumari Lawyer, District court, Madikeri spoke on **'The Rights of the Disabled' and 'Legal awareness'**. Mr. Medappa officer from the Department of Woman and Child Welfare Madikeri spoke on **Government schemes for the Disabled**. Ms. Poongodi of Ramakrishna Vidyalaya Coimbatore held a workshop on **Sign language for the Speech and Hearing impaired**. Mrs. Pushpa Bopaiah an Equine Therapist from Bangalore had a presentation on **Equine Therapy**. A workshop was also held in **Origami** by a specialist from Goa which was well appreciated by the students.

**Films:** The disability films screened at the mela aroused a sense of duty and commitment towards the differently abled in society, to help bring them into the mainstream.

**Job opportunities & Capacity building:** Eighteen differently abled individuals were registered with the Ministry of Labour, Vocational and Rehabilitation Centre Bangalore for training and placements. Wipro an IT company from Bangalore conducted interviews and counseling.

**Cultural programmes:** held on both days was a huge success. All the special schools of the district participated actively and enthralled the audience with their performances. This was the first such Mela held in the whole district bringing together all agencies together.

**BCF & Association for Social Service & Rehabilitation of the Aged (ASSRA) in Gobarghusi Village of Patamda block East Singhbhum district, Jharkhand on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2009, conducted for the second time in year two of the project.**

ASSRA is a non- profit organization based in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand that works to empower the rural marginalized and disadvantaged communities. ASSRA is to act as the bridge in the area to link PWDs with markets where they can have a say on the price of products produced by them and to do away with the middle men.

Over the years it was observed that many NGOs working with the PWDs, SHGs having PWDs as members and family of artisans having PWDs who were trained craftsmen were striving hard to produce various kinds of home made products. However there was no market potential for such items produced by them. Few organizations or associations who were able to market their products through local agents were at losing end as the actual profit was enjoyed by the middlemen who sold the products in markets of nearby towns.

In this scenario the mela served to be a platform within the immediate vicinity to advertise/display their products as well as participate in the Faridabad Mela, etc.

### **Key Highlights & Outcomes**

There were 32 participant stalls at the mela. Exhibiting products made by the differently abled as well as information of different types of vocational training, counseling and job opportunities for the differently abled..

The participants were informed about the schemes for the benefit of PWDs available with the National Trust<sup>2</sup>. ASSRA has initiated steps to link the disability groups to ARUNIM<sup>3</sup>, the marketing initiative of National Trust that facilitates and promotes marketing of the products made by PWDs

With an initial effort to rehabilitate the PWDs since the last mela in 2008, ASSRA has taken initiative and the following PWDs were helped to receive BPL(Below Poverty Line) Cards and provided with monthly pension (Rs.400/- p.m.) from the block office.

- a. Laxmidhar Garai,S/o Madan Garai,Male, Village: Gobarghusi
- b. Sarala Tudu,D/o Tapan Tudu,Female,Village: Ladaidungri
- c. Sambhu Sabar,S/o Sushil Sabar,Male,Village: Ladaidungri

The Block Development Officer (B.D.O) who was the chief guest and Government representative expressed hope that such initiatives would provide a wide market reach for PWDs to become financially productive and get buyers for their products. He also expressed his desire to promote such activities in different blocks of the district.

### **BCF & Brotherhood, Faridabad, Haryana, 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> November 2009**



In an effort to bring disability centre stage in Faridabad, BCF & Brotherhood organized the Abilities Mela on November 11 - 12, 2009 at Faridabad Chambers of Commerce grounds. The first of its kind mela in Faridabad, marked by the participation of 19 organizations, was a launching pad to successfully showcase the abilities of PWDs

### **Key Highlights**

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<sup>2</sup> The National Trust is an autonomous organization of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, set up under the “National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities” Act (Act 44 of 1999)

<sup>3</sup> ARUNIM: Association for Rehabilitation under the National Trust Initiative of Marketing

- Free check up of hemoglobin; blood Rh factor for women to prevent birth of disabled children by Red Cross.
- District Social Welfare department, Faridabad provided information about various services, schemes policies available for PWDs in Haryana and in India.
- Disability films and documentaries from India and abroad were screened during the mela to sensitize the visitor and students from schools and colleges.
- The organizers along with the Chamber of Commerce gave away awards to four PWD achievers from rural area that are not only living independently but supporting their families. This acted as a role model to others who attended.

### **Outcomes:**

- The mela brought to light a network of 19 organizations working in the disability sector and providing various services to the urban and rural population of this region. Brotherhood has taken the next step to link these organizations with local agencies: Indian Red Cross Society, UN Information Centre, Faridabad Chambers of Commerce.
- Mr. J P Malhotra, President of Faridabad Chamber of Commerce agreed to support the organizations working in the disability sector by way of promoting the standard of education of children with disability in this region, promote their products like envelops, files, candles, bags etc. through the members of Faridabad Chamber of Commerce in Faridabad.
- Dr. R K Sharma of the UN Information Centre extended an invitation to provide a platform to exhibit products made by children / persons with disability at the premises of United Nations, New Delhi.
- Dr. O P Bhalla, Chancellor, Manav Rachna International University offered his and his University's services for the welfare of persons with disability and organizations working in the disability sector in the field of education, promotion of products made by organizations, treatment of persons with disability, physiotherapy etc wherever cases are referred to him in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Abilities Melas have been a direct means of market access and customer knowledge for PWDs to understand consumer behavior, obtain linkages to companies and governments. The platform serves as a means to achieve greater confidence and long term livelihoods. The melas have truly highlighted the innate skills and abilities of PWDs.

The Abilities Mela initiative will go a long way to build capacities of the disability sector organizations and pave the way towards a self financed Abilities Mela by the differently abled as an annual feature in different states in India in times to come. The idea would be to keep it low cost and replicable so that it can be organised all over the country by local disability groups to showcase their abilities and strengths and carry it forward.