



Letters to a Friend

(Experiences from a Panchayat Mela)



UMA PRACHAR

UMA RESOURCE BOOK-7

For Private Circulation

Acknowledgements

This Resource Book has been written for ISST by Ms. Vani, Consultant to the UMA project, based on the detailed documentation of the UMA MELA organised by ISST in December 1994. The documentation for the MELA was carried out by a team of 23 Sahayoginis of Mahila Samakhya Karnataka, co-ordinated by Vani.

We are grateful to the Programme Director of Mahila Samakhya, Ms. Uma Kulkarni for extending this service to ISST. The members of the team were Mahadevi K, Rita J, Nagamma D, Theresa, Gulabi, Shankamma Hiremat, Yeshoda Kolli, Jayamma P, Draupadi Belechucky, Damayanty K, Mainamma, Shanta Kumari, Rajamma, Suguna, Chennamma, Kashibai, Vimalakshi Hiremat, Saraswathy Kulkarni, Prabha Biradar, Chandrakala, Rajamma, Manoranjini and Renuka.

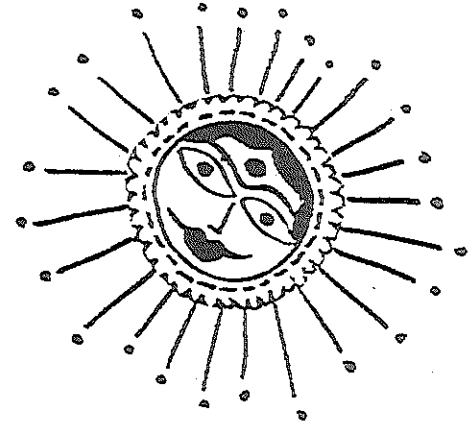
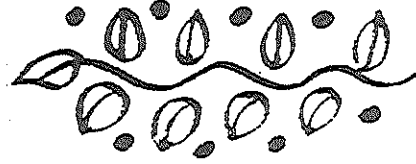
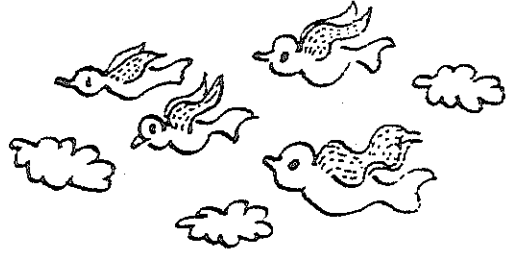
We thank Mr. G.S. Praveen for illustrating this book. We are grateful to the Resource persons at the MELA - Ms. Meera, The Hengasara Hakkina Sangha, Mr. Somashekar Reddy, Ms. Gangamma, Mr. G.S. Praveen, Mr. Siddu and Ms. Shyamala.

We also thank Lakshmi N. for the first round of English translation of the book from Kannada. It has been subsequently worked upon by Mani, Roopa and Sreevidya of the UMA Resource Centre.

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Experiences from the UMA MELA could be valuable to the elected representatives anywhere in the country and as such, activists and organisations working for this cause may feel free to translate and use the book to maximum advantage.

We will be grateful if the UMA Resource Centre is acknowledged in any translation and use of material.



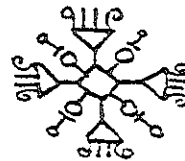
*Have you seen the light in a woman's eyes?
 Have you watched her hold her head high
 and felt her inner strength?
 Have you seen her walk with grace,
 talk with a gentle wisdom,
 write with pride and
 think with quiet confidence?*



*When it fills your heart
 with pain and joy
 bringing tears to your eyes
 and a smile to your lips
 you have watched
 a woman grow.*



- Sourabha Gowda



Foreword



ISST, Bangalore organised a MELA for 200 elected women representatives of the Karnataka Gram Panchayats. The report prepared is a good document for the organisation and also a good reference material for people who are working in this field.

ISST felt the need to make this material accessible to every participant of the MELA. Activists in this field feel the scarcity of reading materials for semi-literates and neo-literates.

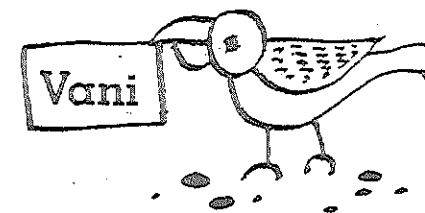
If the text was simple, the language was incomprehensible, or if the language was simple, the text was incomprehensible. In a few cases, where both text and language are kept simple, they never seemed to reach the intended reader. Therefore, we felt the need to bring out this MELA report in the form of a Resource book.



This MELA was conducted at a time when the elected women representatives were experiencing power for the first time and were moving from a world of ignorance and illiteracy to a world of knowledge and power. Literacy empowers women. To this extent, this Resource book contributes to this process.



An attempt has been made to prepare this Resource book in the form of letters. These letters are written by a woman who participated in the MELA describing her experiences to a friend who could not make it to the MELA. For those who attended the MELA, reading this Resource book would be like re-living the experience. This book has been pre-tested on 60 women representatives from two different districts. It has also been read by a few people from the Trainer's Samakhya and their suggestions have been incorporated. It has been revised several times and leaves scope for more. We fondly hope that this book will inspire more people to document their experiences. It would be a rewarding experience for us if many people use this book.



Bangalore
15.12.94



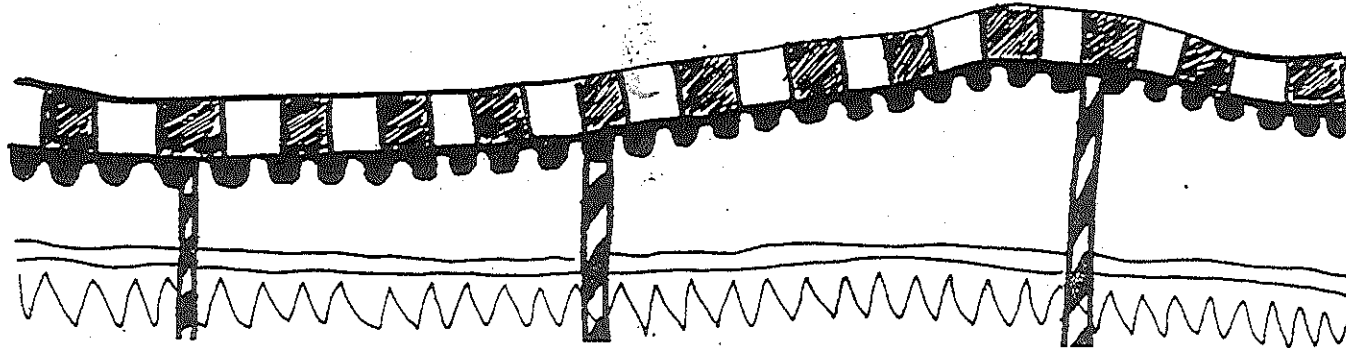
Dear Basavva,

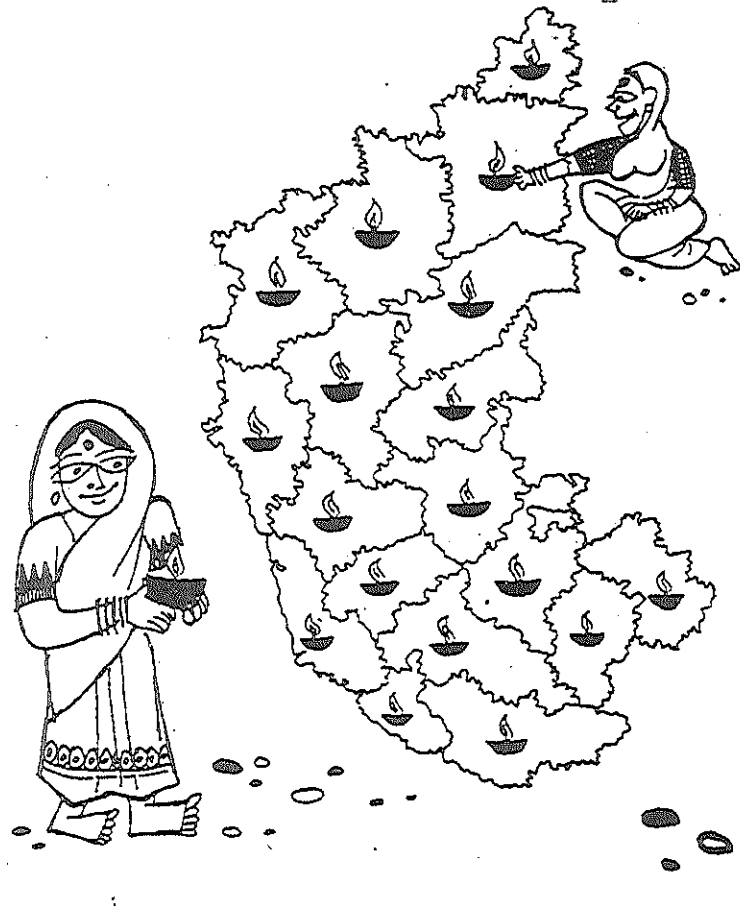
How are you? How is your child? I reached Bangalore safely.

It was evening when I reached the venue of the MELA. A huge, colourful pandal was put up next to a big building. The women in colourful sarees were arriving at the venue from different places. It looked as though they were all coming to attend a fair.

Though they were all strangers to each other, all of them were members of different Gram Panchayats.

As Kamala, Madamma and Hasanabi and I sat in a corner and were wondering what to do next, someone called us to get our names registered. They gave us green badges. Different groups of women were given different coloured badges. The women were still arriving. It was beginning to get dark when the MELA was inaugurated.





There was a stage on which a few women stood and sang the song *'Bantu, Bantu Panchayati Bantu'* (Panchayati has arrived). A map of Karnataka was drawn on the stage. 20 women amongst us were chosen to hold the lighted lamps in their hands. When the song ended, they placed the lamps on the map of Karnataka. It looked very beautiful. Suman Kolhar addressed the gathering on the inaugural

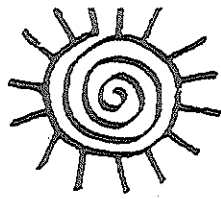


day. Just imagine, she was Bijapur Zilla Parishad Upadhyaksha and has worked in the Panchayat for five years. She did not know anything about politics before. She shared her initial hesitation in entering politics. But with the passage of time she gained confidence and strength. She inspired the women to cast off their inhibitions and be bold to face the challenges of the political field. She added, "Our seats are in the hearts of the people."

As she spoke I was constantly reminded of you. I wish you were also here. The hosts had made excellent arrangements for food and stay for all of us. I may not find time to tell you everything when I reach home, so I will be writing my experiences to you. They are calling us for dinner, so I will sign off now.



Yours lovingly
Sakawa



Bangalore
15.12.94
(10.00 p.m)

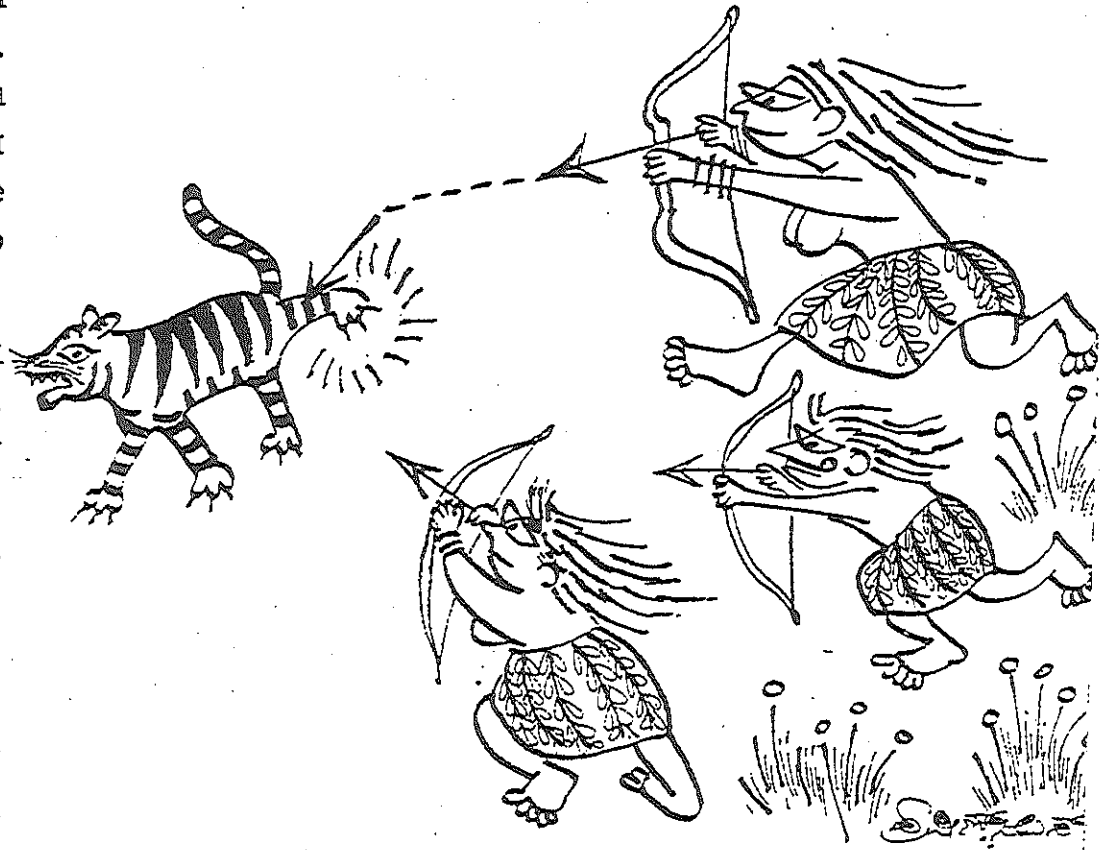
Dear Basavva,

The dinner was excellent. We enjoyed it amidst chatting and laughter. It was fun, because the cooking and serving was looked after by somebody else. I had forgotten to write to you about 'Avva' in my hurry to go for dinner. This was a story narrated through song by Vani and her group after the inauguration.

'Avva' is a woman whose origin could be traced back through the ages. In those days, women enjoyed a high status in society. The people led a nomadic lifestyle. The woman was the leader of the group. She held the group together.

She gathered food for them, went hunting, took care of the children, nursed their illnesses by extracting medicine from local herbs and so on. Thus, she performed all activities and saw to the survival of the group.

Did you know that in the past, people did not know the secret of birth? It was assumed that birth was a miraculous experience. They looked upon women with awe and respect.

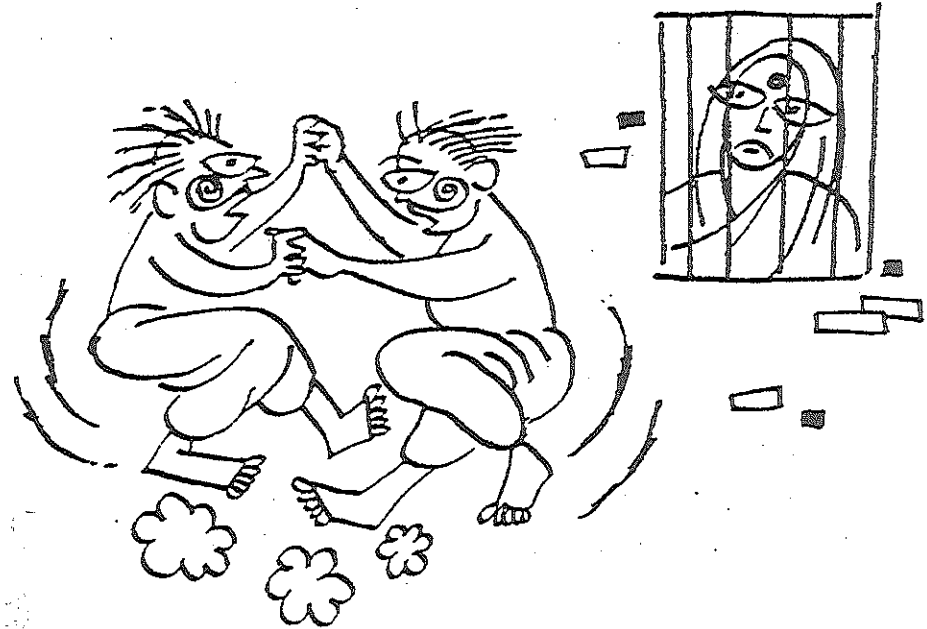


As time passed, the mystery surrounding the cycle of birth was unravelled. Men began to realise their role in this process. As people began to give up nomadic life, they discovered agriculture and started leading a settled life. Here too women contributed to the cultivating and harvesting of the crops. Gradually men took control over the harvested produce and also their property. They also began identifying women as their property and thus began the saga of domination over women.

Women nurtured generation after generation overcoming hardships. Avva is the story of such a woman who had to lead a life of misery. We were moved by this story.

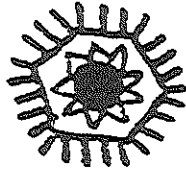
Ms. Vani asked us if we wanted the situation to continue, to which we replied in unison that it shouldn't. She asked us what could be done about this, to which we said that we have to change. When she questioned us as to how we would go about it, we replied that we would work together. As we all replied in one voice, I felt a surge of strength engulf me.

Everybody is discussing the same subject around me. I am the only one writing to you. I am tired now. I will write to you tomorrow.



Yours lovingly
Sakavva

From the Panchayat Raj Pandal...



Bangalore
16.12.1994

Dear Basavva,

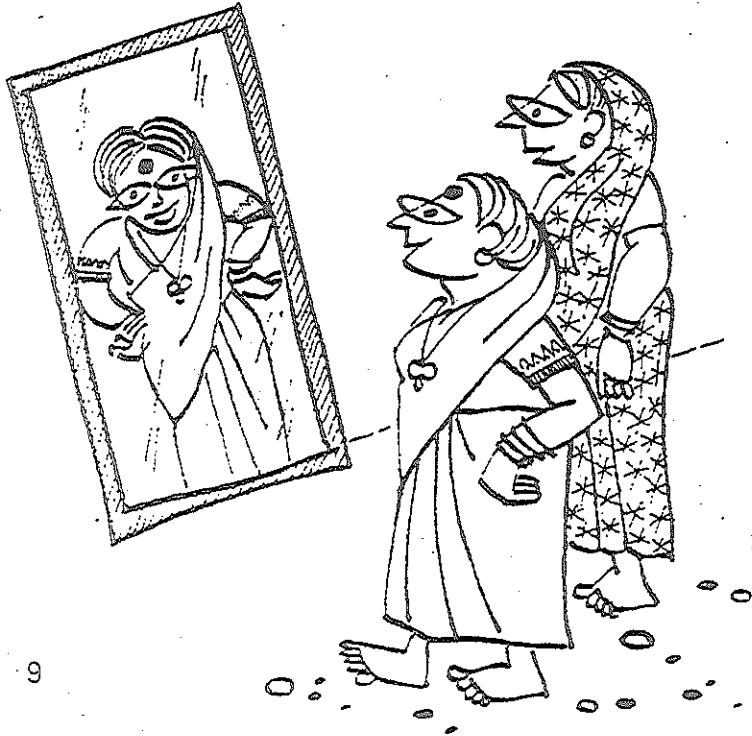
This morning, we went to the 'Panchayat Raj Pandal'. The Resource person Ms. Meera asked each one of us to look at ourselves in the mirror. This is not like the mirror you have at home where you can see only your face. This was a full length mirror. You might wonder what we learned by looking into the mirror! We have never looked at ourselves in the mirror like this. After which we talked at length about ourselves. Most of us felt happy. Some felt scared, others felt that it was wrong to look at oneself in the mirror. As we continued with our discussions, we felt that it is not right to feel scared. If we are scared, people will trample on us. If we are not scared, nobody can do anything to us.

Let us think of something now.

What would happen to this world if all of us women decide to stop working? We had lots of fun imagining this situation. If you stop working one day, can you imagine what will happen ?

The chair game...

I was told to go and sit on a high chair on top of a tall table. Do you know how I felt? I was hesitating first, but later I got courage. I thought maybe I shouldn't have come here at all. Now since



I'm here, I feel I should achieve something. Many women sat on the chair. They also expressed how they felt while they were on the chair. The women watching us asked us many questions, which we discussed.

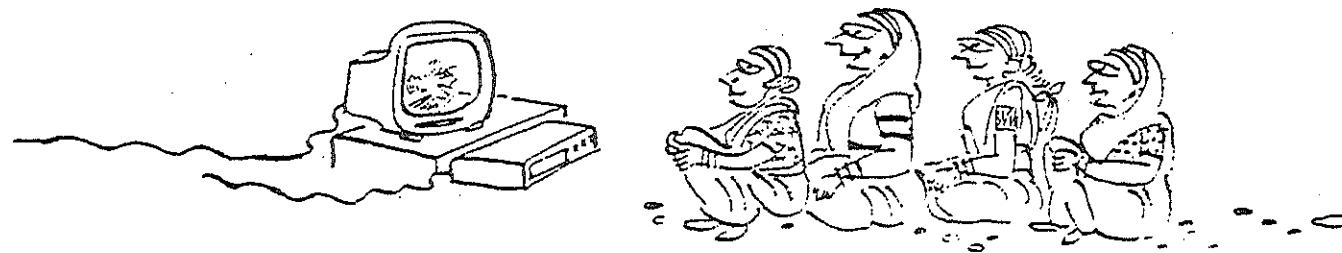


When one of the women sat on the chair, somebody asked her, "What if your husband stops you on your way to the Gram Panchayat meeting, picks up a quarrel with you and snatches away your Mangalsutra? How would you react?"

She replied - "I will tell him, that when he realises his mistake, he will replace the Mangalsutra around my neck. I will also tell him that the meeting is more important to me right now".

We have never seated ourselves on a chair even at home, and now we have got 'power'. How do we manage it? It's easy for you because your husband helps you at home. But what about us? This is what we were talking about.

Back in the village, people make comments like 'what can women do with power?' Some others say; 'If they get power, they will also resort to exploitation'. We talked about this too. Should we be autocratic or should we work with love towards everybody? Most of us felt that whatever position we have acquired, we should remain close to the people. One woman amongst us, when she sat on the chair looked at those sitting below and said; "they appear far from my vision, but, close to my heart." We women should set a new trend, a novel way of practicing politics. Don't you think so?



The menfolk can sit and chat and even discuss politics in the coffee shops and at the village *katte* (centre of the village). Many a time, the men members discuss among themselves and come prepared for the Panchayat meetings. What we can do is, when we meet each other at the village well, tank, or while working in the fields and during special occasions like marriage and other ceremonies, we should discuss about our work. We must support each other, encourage each other and must strengthen women's groups. Don't you think it will be good?

How do we do the administration? Don't we need training for this purpose? Here, we had to show how we conduct ourselves during a meeting. After preparation for ten minutes, we showed them how we conduct a meeting. This was video-recorded and showed to us later. We realised how we conducted ourselves in the meeting.

This meeting was very similar to our Gram Panchayat meeting back home. Some of the women members played the role of men members. They were taking all the decisions and silencing the women members. Poor women, they sat quietly at the meeting.

During this discussion one important thing we learnt was that we should not be quiet. We should express our feelings. If we do not raise our voice, we will be letting down the people who elected us. Don't you think so?

It is not enough if we just talk. We should fight for justice and truth. People who were rich and therefore had power had done as they desired and have prospered, But, we should not be like them. We should take up issues which will bring new life to the village. Normally, we feel scared because we are alone but here we gained a lot of courage because we were together. In future, we should work together. But, will they let us work together? They trouble us on the basis of caste and poverty. As one member said, in her village, they still keep a separate drinking glass aside for her. Unless this discrimination goes, how can we ever be united? Unless all of us are united, how will this feeling of discrimination disappear?

We should be very careful regarding what we say. One woman used the word 'forum' for 'quorum' and this was given wide publicity through out the village. The poor woman felt humiliated. People will be waiting to seize such opportunities. This is how they make fun of us and quieten us.

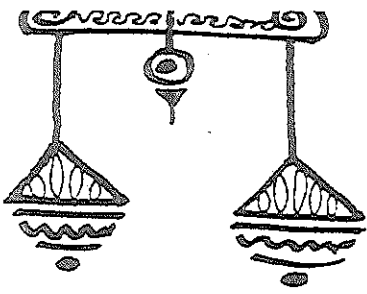
If you had been there, you would have sealed their lips by asking them "Did you know all this as soon as you were born?"

If we start voicing our opinions as one, probably by the time our grand daughters grow up, this kind of fear and hesitation would not be there. Don't you think so?



Yours
Sakavva

The Legal Awareness Pandal...



Bangalore
16.12.1994

Dear Basavva,

This afternoon after lunch, we climbed two floors, we were tired when we sat down for a session on law and legal awareness. The Hengasara Hakkinu Sangha (Women's Legal Rights Association) conducted this session. When asked 'What is law?'

'We replied 'Laws are rules and regulations'.

'Some norms made to ensure that society moves in the right direction'.

'Some rules and regulations which are made to ensure that nobody is put to trouble'.

When asked, 'What is the Constitution?'

'Constitution is the book on law in the country. This book has norms laid down regarding all the matters of the country. From this book, laws are framed'.

When looked at from outside, this law appears to be perfect. But when examined carefully, we can make out that it has several flaws. It is very important to identify these flaws. Because this is the highest law. If the highest law itself has flaws, how can the other laws framed be perfect?



We have all seen the statue of justice. The goddess who has been blindfolded and who is holding the physical balance in her hand gives us justice. With her eyes blindfolded how can she understand the lacunae that exist in our laws and injustice in our society?

How can she give us justice with her eyes blindfolded? Let her open her eyes and understand the disparities that exist and give us justice. Probably then, everybody will get justice.

This may seem a little difficult. Perhaps you know the story of a fox and a crane. Considering both the fox and the crane as equals, is it possible to serve them with *Payasam* in the same plate or in the same pot? No, if they have to drink *payasam*, the fox must be

served in the plate and the crane in a pot. Here, even though the method used to deliver justice was different, both were able to drink the *payasam*. This is justice.

In the sessions we attended, they told us about our roles and responsibilities as an elected women representative. It is also enlisted in the handbooks given to us here. We were taught to make them beneficial to women.

Maintenance of the library service is one of the responsibilities of a gram panchayat member. Let us examine the way the library service operates in a village. We women don't go to the libraries. Why should we go? We are not literates. Even if we go, we don't get anything. How should the library be if it has to be helpful to us? Firstly, there should be books which we can read. There should be somebody to tell us about the availability of the books and explain its contents. There should be an exclusive reading area for women. All that is read and learnt in the library should be discussed at the village while working in the fields, drawing water and so on. Only then will the knowledge possessed by only a few spread to others as well.

Let us also consider the scenario of the 'market place'. Whether it is silk or milk, a lot of hard labour would have gone behind it from the women. But, it is the men who sell it in the market and make money. The market transactions are all in the men's domain. The women who perform all these activities are also capable of bringing the produce to the market and selling it. They have the capacity. But, they do not have the opportunity to do so. As members of the Gram Panchayat, is it not our responsibility to make these opportunities available to women?

Let us take the case of the construction of roads in the villages. This comes under the purview of the Gram Panchayat. But all the roads that are built so far lead to the cities. Why is it so? Obviously it is to transport all the produce we have produced with our hard labour to the cities; in order to make profits. But do we have roads leading to villages? Are there proper roads in the villages? Why are they not constructed? Because, it is not profitable to the city people. As members of the Gram Panchayats, we must see to it that there are roads constructed between villages and inside villages.

In every developmental work or activity we undertake, we must see to it that they are useful to women. We do not have to restrict ourselves to the agenda we are expected to carry out, but go beyond that to do any activity that is necessary in the village.



Initially we were apprehensive of our abilities to manage the Gram Panchayat as it is new to us. But after the discussions we had here, we were convinced of our ability to run the Gram Panchayat. So far, have we not managed to run the house despite all problems? Don't we have the capacity to manage this too? What qualification should the members have to run the Panchayat effectively? We should be aware of the issues that affect us. For this we need information. Don't we collect the necessary information when our children or cattle are ill? Don't we collect information pertaining to those diseases?

In the same way, we have to collect information from all sources, on all matters pertaining to the Gram Panchayat. Are we not capable of doing it?

The activity of the Gram Panchayat also involves financial transactions. Everybody makes fun of us, saying 'What do women know about financial transactions'? But then, don't we undertake money transactions? Yes of course, we do. It may be something which we have earned or money given to us to run the household. We run the house with whatever little money we have and efficiently too. Besides, we also save some money. It is these savings which have come to our spouses' rescue at times of dire need. Is it not so?

We have done transactions in small numbers, if a little more care is taken, we can manage the transaction of a large sum. If we are a little wiser, we may transact, with equal ease, lakhs of rupees allocated to the Gram Panchayat. For this we must remain honest and loyal. Many a time, those who lend money will say, 'I am giving you money since I repose confidence in your wife'.

There is absolutely no reason to belittle ourselves or underestimate ourselves. We have a fund of varied experiences. Are we not capable of decision-making? Are we not capable of prioritising our needs? Are we not capable of thinking rationally? The same skill with which we run our households should be adopted to run the village administration as well. Are we not capable of doing this?

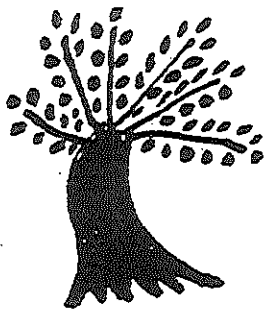
A short play was put up to show a meeting of the Gram Panchayat. They briefed us about the rules and regulations of the Gram Panchayat.

Yet another issue which came up for discussion through this play was - Suppose a woman President of the Gram Panchayat is a maid servant at the village headman's house, she is not able to manage her work in the Panchayat efficiently. The law cannot come to her help. But, we have to help her out. She can manage her work efficiently only if we encourage and support her.

There was considerable attention given to the issue of 'Quorum'. Here, the women came up with a new idea. They said.. there should be at least one woman member to complete a 'Quorum'. This rule is not there in the current legislation. But, this can become a rule in the legislation if we are able to exert enough pressure on this issue." What do you feel about this? Don't you think that we should push this idea through?

In this pandal on law, we realised that we are aware of a lot of issues. Even if we are not aware, there is no need to be perturbed. We can always learn whatever we do not know. We are capable of learning...

Yours lovingly,
Sakavva



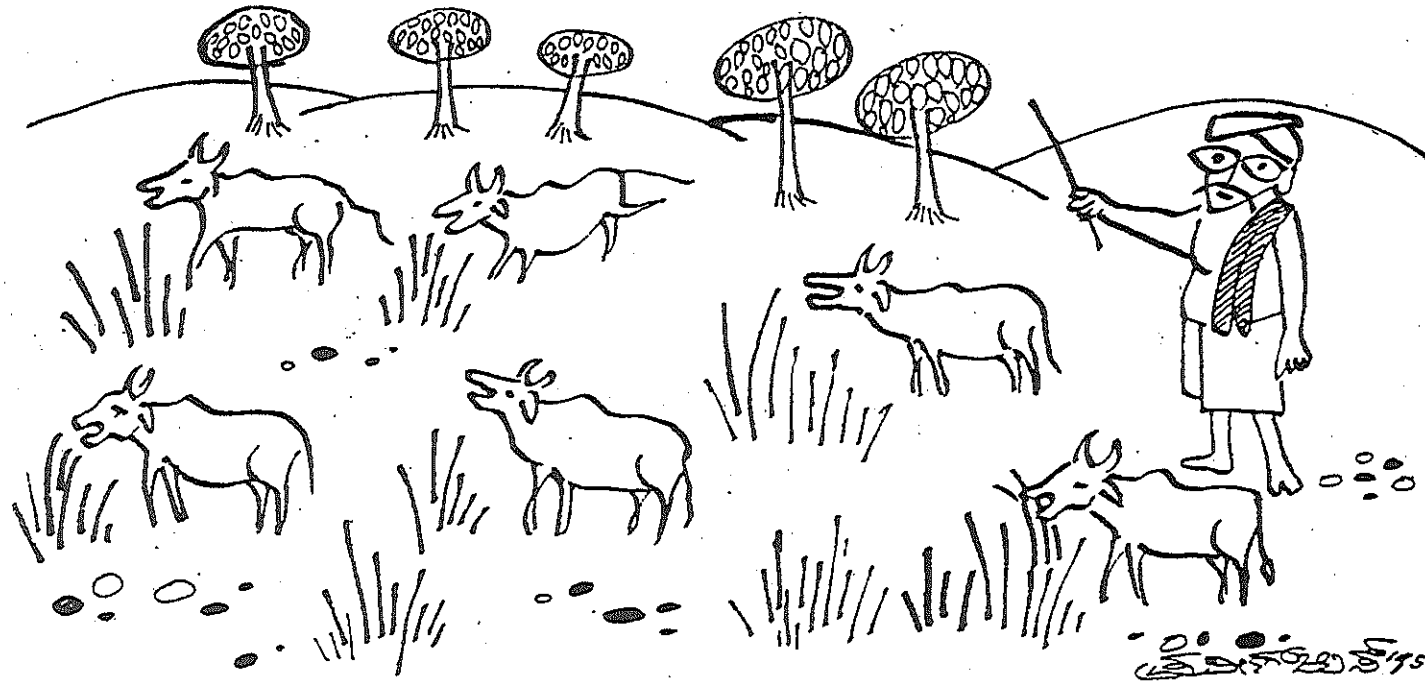
From the Environment Pandal...

Bangalore
17.12.1994

Dear Basavva,

I did not realize how the past two days were spent. Here, they are not just giving us information but yesterday evening, there was Yakshagana and a magic show as well.

This morning, we went to the pandal in which a session on environmental awareness was held. Kamala was grumbling, 'What will they tell us here other than asking us to grow plants and trees'. But, they told us more than that.



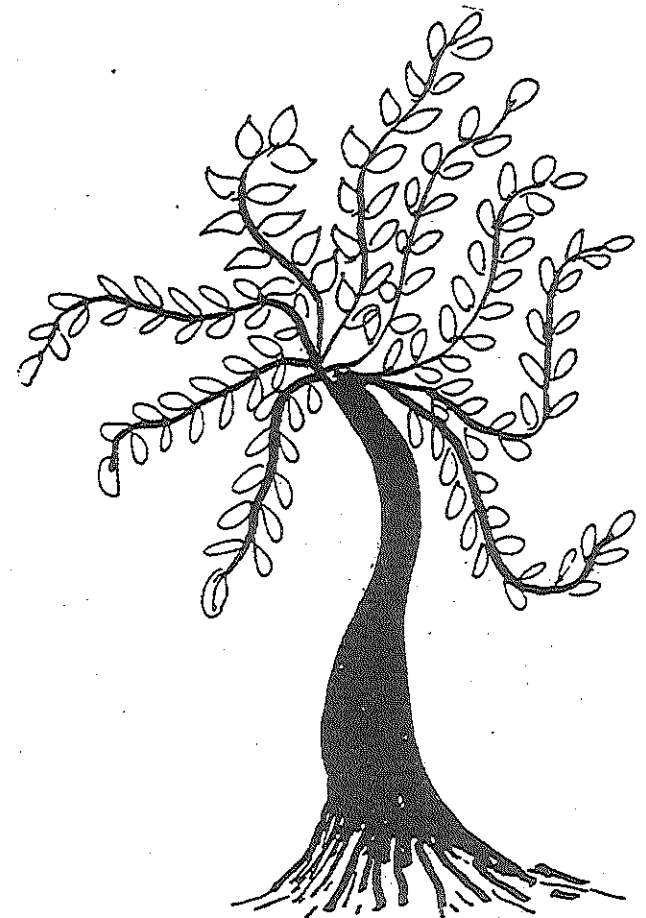
Let us take into consideration the community pasture land. You know what it is, don't you? The land earmarked for the community and the cattle in every village. What is happening to this land? We have been losing it by the day. All of us have a right over the community pasture land. As our ancestors use to say, all the produce grown in this land - greens, firewood, fruits and herbs belonged to the community people. This was of great help to the women folk. They did not have to go far in search of greens and firewood. Everything was available in the community pasture land itself.

But where are these community lands now? In whose hands are they? They were snatched away from us. If there is anything remaining, it is only the barren land. As members of the Panchayats, is it not our duty to ensure that these lands are made available to the poor people?

If we continue to plunder the wealth of nature, what will remain for posterity? We must give and take from nature. We must conserve and reproduce as much as we consume.

In the present scenario, it is very necessary to grow plants wherever possible. It can be on either side of the farms, the low lying areas where the drainage and borewell water flows and around tank beds and so on. Just imagine how beautiful our village will look if plants and trees are grown in all the public places.

We all know that water is a scarce commodity. The minute there is scarcity of water, we dig borewells. As each borewell is dug, the level of ground water goes down. What will happen if the ground water level keeps on going further and further down?



As soon as we get borewell and tap water connections, we forget the tanks and wells. We should maintain these tanks and wells which store rain water. The maintenance of tanks and wells is not a difficult task. Our ancestors used to do it efficiently. From time to time, they used to remove the silt and protect the tanks and wells. We should also look after them properly.

There was yet another matter which left me dumbfounded. Have you heard about pesticides which are used to increase the yield and protect our crops from pests. We learnt that they are poisonous. They will get into our food chain and even into the mother's breast milk. We wanted to know the alternative for these pesticides and chemical manures. To which they said - 'What is there for us to say? You have the solution in your own hands'.

In North India, during the harvest of crops, they grow 7-8 varieties of crops. They do not use any pesticides for these crops. Because each crop protects the other from diseases. Similarly in southern India, while growing pepper for domestic use they grow greens, ladies' finger, cucumber and flowers along with it. They do not use any pesticides. Even then, the crops do not catch any diseases. This is because the odour of one crop keeps the insects away from the other crops.

Do you know what a food chain means? The insects thrive on crops. The insects, in turn get eaten by the lizard. The snake eats the lizard and the snake is eaten by the mongoose. The kite then eats the mongoose and when the kite dies, it becomes manure



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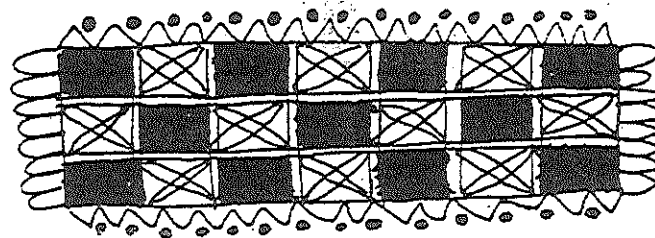
for the plants. Once again, the leaves are eaten by the insects: This process is circular. Though we know the process, we did not know for sure that this was the food chain. There are innumerable food chains like this on earth. If we use pesticides, the food chain is broken. We disrupt the process through our intervention.

If we use chemical manures, we can definitely grow crops faster. But, the fertility of the soil will reduce in the long run. To protect soil fertility, compost and green manures are very effective.

This is not all. We have so many methods to protect seeds in the village. The seed is coated with mud. In some other places, a mixture of neem leaves and burnt cow-dung is used for coating. The neem leaves kill the insects. The ash of the burnt cow dung will absorb the moisture and see that there is no air inside the seed. Likewise, there are numerous methods of protecting the seeds. Mr. Somashekar Reddy who conducted this session said that this is the best method of protecting the seeds.

At this point, I am reminded of the words spoken by Mr. Yellappa Reddy yesterday. He told us, 'the earth should not be left barren. We should give to it by growing plants and trees. If we do so, milk and honey will flow in the village'.

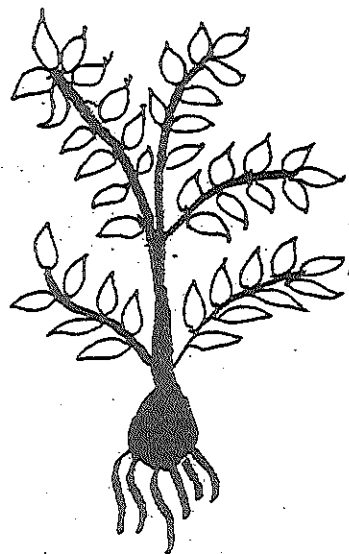
If milk and honey can flow in our villages, it is worthwhile for us to have been elected to the Gram Panchayat.



Yours lovingly,
Sakavva

From the Health stall...

Bangalore
17.12.1994



Dear Basavva,

There is a feeling of being at my mother's place. Where else can we sit in such a relaxed manner. Food is served to us. This afternoon we had a sumptuous meal. Jowar rotis and chutney made out of groundnuts. Ms. Suman Kolhar had packed all this from Bijapur for us.

We women have always nursed the sick. But, when have we spoken about our own health? Here, in this pandal, we gathered for a session on health awareness with the Resource person, Ms. Gangamma. We talked at length on various issues concerning women's health. We got an opportunity to talk about ourselves. These issues need not be kept in the dark. We discovered that through talking and sharing, we can find out remedies for our health problems. In our discussions, we began to talk without fear and inhibitions. We gained a lot of courage by talking to each other.

Most women suffer from ailments like white discharge, cramps and pain during menstruation. We can have herbal remedies from the herbs around us. We also shared whatever we know about herbal medicines. We felt we needed to know much more. We were told that it was women who discovered the use of medicinal herbs and plants. We grew them and have been passing this knowledge from generation to generation. It is our responsibility to look after the health of the children and other family members. But today, we have lost our hold on them.



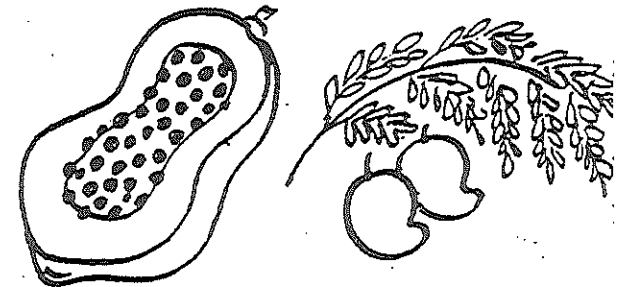
We are being lured by allopathic medicines. We were told that this is not good as it affects us adversely. These medicines, taken for a particular illness, will have side effects. Drugs which are being banned as hazardous in developed countries are being sold in developing countries like ours.

Tumba a kind of flowering plant, *Yekka*, *Amala*, neem leaves and *Natike Mullu* (thorns) which we tread on everyday have great medicinal value. We should grow and protect them.

As members of the Gram Panchayat we must grow small herbal medicinal gardens in our backyards. It is good enough if we plant at least 50 saplings. This will suffice at least to cure all our common diseases. We are used to growing plants around our houses. Now, won't it be nice if we grow it for the community?

The *Nellikayi* (*Amala*) is called the 'Fruit of Karnataka'. This small *Amala* contains several vitamins essential for our health. It is also easily available and quite inexpensive. A single fruit taken is equal to taking vitamin tablets. Likewise, papaya, mango fruits and greens which are grown in the villages are very healthy.

Have you heard of the new disease - called the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). They told us about it also. This disease spreads from one person to the other through blood transfusions and physical relationship between a man and woman. A cure for this disease has not yet been discovered. Therefore, prevention is the only way out. We must take appropriate measures to prevent this disease. The needle used for injections should be disposable. In blood transfusions, we should get the blood test done.



Another important information was given to us. Soon after childbirth, the child should be fed mother's first milk (breast milk). Many people do not practise this out of ignorance. This first milk has the power to build immunity or resistance against diseases. Therefore, it should be given to the new born.



Ms. Gangamma conducted this session. We questioned her. A special oil for treating 16 skin diseases was given in small bottles to everybody.

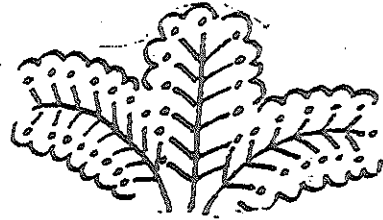
For minor illnesses it is the women who have discovered medicines. After coming here, we felt that what we were doing was right. I have learnt a few more things here. I will tell you all about this and more when I meet you.



Yours,
Sakavva

From the big pandal...

Bangalore
18.12.1994



Dear Basavva,

Today is the last day of the MELA. Some women are reluctantly leaving the venue but I am already thinking of home. This MELA was like a fair, but as always we cannot stay forever.

After visiting all the pandals, we came to a pandal where a session on songs and paintings was held. Mr. Praveen helped us draw pictures. We enjoyed it. I spilled paint on my saree. As a group, we drew a picture of a woman. One group drew a picture of a man. Do you know what the man held? A beedi in one hand and an arrack bottle in the other hand.



In this same pandal we composed and sang songs with Dr. Siddu. As we sang, we realised that all the songs that are composed on women are tales of woe. But here, there were some songs which empowered women.

There were many activities going on under the shade of the big pandal simultaneously. I thought this is the biggest MELA, but, two women told us about a conference which is to be held in Beijing, China. I heard that women from all parts of the world are going to take part in the conference. They are

going to plan their activities together. I was told that women like us could take part in the conference. I felt I should be there. You could not make it here, try to make it to the Beijing conference at least!

Yesterday evening a few children put up a moving play in this pandal. The play depicted the conditions of the poor and working children. Later, we had our own programmes. Some sang songs, some put up plays, some performed the Koravanji dance and others performed mono-acting. But what made us most happy was when we all danced together. Some of us have danced before, some had never danced and were very shy. We forced them to dance with us. Dancing and making others dance was real fun. This will remain a memorable event in my life forever.

I learnt that the MELA was organised by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST). Mr. Vijay from ISST explained the various programmes to us and told us which pandal to go to and so on. Ms. Revathi and a few girls used to come and enquire about our well being through out the MELA. They used to make sure that nothing was amiss. They gave us a lot of books in each pandal and my bag is full of them, I shall show it to you when I come back.



There were some girls from Mahila Samakhyā (Women's collective) staying with us at the MELA. They helped us to understand the various issues. They added life to the MELA. If our girls had been here, I am sure they would also have been very happy. Amidst, all



these hectic activities, we visited the Vidhana Soudha. The final day of the MELA was very beautiful. There were no speeches by big people. We were made to stand in three concentric circles. There was a candle in everybody's hands. We lighted the candles, held them aloft and sang songs. Later, we placed the lighted candles in the centre of the stage. 200 candles burning together was a beautiful sight. Thus, we concluded the MELA with songs, dance and wishing success for entire womankind.

I cannot recall another incident throughout my life where I spent 3 days with such happiness like the UMA MELA. I thought of you very often at the MELA. We must come together like this as often as possible. I feel this kind of MELA should take place in every village. Why don't we get together and have a similar MELA in our village?

Yours lovingly,
Sakavva

VOICES FROM THE MELA

"There is no taste in the rice and no strength in human beings since the machines came".

"We want to do good work for our villages. But there is no money in our Panchayat. How can we face the people who elected us?"

"The machines came and our songs have vanished".

"Just as we take care of our children at home and lavish love on them, so too should we lavish love and care on the community as Panchayat members".

"They say the new State Government can remove us from office if they change the Panchayat Act. Is that true?"

"I will never forget this evening as long as I live".

"When we sit on the chair, there are both dangers as well as advantages. If we realise this, no one can bully us. We will not swerve from our purpose and we will not let the chair sway either".

"I feel as if I have come to my mother's house".

"The chair is not important, it is the person who is important. And she can be important only with the people's strength behind her".

"If we speak with one voice now, at least in our grandchildren's times women will not have inhibitions and constraints".



UTSAHI MAHILA ABHYUDAYA

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for Women in Panchayat Raj

AT

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