



BAL MELA 2004



The third Bal Mela (Children's Fair) of Samrakshan's Asha schools, which have been providing primary education to children displaced from Kuno wildlife sanctuary, was held on November 29-30, 2004. Given the team's experience over the last two years, we decided to hold a 2-day mela this year. This, we felt, would allow us to introduce new activities in the mela schedule, and would also give the children a new and exciting experience of staying away from their families and enjoying themselves overnight in the company of other children.

This year, the Samrakshan team decided to hold a mela that is rooted in the local cultural context, but at the same time, carries some unique elements of the Asha schools, which have evolved over the past 3 years to become an important institution in the displaced villages. Accordingly, we dedicated the first part of the mela to a number of games commonly found in local fairs, along with a few innovative and educational games that the team had evolved during the year. In another significant departure from previous practice, we decided not to hold the mela at the Samrakshan campus, and instead chose the open ground in village Paira Adivasi to host the fair. The villagers from Paira generously contributed their labour for levelling and cleaning the mela ground, and for setting up the stalls and stage.



The children from the 3 Asha schools arrived at the mela venue at 9 am, holding banners of their schools and dancing to the tune of their own bands, where the schoolchildren were playing local musical instruments. Upon arrival, they were greeted by the sight of a colourfully decorated mela ground, complete with balloons, paper streamers, banners, tents and a carousel (ferris wheel) that dominated the centre of the ground. Each child received a pair of colourful sunshades as a gift upon entry into the mela ground. The children immediately stormed the game stalls, with rifle

shooting, darts, ninepins and the Ferris wheel being big favourites. Other games the children enjoyed immensely included ring-a-prize and matchstick-maximizer. A range of colourful prizes were on offer at each game stall, and the children competed with great zeal and enthusiasm for toys like tractors, cars, mobile phones, dolls, animals, bugles and whistles. Lunch consisted of poori-subzi and gulaabjamun, and after lunch, the children participated in a 5-part race conducted on an army-style obstacle course, in which boys and girls participated with great enthusiasm to compete for attractive prizes including watches and toy synthesizers. The sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) of Vijaypur, Shri S.S. Trivedi attended the Bal Mela for a short while and awarded prizes to winners of the obstacle race. James Minter from Asha (Washington D.C. chapter) also attended the Bal Mela.



In the evening, children from each Asha School presented a small cultural programme, where they performed traditional dances, sang songs and enacted a self-produced drama. The six teachers of the Asha schools also enacted a small one-act play, based on a story from the school syllabus. After dinner, all children gathered at the mela venue along with families from the host

village, Paira Adivasi, to attend back-to-back film shows on a large screen. The 2 films screened in the mela were Hindi remakes of Gullivers' Travels and ET, respectively, and the show continued till midnight. The children stayed overnight at the government middle school building of village Palpur, near the mela venue.



On the second day of the Mela, the children gathered at the mela ground at 8 AM, and after tea and biscuits, three races - lemon-and-spoon race, three-legged race and sack race - were organized, in which all the children participated. All winners got attractive prizes, and this was followed by a snack of samosa and jalebi, after which the Samrakshan team organized a small thanksgiving function to mark the end of the Mela.

Samrakshan is a non-profit organization working since 1999 with villages displaced from Kuno wildlife sanctuary on issues of livelihood security, health and education. The Asha education initiative has been in operation since 2001, and the three Asha schools of Samrakshan provide elementary education to over 200 children from around 10 displaced villages. For more details, please visit www.samrakshan.org or email at asmita@samrakshan.org.

