

The Abilities Mela
1st & 2nd Dec2007
Blind Relief Association, Lal Bahadur Shastri Marg, New Delhi

1st December

Abilities Mela 2007 was already abuzz with activity by 10 a.m. Stalls, draped in pretty off-white, neatly lined along the perimeter of the enormous grounds, were already filling up with colorful products. Stallholders were busy arranging soft toys, candles, cards, food items or garments etc in an attractive manner.

At the stall put up by 'Deaf Way', youngsters communicated in sign language, while students of Blind Relief Association, which co-organised the Mela, walked around freely, usually in groups.

'Families of the Disabled' put up two stalls. In one, they exhibited gorgeous artwork made by those in their family who suffer disabilities. In the other stall, Mrs Om Lata Tyagi, FOD, stood over a steaming kadhai and dished out fresh biryani, chhola bhatura and kadhi chawal, while her husband Mr. Rishi Tyagi helped. She explained, "I volunteer every morning with FOD, while my daughter is in school. My husband has only one arm, but he runs a transport business! He also volunteers with FOD." The proceeds from both stalls will go towards supporting FOD activities.

Another stall displayed the beautiful artwork of Jitin Kevalramani, diagnosed as mentally retarded, but with aesthetic sensitivity and artistic skills far above average. He beamed with transparent joy when people passing by, stopped and gazed at his beautiful watercolours, with open appreciation.

Anuradha Krishnamurti, at the 'Action for Autism' stall, is a post-graduate in Psychology. She said, "Working with our children is very enjoyable. Many parents get very involved. The products here are hand made by 10 to 15 of our older children." Her colleague at the stall is an intern with the organization, learning how to teach children diagnosed as autistic. She is a professional social worker, and has come all the way from Hyderabad to intern with the pioneering organization in this field.

Dr Sudesh Yadav, of Dabur Foundation, went around keenly observing and vetting various products, to see which could be useful to her organization. She has come to this Mela every year since its inception (in 2004). She reflected, "What I like most is that the products are increasingly well made. We like to pick up files, handmade paper and cards from some of the organizations represented here. The best part is the feeling that our money is going directly to the right people. I take down contact numbers so, when we need to, we can place bulk orders. For instance, see these clean, delicious foodstuffs – we can order these for meetings or workshops." Yadav points towards traditional savouries and sweetmeats, made by Mithlesh Sharma, who employs poor women in Modinagar, to assist her in this income generating activity. All the women employed by Sharma are in acute financial distress.

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An integral part of the Mela, for the first time this year, was the Job Fair, in which potential employers came face to face with a number of enthusiastic job applicants. Amita Joseph of BCF, said, “In a society with so much general unemployment, it is not easy for people with disabilities to find job placements. The National Trust received applications from about 50 applicants, and held a two-day orientation workshop with them. Finally about 20 came for this Job Fair, and interacted with corporate sector employers. About ten of them have been shortlisted & if they perform well in the next round of interviews, are likely to find jobs as a result of this effort.” While the Job Fair was for people with the four disabilities that National Trust focuses on (autism, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, and multiple disabilities), Anubhuti Consultants, Vocational Rehabilitation Centre (VRC) stall responded to employment-related queries from candidates across other disabilities.

The Abilities Mela this year was co-organised by BCF (Business and Community Foundation), BRA and the National Trust. As Poonam Natarajan, Chairperson, National Trust explained during the inaugural function of the Mela (1st December morning), “There are so many attitudinal barriers to people with developmental disabilities. Skills training can help people work and earn. We are happy to work together with all the organizations that work with people with many different disabilities.”

‘Speaking’ at the inaugural function, Zamir Dhale, Advocacy Officer with Sense India Foundation, communicated in sign language, through his interpreter Sachin. Zamir said, “The atmosphere is not conducive for us. Here at the Mela we feel good, because we meet all our friends in one place. It is very important for us to sensitise people across disabilities. Each other’s experience and support is very important, for our happiness.... I lead a normal life today. I work all over India, for the rights of deafblind people.” Chief Guest Ms Sminu Jindal, Managing Director of Jindal Saw Ltd, said, “Persons with disabilities prove to be honest, dedicated and sincere workers. Somebody who is visually impaired often has a very keen sense of hearing, as compensation, and might be very good at the telephone. Persons can be employed based on the skills they have.” Mr Atul Prasad, CEO, National Trust, noted that people with disabilities have more fighting spirit than others, and can excel in every walk of life, if given the right opportunity.” The Mela and Job Fair were about facilitating such opportunities.

Meanwhile, Sonal Sharma of ‘CanKids’ was busily looking up various stalls to see what could be useful for “her” children – child patients of cancer. Her own two daughters, tagging along with her, are bright and full of questions. I wonder how they feel about their mother’s ‘other’ children – and know that there is no better teaching she can ever give them than this ‘sharing’ of their mother with other, less privileged, kids. At the CanKids stall, a young girl tried to get anybody passing by to have mehndi applied on the hands; she herself is a brave cancer survivor. Next to her another child was busy selling slices of walnut banana and chocolate cake... there was little need to call out to customers for these!

Some stalls were purely for information on aids and assistive devices, such as the one run by ‘Handicap International’. At the ‘Astha’ stall, Shabnam Agarwal explained her

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organization runs a Helpline providing disability-related information -- “We get 40 to 50 calls a month. We provide answers to many queries, but often there are queries about institutional care for a disabled person, and we are unable to provide satisfactory answers.”

Samadhan Trust, which works with mentally retarded children, had an interesting product on sale – a slim book entitled ‘Sunny’s Story’. In the book, founder-trustee Pramila Balasundaram, has written out the heartwarming true story of a little boy who suffering from mental retardation, and his journey from being ‘disabled’ to being a productive, confident and able member of society.

The ‘Athak Prayas Sanstha’ stall stood out for its greenery – glass bowls with bamboo and other indoor plants. Mrs. Pinky Rani, President of Prayas, explained, “These plants absorb negative energies. We use them with children and families. They are useful for any family. Her son, 9-year old Rahul, has no vision and is mentally retarded. She says, “Some of us felt we must start an association. All our children now have speech therapy, and multi-disability certificates. We began the organization in 2006. We still function from the premises of the National Association of the Blind (NAB). It is difficult, since there is no transport facility. I travel 25 km. But this is part of our lives.”

At the Jeewan Jyoti stall, 20-year old Deepak invited people in, and lovingly displayed the ware. He was so very happy open and showing tablecloths, wall plates and so on -- decorative and functional items, several made with his own hands. Principal Mr Vinod Bhatt, and social worker Mrs. Meera Joshi, smiled indulgently. Joshi said, “We work with 220 mentally retarded children in the school. I find it immensely rewarding, when I see the progress made by children like Deepak.”

From about 4 to 6 in the evening, Parikrama presented ‘Dance Magic’, a jam session, in conjunction with Prabhat Society for Child Development, a support group of parents of people with mental retardation. Many Mela participants joined in enthusiastically, as the dance and music created a different atmosphere. Rather than a stage performance, this was truly participatory entertainment, held in the center of the open Mela ground. People of all ages, particularly teenagers, enjoyed themselves, in the safe yet fun-filled environment.

As darkness set in and the cool evening breeze began to blow, participants began to shut their stalls, and wend their way home. My last vision of the day was a solitary floating candle, still alight at about 8 p.m., until the last participants left.

2nd December

Representatives of various organizations came up, in the morning, to share their activities with one another. This was an extremely important and heart-warming occasion for most organizations present, especially the smaller ones, who have struggled all along for sheer survival. Mr. U.S. Srivastava of ‘Aradhana Parents Support Group’, East Delhi, recalled, “The organization began in 1993 with just 5 parents of mentally challenged children. Today we have 50 members, and 30 children or adults who need special care, aged 13 to

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35. Members support the organization from their own resources. We aim to build skills for employment and self-employment -- how to run a computer, a xeroxing machine, lamination machine etc, and also prepare clean spices.” Arti Sahni, 36, who has learnt vocational training at this center, came up and explained that now she puts up stalls in schools, for selling spices, earthen lamps and other products.

55 organisations participated in the Mela this year – the fourth Abilities Mela (the first being held in 2004). Explains Amita, “The Mela is meant to showcase the abilities of people. It provides a dynamic platform for organisations to come together. It promotes wage & self employment by putting organizations in direct touch with customers, especially targeting X’mas, New Year & corporate gifts. It enables the organizations to understand what the market wants, in terms of products & pricing.”

Anuj Prasad and Sandhya Raman, professionals from NID, now working in ‘Desmania’ a design organization, spent both days at the Mela to guide organizations in product designing. They identified scope for improvement, for instance, in product finish. They advised ‘Aradhana’ to form a cooperative for production and marketing of spices, seeking visibility and converting the product into a brand. They offered to hold a workshop for children and teachers of ‘Nav Jyoti Institute for Mentally Challenged’, to help improve quality through better colour combinations and a hand made touch to the jute bags, mats, notebooks and greeting cards.

During the afternoon, ‘Handicap International’ performed street plays, communicating the struggles of persons with disabilities. In the evening, students of ‘Jeevanpath Viklang Vidyalaya’, Rai Bareilly, and Blind Relief Association, put up cultural performances. Evocative songs and music cemented bonds of friendship and conviviality among the Mela participants.

Participants were happy to meet others doing similar work, make friends and learn from one another. Richa Tyagi of BCF noted, however, that the turnout of people at the Mela was less than expected, given that over 6000 invitations were sent, 30,000 flyers in newspaper, posters, email, sms, advertisement in Civil Society magazine & newspapers etc. Total sales during the Mela came up to over Rupees 1 lakh. Organizations with high quality products like MESH, Pardada Pardadi Educaton Society, Blind Relief Association and several others had particularly good sales. Since organizations do not bear costs for the venue and organization, they do end up making a small profit. She said, “We are considering how to organize it differently next time. We are thinking it will be better to have a number of smaller Melas at different spots, with different organizations co-organising it. Rather than one big event, we will encourage various organizations to come forward and take on the responsibility, so there can be many such events, on a smaller scale, perhaps in residential colony parks, or places like Dilli Haat, where many people would automatically gather.”

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