

**THE UMA MELA FOR WOMEN
IN PANCHAYAT RAJ**
held on 16 - 18th December 1994 at Bangalore

A Report of the MELA

Uma Resource Centre
Institute of Social Studies Trust
No. 42, Sree Shyla, 15th Cross,
4th Temple Street, Malleswaram
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This report describes one of the highlights of the 'UMA Projects' activities - the Mela (or fair) organised by ISST for 250 elected women representatives of the Karnataka Gram Panchayats in December 1994.

Section I describes the events that led up to the Mela and what ISST hoped to achieve from it. It also describes the planning involved organising the event. **Section II** is a process documentation of the Mela translated from the Kannada document written by Vani Umashankar and her team. It not only captures the flavour of the event in its entirety but also highlights an important approach to documenting such events and using these documents for further learning and training.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the elected women representatives for sharing their valuable experiences at the MELA which helped us bring out this report.

We thank Ms.Vani Umashankar for the detailed documentation of the UMA MELA. She was assisted in this process by a team of 23 Sahayoginis of Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka.

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.

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We also thank Lakshmi N. for the initial translation of the Kannada documentation to English. It has been subsequently worked upon by the UMA Resource Team.

We are grateful to Ms.Srilatha Batliwala, Anita Gurumurthy and Uma Shankar Periodi for their support in planning the Mela.

We acknowledge the support, enthusiasm and encouragement given to us by Ms.Anita Kaul, Director, Department of Women and Child Welfare. We thank Ms.Sita Anagol, Co-ordinator of Co-ordination Unit for enlightening the women about the international conference for women at Beijing.

We acknowledge the people who mobilised the elected women representatives to participate in the Mela -- Suman Kolhar - Bijapur Dist, Rajashree Ireshanavar - Dharwad, Ramakumari - Tumkur, Mahila Samakhya - (Gulbarga and Raichur), B.S.Ramanand - Nelamangala, Bangalore Rural, BDO, Bangarpet - Kolar

We would like to thank Mr.N.Nagaraj , Director, Centre for Youth and Cultural Development (CYCD) for his excellent arrangements and personal interest shown throughout the MELA.

Thanks are due to Abdul Rehman Pasha for the visual coverage of the MELA.

UMA MELA - Planning & Co-ordination

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Ms.Sarala Kumari

Ms.Sourabha Gowda

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Mr.Somashekar

Mr.Krishna Karanth

SECTION I

A.1 PRELUDE TO THE UMA MELA: WIDENING OUR HORIZONS

"How can we expect this woman, whose house is no better than a tiny cowshed, to sanction IRDP loans to others in her village? She is so poor that all the available loans should just go to her".

"There is no need to teach this one anything - she is a 'typical' politician - selfish, loud and probably unscrupulous".

"I found it interesting that Nalini who is a 'high caste' woman had no problems at all eating with women of the so-called 'lower castes'".

"What chance does this illiterate Bijapur woman have? She does not even know that she is Adhyaksha of her Panchayat".

(Some comments by UMA researchers about women representatives they met during field visits)

As our work on the UMA project progressed, it became clear that we were working with rich material. It was all there - hope, despair, courage, injustice, enthusiasm, challenge and opportunity. Could we capture all these shades, differences, nuances in a single event? We had read about the "jathas" of the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad and the National Literacy Mission, of the 'shibirs' organised around women's issues in Maharashtra. There were also the 'shivirs' organised by the WDP programme and the Mahila Mahiti Mela (Women's Information Fair) organised in 1991 by Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka in Bidar district. Could we organise a similar event for the elected women representatives of Karnataka?

A.1.1 *The Goals*

As our ideas crystallised, it became clear that the goals we could aspire to were several.

- Providing a forum for women representatives from different parts of the state to come together.
- To help build up their confidence and self esteem through a journey out of their homes to the state capital.
- To use the opportunity to help women analyse their role as representatives of the people.
- To provide information which would strengthen them as elected women representatives.

- To create space and time for fun and laughter away from the routine drudgery that life is for most of them.
- Could we document the process in detail and create material that could be used as resource for training and for advocacy?
- The entire process of planning and carrying out the Mela would be a reaffirmation of our faith and energies for the cause of women in Panchayat Raj.

In Chapter 1, we have referred to the need for a mix of strategies to strengthen women in local governance. One of the cherished goals of the Mela was to see how far we could make this mix work.

A.1.2 The Strategy

Planning for the Mela started about six months in advance of the event (which was held in mid-December 1994). It was clear from the start, that ISST, as a small NGO with little experience in conducting events of this magnitude, needed a partner organisation for the Mela. The then State Programme Director of Mahila Samakhya, Ms. Uma Kulkarni responded to our request generously. We needed a core group of women activists who would interact freely with the participants, who would help trigger discussions, who would act as a vibrant and enthusiastic nucleus around whom the event could be built. The obvious choice were the Sahayoginis of Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka. Some of the participants for the Mela were the Sangha women of Mahila Samakhya who had won the Gram Panchayat elections. An environment of warmth, friendliness and joy was that intangible, that imponderable on which would hinge the success or failure of the Mela. We could not have asked for better talismans for success than this young group of activists who can work and play with equal ease and vigour, who are themselves a great source of inspiration to other women.

Several consultative meetings were held with a panel of advisors and resource persons to refine our ideas. Within our self imposed limits of three days, five groups of 50 participants each and five sessions of about three hours each, we decided on the following sessions.

- a) A conceptual and analytical session on women and political participation to give women time and space to examine themselves in their new role as politicians.
- b) A session on legal literacy and Panchayat Raj which would provide both broader concepts of law in relation to gender as well as those specific to Panchayat Raj.
- c) Environment as an issue they have to tackle at personal, social and political levels.
- d) Health - This session was chosen not just an issue important to women but also to emphasise that women had the right to think about themselves, their own health.

The sessions on environment and health were also intended to build up self-esteem by emphasizing the knowledge and wisdom the participants themselves possessed. In both these stalls, some women displayed knowledge that was new to the resource persons, who were experts in their respective fields!

- e) The fifth stall on creating songs and posters was intended to be a fun stall that would help participants shed their inhibitions and also to reiterate that a participatory learning process can be a joyous event.

Evening plenary sessions were given over to the participants to exhibit their talents. Puppet, magic and theater shows by resource groups were also arranged.

A.1.3 The Record

Process documentation of the entire event was entrusted to Ms. Vani Umashanker and a team of Sahayoginis. It can be seen in the following pages that this document captures the situation of the women representatives in all its shades and subtleties. As a document, it goes far beyond a diary of a three-day event. It is a whole tapestry spread across several dimensions, that weaves together the realities of women's lives as representatives of the people.

This document, as it is, would not have been comprehensible to the majority of the Mela participants. It has been simplified in the form of a set of letters written by one participant to an imaginary friend back in her village describing every detail of the Mela (*UMA Resource Book 7: Letters to a Friend*). This resource book along with a book of stories on the women's movement (*UMA Resource Book 6: Moving Forward Together*) were sent to all the participants of the Mela.

The report of the Mela contained in the following pages is an English translation of the original process documentation in Kannada. A major challenge for the Resource Centre has been the translation of documents between Kannada and English without losing their essence. As such, this effort is more of a free translation consciously retaining episodes and passages as they occurred despite the fact that they might sound odd in an alien tongue.

A.1.4 The Icing on the Cake

Call it serendipity or what you will, the Mela turned out to be one of UMA's best efforts at networking and advocacy. As ISST was gearing up for the Mela, the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of Karnataka was preparing to film a special participatory programme for elected women representatives to be beamed over satellite to all the districts. Known as GRAMSAT, this was an innovative one way video, two way audio programme. Some of the filming for the GRAMSAT programme was done at the UMA Mela, by film-maker Deepa Dhanraj, especially in the session on women and political participation.

Parts of the UMA Mela were thus viewed by about 600 women representatives in all 19 districts of the state through the GRAMSAT programme.

For the organisation and the entire staff of ISST, the Mela was a great opportunity to work with a common vision towards a common goal. The entire staff of ISST, both research and administrative, put in a great deal of time and energy into preparation for the Mela. For all of us, it was a reaffirmation of our commitment to women's issues. Interaction with the women representatives for the three days of the Mela was in itself a process of re-energising and rejuvenation for ISST.

Section 2 of this chapter presents the process documentation of the Mela.

Section 2

A.2 THE UMA MELA

LET US HERALD THE NEW DAWN...

*The big pandal is bright with myriad hues.
The women arrive...
Having left their mundane problems behind
They come as representatives of thousands,
Seeking and hoping to find answers
To the hardships they face,
To the questions that confront them.
The women arrive...
New symbols of authority
Eager to understand their new roles
Eager to learn, full of vigour.
The women arrive...
Eager to experience
A rare opportunity that has come their way.*

The women started arriving to participate in the 'UMA Mela' (Utsahi Mahila Abhyudaya) organised by the Bangalore office of the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) for the women representatives of the Gram Panchayat. The Mela was held at the Centre for Youth and Cultural Development (CYCD) premises in Vijayanagar, Bangalore from December 15-18, 1994. As the women started arriving at the venue, the atmosphere pulsed with mixed feelings of enthusiasm, fear, hesitation, confusion, curiosity and happiness.....

Even as we keep hearing comments like 'why do women need politics' ... the fact remains that, whether women wanted it or not, whether they had pondered over it or not, women have entered politics. Perhaps, it is encouraging to know that as of now, there are about 34,000 women representatives in the Gram Panchayats of Karnataka. The 'UMA Mela' was conceived by ISST to provide an opportunity to motivate, give information and support to these women, to facilitate and stimulate them in their work with the people. It was also hoped

that this Mela would pave the way for building a strong forum of women representatives by the women themselves. It was felt that this would facilitate women's growth through mutual support and sharing of their experiences.

By evening, the pandal was crowded with women. Registration was being done as the women came in. A bag containing the Panchayat Raj handbook, a calendar carrying Panchayat Raj messages, the time-table of the Mela, a note pad and pen were handed out to all the representatives. The participants were then divided into five groups and each group was given a badge of a particular colour (red, yellow, blue, green and pink). The resource persons and the ISST staff wore purple badges.

Though the women were strangers to each other initially, it could be seen clearly that a bond of familiarity and relationship was gradually being forged between them. The stage was decorated with a large and colourful *rangoli* map of the state of Karnataka. Charged with emotion, the atmosphere reflected a long cherished dream come true.

The ISST team invited the women by singing the song '*Bantu, Bantu, Panchayati Bantu*' ('Panchayats have come'), a song composed by Dr. Siddhu of the UMA Training Team. Flowers were distributed to all the women. Mr. Vijay Kumar, Training Coordinator, UMA Project, ISST facilitated the inaugural programme. Dr. Siddhu, Senior Research Associate, UMA Project, ISST spoke about the background and objectives of the Mela. He explained the activities of the ISST as well.

Later, the details of the three day programme were set out before the participants. The objective of each stall (in each stall, a particular issue was scheduled to be discussed and the women who were divided into five groups were supposed to visit these stalls, one after the other) was announced and the participants were introduced to the resource persons in charge of these stalls.

In the first stall on WOMEN, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND PANCHAYAT RAJ, the Resource Person was Meera M. She was a consultant with Concerned For Working Children, Bangalore. Meera had also spent three years earlier with Mahila Samakhya, Mysore where she was intensely involved with planning and operationalising field strategies for women. Her activities included training, research and providing resources and support to the Mahila Samakhya staff.

The second stall on WOMEN, LEGAL LITERACY AND PANCHAYAT RAJ was organised by Hengasara Hakkinna Sangha (HHS), an organisation in Bangalore dealing with women, legal literacy and rights.

The third stall on WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT AND PANCHAYAT RAJ was conducted by Dr. Somashekar Reddy (currently at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore) who has worked extensively on the management of natural resources specially on indigenous management systems. His areas of expertise include the relevance of eucalyptus in social

forestry, drought in Karnataka and the rehabilitation of tanks. He has also been closely involved with NGOs and their action programmes. He is now looking at the role of women in the conservation of biodiversity.

The fourth stall on WOMEN AND HEALTH was conducted by Ms.C.M.Gangamma, a health consultant on indigenous medicines for over a decade now. She started her career with DEED (Development Through Education), later joined Mahila Samakhya in Mysore and is now a full time consultant with Mahila Samakhya, Bangalore. She was the driving force in organising the Health Mela in 1990 at Mysore and was involved in the State level Mahila Mahiti Mela in 1991. Both events were resounding successes.

Her publication 'Hithila Akka' ('The Neighbourhood Sister'), a manual on herbal medicines is an enduring contribution to Mahila Samakhya and to rural women. This manual has been used by several NGOs for their work in the field. Gangamma has constantly endeavored to put forth and explain gender related aspects of women's health.

The fifth stall on CREATIVITY AND COMMUNICATION was taken care of in two sessions, namely the poster session and the song session. The Resource Person for the Poster session was Mr.G.S.Praveen, a freelance artist who has worked for various organisations including Oxfam, Bangalore Urban Poverty Alleviation Programme (BUPP) and ISST among others. He had been the layout artist and cartoonist for the 'Canara Times' and has also worked with MAA printers and for the State Resource Centre, Mysore. The association with many development organisations has added that much more perceptivity to his illustrations.

The Resource Persons for the song session were Dr.Siddu Madivalar and Ms. Shyamala, both from the UMA training team of ISST. Dr.Siddu, though a geographer, is gifted in the art of poetry and literature. He has composed six songs on matters relating to women and Panchayat Raj for UMA. Ms.Shyamala is a trainer who composes songs and writes in her spare time. In the fifth stall, the posters and song sessions had an hour and a half duration each. In the rest of the stalls, there was a three hour session for each of the five groups of participants.

The inauguration was held on the 15th evening. Group visits to the stalls started from 16th morning. The logistics were worked out in such a way that by the 18th afternoon, the five groups would have visited all six sessions in five stalls.

After these details were explained to the women, Dr. Revathi Narayanan, Research Coordinator of ISST thanked the people who had helped to make the Mela a success - Ms.Uma Kulkarni, State Programme Director of Mahila Samakhya, Ms.Suman Kolhar, former Upadhyaksha of Bijapur Zilla Parishad and Ms.Rama Kumari of the National Literacy Mission, Tumkur District. They were presented with mementos as a token of ISST's appreciation and gratitude.

This was followed by the inaugural ceremony which was performed by the participants themselves. Nineteen women, chosen at random had been given badges with star marks. These women were invited on to the stage. Each woman, representing a district in Karnataka lighted her *diya* from the tall silver lamps placed on either side of the map. Nineteen *diyas* were placed by the participants on the nineteen districts on the *rangoli* map.

It was then twilight.

The lamps sparkling in the dark,

The different districts...

The people ...

It was a time to hope..

A time to wait

For the light of the women's power.

A great moment as a few women took up the challenge on behalf of thousands of women. A moment of magic when hundreds of minds and hearts became one under the gaily coloured pandal, in front of the sparkling lamps.

This simple ceremony, devoid of pomp and formality, marked the prelude to the Mela. The Mela had started, quietly and serenely.

The inaugural function continued ...

Ms.Suman Kolhar shared her experiences in politics with the participants. She had moved into the arena of politics without any political background. Her achievements were a source of inspiration to the listeners. She shared a piece of advice given to her by her father when she stepped into politics. He had told her, 'Our seats are in the people's hearts!' This made a lasting impression on her as well as on the minds of the listeners. Time and again during the Mela this idea was voiced from all sides.

As a woman, Suman Kolhar has been constantly working for women's demands and fighting for women's rights. However, she reiterated, that a political representative, must work for everybody irrespective of whether they are men or women. She also said that the Panchayat Raj system should be given adequate power since it is synonymous with decentralisation. Suman Kolhar, as always, proved an invaluable presence throughout the Mela. She participated actively in all the sessions and was a fund of information and experiences about Panchayat Raj.

A.2.1 Why shed tears only because you are born a woman?

The session started with the women singing the song '*Banni, Banni, Bannirakka, Banni, Banni*' ('come, sisters come, come along') calling all the women to join in, drawing them into the spirit of the Mela.

"Why shed tears only because you are born a woman"? This question unfolded a process of finding out the historical reasons that lead to this eternal question. It was a fascinating exercise for the participants, trying to trace the history behind the man-woman relationship and how it has taken on new dimensions and twists and turns with the passage of time. Ms.Vani, (formerly District Coordinator, Mahila Samakhya, Mysore, trainer, writer and activist) conducted this session, commencing with the song 'Avva' composed by K.Ramaiah. The song was sung by Nagamma B., Mahadevi K., Teresa and Meera all associated with Mahila Samakhya with Vani giving the necessary explanations in between. The song and the explanation went hand in hand and one could see the women becoming more and more enthralled.

The story was not just of our grandmothers or great grand mothers, but a critical examination of generations of our female ancestors who led a life of dignity and self-esteem. In the old days, people did not know about the physical processes associated with birth. To them, woman was the marvelous being who could create a new life. Women were involved in many ways for the preservation and growth of the future generations. All the information and knowledge which she collected and used was to nurture the coming generations. Gradually, she found out about agriculture as well -that seeds grew into plants and it made a harvest. But, the harvest did not belong to the woman, it belonged to someone else.

Gradually, people became aware of the secrets of procreation and man's role in the process. With this realisation, came the concept of ownership of property and children to carry on family wealth and tradition. Slowly woman came to be regarded as the possession of the man and her life became circumscribed within narrow boundaries. False prestige and son preference set in. With this, the seeds of gender discrimination were sown. To control women and her activities, various rules, regulations and customs were created. The woman who had until then led a life of dignity began to face many difficulties.

The song continued...

"The sword of gender discrimination has fallen on the woman's neck! Her dreams have been shattered and consigned to flames. This is the situation today. From the ashes of her dreams, woman must rise again, understanding her true worth, learning to co-exist with the realities of her life, learning to cope smilingly with her hardships".

This song, the eternal saga of woman's life touched a responsive cord in the hearts of the participants. The clapping became louder, the song reached a crescendo as more and more women joined in the singing.

The pandal reverberated with emotion, with a feeling of unity, of common purpose, with the pain of age-old griefs, with the pleasure of new found hopes, with a spirit of camaraderie. The mood of the Mela was catching on. The veil of tension and reticence started melting away... happiness filled the pandal... The Mela had truly begun at this moment.

A.2.2 Let women hold the reins of the political chariot

The women's group was laughing loudly for some reason. "Let us stop laughing and begin the class", one said. "Let it be a mixture of both enjoyment and learning", somebody else quipped. Though the issues before them were serious, the women had begun a process of self-introspection amidst talk and laughter. This marked the beginning of this session.

This session helped women look at themselves in relation to their new position, to understand their powers, to observe and analyse their participation in the Panchayat Raj processes.

A.2.3 Looking at my image

The women were asked to look into a full length mirror and later explain what the reflection revealed. This exercise was an eye-opener as one could see some women feeling hesitant, others confused and some shy. While some ignored their reflection and just walked away. And when the discussion followed, there were varied reactions:

"I felt happy"

"I got courage"

"I felt scared"

"I felt shy"

"I saw anger in my eyes"

"I preferred seeing other's faces to seeing my own"

"I felt curious"

"My face looked nice. People were watching me"

"The mirror reflects our feelings"

"The eyes speak"

"I felt that we should be as transparent in our work as the reflection in the mirror"

"The mirror at home shows only half the picture. But here, I saw the full length, from head to toe"

"I felt like just dancing... laughing... I felt very happy. At home, we just don't have time to look into the mirror"

"We have been elected to represent people. We want to get a good name"

"Life should be as sparkling as the mirror. If there is any dirt, let us clean it"

"The reflection is as important as the view"

"There is a festive atmosphere here"

"We should have faith in the people's love and affection. This will be an honour to ourselves as well as to the people who have elected us"

"What is so special in looking into the mirror? What do the faces reveal?"

"It is a waste of time"

"The work gets delayed"

"I get a feeling that it is wrong to look into the mirror"

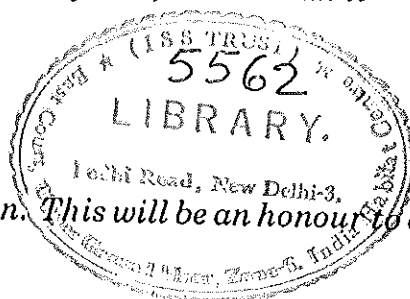
"I don't get time to look into the mirror. The reflection I see in the mirror is of a happy self. We are just feeding ourselves without doing any work. If we sit like this at home, they will say 'throw away the mirror and get down to work'"

"At home, they say we should be happy, but they don't create the atmosphere for happiness"

"Back home, they will ask us, 'Have you only learnt to look into the mirror in Bangalore. Now who will do the work at home and in the fields?'"

"When we go out with our husbands, we have to dress properly otherwise they will say 'look at yourself, get dressed properly'. If we are presentable, they get more respect".

One of the women, who came in front of the mirror, went back and slung a bag over her shoulder and came back to look into the mirror. The women compelled a few men seated in the stall to have a look in the mirror. When the men refused, the women argued, "In what way are you superior to us. Everyone should be equal" and thus the men were roped in too. Thus, the women seemed to have a nice time, watching and teasing each other.



Probing further...

There were serious discussions on the various issues confronting women in daily life. Amidst laughter, there were also moments of grief. But there were hopes and dreams for a new life. Instead of harping about their daily problems, they were trying to understand life in a larger context. They were beginning to dream, and hope for a better future. A discussion on the importance of women's role in worldly affairs ensued. They imagined a situation when all the women in the world stopped working. They went as far as saying *'What will happen if we don't wash clothes?'*. Then somebody said, *'I feel scared'*. The group pondered over the reasons for this fear. They also discussed the social conditioning and the life of the girl child - about patriarchal forces controlling her mode of dressing, her behaviour and her interactions with men. This issue of how women are brought up only to please men was also discussed.

The condition of women must change and the possibilities of change were discussed. One of the participants was heard saying - *"We are on the way to change. Would it have been possible to come to a Mela like this a few years ago?"*. This reflected the mood of many and one could see a ray of hope building up in the women. It was also observed that when women joined together, they felt stronger. In the light of this, the need for forming 'sanghas' ('collectives') was emphasised.

They are now moving from their traditional domain of the home and hearth into a new world of politics. As power was alien to women, remarks were made that *"women too would misuse power like the men have done"*.

The people may have their own reasons to say so. But one cannot dismiss the argument. It would be good if it is taken up as a challenge. It is necessary to analyse women's perception of power. As direct questions may not elicit the right responses, the women were drawn into a chair game. They were made to sit for a few seconds on a grandiose chair placed on a high platform. The woman on the chair was then asked to interact with people sitting below. Many issues came to the fore. Some of the observations made by the women are presented here:

* *"How do you feel?"*

"I feel as though I have got power".

* *"How come you are sitting in the chair?"*

"Because there is reservation".

* *"How do those who are sitting in front of you appear to you?"*

"They are far from my vision, but near to my heart".

* *"I feel over burdened".*

* *"This is not where we should have come. But since we are here, let us achieve something before we leave".*

* *"If you are on your way to the meeting and your husband, picks up a quarrel and snatches away your tali(mangalashtra), what would you do?"*

The woman replied, 'I will tell him - when you realise what you have done, you will put the tali round my neck again. But now, I won't wait. The meeting is far more important to me' - This evoked laughter.

* *"I feel very happy".*

* *"What will you do if the chair is shaken?"*

"I will see to it that it is not shaken. All these days, we women had given the power to men. Now, we have taken power into our hands. We won't let our position be threatened".

"If we are aware of the obstacles in our path and realise the power we have, we need not be dominated by anti-social elements".

* *"Do you want to be in a higher position where you will have more power?"*

"If we acquire such power, we can use that opportunity to move forward".

* *"Will you place equal emphasis on programmes for men and those for women?"*

No, I will give more emphasis for women".

* *"Don't you think this is a biased view?"*

"No, the man and woman are not equal. Since the woman's status is low, at present I will lay more emphasis on women, till such a time they are on par with men".

* *"Why do you sound authoritative now?"*

"It comes with power".

* *"What is power?"*

"Power is authority and duty. We should question and learn how the government functions and also about the changes in law and the process of legislation. We have a right to question what is happening in the Panchayat. We should also develop the power to protest".

* *"How do you feel when you sit in the chair?"*

"Happy!"

* *"If your husband happens to come to a Gram Panchayat meeting what will you do?"*

"I will be shocked at first, but I will be bold. He is my husband, no doubt. But he cannot take away my powers at the meeting".

* *"What if he comes when you are sitting on the chair?"*

"He is my husband only at home. Outside the house he should conduct himself like everybody else".

* *"When I sit in the chair, I feel I should be a Prime Minister one day. When we women go to government offices to get things done, we encounter obstacles. At a time like this, I wish I could have the powers of the Prime Minister. It is my desire to work for the poor people".*

"With people's co-operation and support we can not only be confident but also achieve positions of power. It is up to the women to be united as men will not be of much help".

One of the woman fell asleep while sitting on the chair. This brought laughter. *"How can someone in a position of power fall asleep?"*

Sometimes, when the women sat in the chair, they were asked to close their eyes. As soon as they opened their eyes, some of them said - *'I feel terrible'*. Discussion were held on the way women behaved when they sat in the chair. When some of them got up from the chair, they were teased - *"Why did you get up? Is the chair full of thorns?"*. When somebody sat in the chair with legs crossed, the others teased her for her lack of good manners. That was enough for her to change her position. But a question was however raised - *"Why shouldn't we sit the way we want, the way we feel comfortable"?* Most women were seen not using the full space in the chair; they sat huddled in a corner. They were advised to take maximum advantage of the opportunity they got and to put their best foot forward.

Whatever the kind of chair, it feels good only if we are close to the people. Most women felt that they should go beyond the issues of water and street lights and look at socially relevant issues in a larger context. The fact that women do not have the time to sit and relax, to chat in tea shops, and at the market place like men was raised. Women needed the support of each other, they said. Perhaps they could discuss issues at the community well, when they were together weeding and cultivating the fields. Participants welcomed this idea.

A.2.4 Model Panchayat Meeting:

The women were divided into 2 or 3 small groups and each group was given 10-15 minutes to enact a Gram Panchayat meeting. The meeting was video recorded and replayed for the women. This gave the women a chance to observe and understand their participation at the meeting. This process had the added advantage of introducing a new technology to the participants.

A detailed discussion was held to examine how effectively the women have been using the opportunity given to them as Panchayat members. The women were interested in learning more about conducting and participating in meetings. When asked about the plans for their village, the women evinced an interest on working for the benefit of the village. At one stage, one of the women proudly said - *"When we put forth a demand, there will be many questions. But we are geared to answer not only those questions but any other doubts that may arise"*.

The need was felt for the Panchayats to identify the resources of the villages and work for its development. The women were sensitive to these issues. One woman commented that, *"manure which was being previously used in the villages itself, is now being taken away to the city in lorries"*.

They also discussed the prevailing 'caste' system. Some of the women did not approve of this. *"It has been there for ages"*, they pointed out. There were many who were fed up with the humiliation suffered in social circles, and were enraged by the caste system. *"I went to school like others. In spite of that, they keep a separate drinking water glass for me. Why should I tolerate this discrimination"*.

Women who started their new role as Panchayat representatives were easy victims for rumours and comments. That these developments put a new pressure on the women come in for discussion. Some women said that they felt a sense of shame for being Panchayat members as their words and deeds were exposed for discussion in public. One of the women had used the word 'forum' for 'quorum' and this was ridiculed throughout the village.

The women were embarrassed when they were given a chance to talk about themselves. When an attempt was made to look at the problems of women, from a women's point of view, many women, particularly those who have been brought up in the city and have been to school, preferred to talk about matters relating to law.

When we told them that our pains and joys take a more important place, their reply was that, *"They are always there.... Please continue with the subject you were discussing earlier"*. But, by the time the discussion concluded, the same women said, *"We never had any idea that there was so much about ourselves to talk about"*.

"At first, we wondered, how and what we had to discuss for 3 days. But now, I realise, that even if we had 300 days to talk and share our experiences, it would not be enough. There is so much to discover".

When an elected women representative was asked why she was quiet, she responded, *"What did I gain out of talking? How can I tell you what happened at home when I returned after speaking in the Gram Sabha meeting? The fact that I had talked boldly was news everywhere. Everybody came and asked me the same question wherever I went - whether it was to fetch fuel or to flour mill or to fetch water. 'What happened to you, Durgavva? Why did you talk so much?' Some of the men commented. 'This Gram Panchayat is not enough for you, you are capable of even arguing with Narasimha Rao himself, aren't you?' 'Why talk and invite comments like that. Why should I be subjected to such humiliation'.* The women confronted with a question like Durgavva's wondered if there was a legal solution for such problems. *"If a circular or letter written by a top officer is sent off everywhere, we may not be exploited like this".*

The women shared some of the allegations made against them. One woman told the group how she was the object of rude comments like this...*"she was a wage earner and cleaned our cattle sheds and worked in our fields. But now she sits in a chair. I find this sight hard to bear. Let us throw a banana peel in her way. Hopefully she will slip on it and fracture her leg. That will confine her to her house!"*

"Can these women sit with men and talk on equal terms in the office?. These women are naive and uncivilised, what can they do? Pity, the government has given power to these women".

As women shared these humiliations with the group, there were also some random statements made by the women that are worth treasuring. Some of them tried to express their thoughts on self-respect and the significance attached to their lives. *"When a man is worried, he will just booze and doze off. It is not the same with women!!"*

"The day begins with us and when dusk falls, we are still there, hard at work. We are always present, through everything, inspite of everything".

"Think of the family as a chariot - it does not topple because the woman is steadily holding its reins. In the same way she will hold the reins of the political chariot!!"

There was joy and enthusiasm as the women spoke boldly, gave expression to their ideas, argued and questioned. Watching them it seemed as though they already had the reins of the political chariot in their hands.

When the session was over, one woman was heard saying...

"If we start speaking with one voice from now, at least by the time our grand daughters grow up, there will not be this hesitation...this fear...is that not so?"

A.2.5 May the Goddess of Justice open her eyes

What is law? Is there any relation between law and justice? How does law operate? Does law solve problems? The session began by introducing the concept of social justice to women. A simple analysis of this was done without raising false hopes and without creating any illusions about law.

How is it that the law which professes 'equality' has closed its eyes to a society which is full of inequalities?

This session went on to point out loopholes in the laws.

The Indian Constitution, was referred to as the 'Big Law' this was to facilitate understanding of the concept. They were told that under this 'Big Law' were various smaller laws. For example, if a brinjal, infested with worms, is used in a curry or a side dish, it won't be fit for eating, because the defect is in the brinjal. The 'Big Law' was compared to the defective brinjal. If the 'Big Law' is itself flawed all smaller laws that are derived from it are going to be flawed. The women nodded in agreement.

The discussion continued by showing a statue of the Goddess of Justice standing with her eyes closed holding a balance in one hand. How can the goddess dispense justice with her eyes blind folded? Should she not open her eyes to the inequalities of society and then dispense justice?

Though the women said that they had seen the statue at the cinema or in court halls, the concept that the goddess should open her eyes was new to them. *"Yes! How can she give justice with eyes closed, let her open her eyes"*- the women could understand the concept very easily. When a second picture, in which the Statue of Justice kept her eyes open was shown, the women agreed with the idea. But, they remarked that there was a slight difference in the way the goddess held the balance in her hand. They commented that a major portion of the statue's hand was tilted towards one side, and it was indicative of inequality. However, the balance was oscillating. To get a balanced effect, we should view it in all its perspectives. This was conveyed to the women. Some women did not understand this concept, and argued that 'it was incorrect'. But others understood this idea.

"If the brinjal is itself worm-infested, any dish cooked with it is bound to be rotten", was one woman's response. *"The Goddess of Justice has closed her eyes in order to avoid seeing the injustice in the society,"* was another woman's response.

On the whole, the entire process was aimed at making the women realise that there are loopholes in the laws and they should be examined and women have a responsibility in modifying the laws. They understood this message to a certain extent.

"See ...these days, in our society, they deliver judgment without even seeing whether it is just or without verifying facts. They tell women to stay where they are.... but, since we are aware of it now, we won't keep quiet", a woman said in a tone of confidence.

A.2.6 Functions of the Gram Panchayat

The Gram Panchayat and its structure was introduced to the women. It was explained to the women that Grama Sabha meetings are the foundation of the Panchayat Raj and the need for women's participation in the Grama Sabha meetings was very important. They were also told of the power the woman can wield through it. It was also pointed out that in the Panchayat Raj system, the Gram Panchayats do not have as much power as the Taluk and Zilla Panchayat!

One or two points in the legislation which are there in the list of functions in Annexure-II of the Panchayat Act were analysed and the women were asked to analyse the rest of the points in the same way. Importantly, 'market' and 'library' services were reviewed. These two facilities were identified as not being in favour of women. The discussions were focussed on the possibilities of making these two facilities an empowering experience in themselves for women.

If there is a common library, there should be proper seating arrangement exclusively for women. A conducive atmosphere should be created to encourage them to read. There should be accessibility to information on books, and they should have opportunities for discussing what they read, not just at the library but, also at places where they go to fetch water and so on. One conspicuous feature of the 'market' is that it is a male bastion. The fact that the women are involved to a large extent in the production of the goods is unrecognised in the market place. Whether it is silk or milk or any other agricultural produce, the men enjoy the fruits of the labour of women. These are some of the points which women have to think and take action as Panchayat members. *"If we accept things as they are where is the scope for change and growth"?*

As it is, there is very little power in Gram Panchayat, it will be a wonder if women are allowed to share any of it! Whatever little power there is, women should learn about it, discuss it and question procedures - these points were also discussed. As these discussions were taking place, the women could be heard saying *"When they don't want to empower women, why elect them?"*

"They are snatching away our powers in various forms"

"Who gives power to top officers"?

"Are we not the ones who do so"?

"While speaking in the Gram Panchayat, our secretary says- You don't know how to read and write. Why talk? Keep your mouth shut"

"If we question them, they say that the Government has not issued orders"

"The men don't let us ask questions".

A.2.7(i) Our intelligence ... our strength... it is in our hearts:

"Just as we diligently carry on with our duties at home, we should do the same in the Panchayat". While identifying the skills of a Panchayat member it was felt that women who have been showing their skills efficiently in the limited sphere of the 'home', need to use the same in a larger context. The gist of the discussion was to help the women understand that they already have the basic skills to efficiently manage the Panchayats they need not 'hesitate' to take charge of their new role. For the first time, the women were given a list of pre-requisites to manage this new role - collecting information, taking decisions, making an impact, financial transactions, planning, leadership, prioritising. It means they should exercise the virtues of courage, patience, intelligence, experience, discretion and so on.

When questioned whether women have all these skills in them, their initial response was 'No'. But when each one of these issues was examined in isolation, the women found that these qualities were present in them. For example, when the child or the cattle is ill at home, the women collect information. On the basis of this information, they take certain decisions on the treatment. Women do it so carefully at home, they can very well do the same on a larger scale at the Gram Panchayat.

In the same way, every woman would have made some small financial transaction at least. She does it in a way that is beneficial to her family. The women themselves said, *"with the money we have, we do the necessary transaction and in the process save some money as well".* *"From where does this intelligence come"?* The women said, *"It's our native wisdom"*. Besides those who had made transactions in terms of tens, in each group, there were one or two women who had gained experience in business transactions. They felt that a person who had transacted in small numbers could well do it in its multiples, and if an opportunity comes, were prepared to negotiate in lakhs.

In villages, when it comes to the question of trust, the women enjoy a distinct status. In many instances, when a family has to borrow loans, the person who lends the money usually says, *"I am giving money reposing confidence in her (the housewife)".* When these issues came up, the women's faces glowed with happiness. The women who said that they did not have skills were now saying with confidence, *"if we can run our homes, so can we run the Panchayat"*.

A.2.7(ii) *A Short Play:*

Yet another distinct feature of this stall was enacting a Gram Panchayat meeting, with the women playing the role of President, Vice President, members and Secretary. To continue the play and raise questions, there was a 'facilitator'. An 'assistant' answered questions raised. The play informed the women about the proceedings of the Gram Panchayat meetings and where and how the complaints can be lodged.

For example:-

- * To conduct a meeting, the quorum should be 1/3 of the total number of members.
- * If there is no quorum, the members present can wait for half an hour, decide and fix up a date for the next meeting and adjourn the meeting.
- * When there is no quorum, complaints cannot be heard.
- * The Gram Panchayat meeting should be called once in two months.
- * Everybody has a right to speak in the meeting.
- * The notice regarding the meeting should be circulated seven days prior to the meeting, for careful perusal by everybody.
- * The members should be directed to inform the President if they have any subject for inclusion in the agenda and see that it is included in the agenda.
- * If the members remain absent for the meeting three times continuously without due notice, they can be removed from membership.
- * If the President and the Vice-President are absent, then somebody from among the members present can be elected to chair the meeting and the meeting can be held.
- * There are three types of meetings: general meeting, special meeting and the emergency meeting.
- * The Secretary has to record the minutes of the meeting and before doing so, he/she should read it to everybody and take their consent.
- * In the event of the Secretary not doing what is expected of him/her, a complaint can be given to his/her superior - the Chief Secretary.
- * For redressal of some of the grievances, there is provision within the structure of the Panchayat. However, some problems have to be tackled at a different level. There is no bus service, the complaint should be lodged with the Karnataka State Road Transport

Corporation (K.S.R.T.C), and not with the Panchayat. Likewise, if the problem is one relating to health, then the complaint should be lodged with the Department of Health.

- * Voting is a very important aspect. All decisions will be taken through the process of voting. In the event of votes being equally divided, the President can exercise the casting vote.
- * While making decisions pertaining to financial matters if it is found that there are chances of transacting with any relatives of the elected members, such member will not have the right to vote.
- * If the President of the Panchayat happens to be the maid- servant at the village head man's house and if she is not able manage the presidentship, then, the complaint cannot be lodged anywhere. The case has to be dealt at the social level.
- * While discussing about quorum, the need to bring pressure on having at least one woman member to make a quorum was given attention.
- * There is no specific information in the legislation as to the period of notice to be given prior to holding all emergency meeting. The women came to know that this decision is left to the discretion of the Panchayat itself.
- * In the play, the Panchayat Secretary was portrayed as being lazy. Many felt that it is not so in real life.

Mrs. Suman Kolhar who has worked as a Panchayat member actively participated in this discussion and helped the women understand. She felt that if anything went wrong in this session, it would have an adverse effect. So she took the responsibility to see that everything went right. The women identified themselves with the play and gained valuable information.

"In the past, women were in power. Now, also, it is women who rule. In between, there were men.... that is all...." was a woman's hopeful stand!

A.2.8 Towards a Green Panchayat

"Now that we have the borewell and taps, the use of wells is reduced."

"In a few places, the wells have been closed"

"We don't have lakes in our areas, only wells. In a few months, we will be getting tap water"

"I am afraid if the taps come, the wells may get closed."

"I have made up my mind to see that the wells don't get closed..."

Similar issues were expressed by different women in different forms. Responses at the environment stall, were not just one of showing an understanding of and concern for the environment, but it also indicated direct action. This session was to create an awareness in the women on issues:

- that would directly affect the village women
- that would set them thinking
- that would make them understand that the traditional knowledge they possess is important in preserving the environment
- though some facilities which modern science has given us are useful, they actually harm the environment (such as chemical fertilisers, borewells etc.).

A.2.8(i) *In what way are the Panchayat members concerned with environment?*

- * Looking at the responsibilities the women took while learning about environment, nobody can deny the fact that these are issues of great interest to the participants representing hundreds of people. Apart from this, there is another direct link. The 73rd amendment to the 1993 Panchayat Act gives a detailed explanation about the duties and responsibilities of Panchayat members. Accordingly, environment management, i.e., managing public resources (lakes, community grazing land, forests) and social forestry is also one of their responsibilities. Also for this reason, the members need to have environmental awareness.
- * Purpose: creating awareness among women on environment since it wields a direct influence on the lives of the women.
- * Motivating them as members of Panchayats to participate responsibly in environment protection.

A.2.8(ii) *Points included for follow-up action:*

- A)
 - 1) Protection/conservation of natural resources.
 - 2) Bio-diversity.
 - 3) Management of natural resources.
- B) Public Utilities (lakes, common grazing land, forest etc.)
- C) Village sanitation.

D) Use of chemical fertilizers - its effects on health and the food chain.

E) The use of waste land around the village.

These are closely entwined with the everyday life of the women folk. These issues are not new in themselves but the session provided a new way of looking at them. The fact that women are also responsible for the degradation of the environment, is new to them. They found this aspect extremely interesting. These issues were explained to the women by giving examples of the village surroundings (keeping in mind, the geographical diversity of the groups) through discussions and by using pictures and slides.

"All the energy and strength of the women are spent struggling hard to meet the daily needs. Mundane issues demand more energy and time than a woman can afford. To bring about a change in this situation one has to adopt effective ways and means to make use of the surroundings. If she is already involved in doing this, then she must use the natural resources judiciously. If she comes across a new subject, she must learn more and more about it. When women gain real control over the natural resources, then a significant change would have taken place".

A.2.8(iii) The Community pasture land belongs to the common people

There were detailed discussions concerning the 'community pasture land' over which the common people have a right, and also on the possibilities of the women using resources like plants, trees, fruits, fuel, greens and herbs which are grown in that land. Women have lost control over the community land; but they were not aware of the fact that they too have rights over that land. Many women said, *"They took away the common land. But at least in future, we will look after it"*. But, for those women who did not have facilities like common land and drinking water, this talk about using land sounded ironical. Many women said, *'Give us the land - we will grow plants. One woman from Bijapur was grumbling. "They speak of growing plants. But, we don't have water in the village. It is not all that easy for us."* But they did not have to get disheartened. The possibility of making use of whatever water was available or waste water and growing the plants was also explained. Their response gave an indication that they were considerably influenced by this suggestion, *"At least if there is some place near the borewell, the waste water can be used for planting a few saplings there. If the idea spreads by word of mouth more saplings can be grown at more places"*, said one woman. They also realised the utility of drainage water and learnt about the possibility of making use of tankbeds and the graveyard for growing plants. Even though this is being practised by many, they did not know its significance. An intensive discussion was also held on the use of chemical fertilizers and the decrease in the use of compost manure. In the course of discussions it was explained how chemical fertilizers destroy the 'food chain'.

The need to preserve the food chain which naturally protects the symbiosis between living organisms was also stressed. The women were startled to learn that some of these chemical

fertilizers which get into food stuffs are poisonous and may enter even mother's milk. It was clear from their faces that for a moment they were feeling helpless. However, the women could not help question - "*But, we have reached a stage where we can't grow any crops without the use of pesticides!*" There is an alternative. The solution lies in the women's own agricultural practices which have been neglected so far. This was explained to the women by giving an example. In South Kanara, those who have lands grow chillies not just for commercial use, but for personal use as well. With chillies, they grow vegetables like greens, ladies finger, cucumber and flowers etc. In this kind of mixed cultivation, there is no room for any crop diseases. The women know very well that they don't use any pesticides for controlling pests. But, they do not know the scientific reason for this. The odour of one plant will keep away the insects away from the other plants. One plant protects the other from pests and harmful insects. In the same way, in North Karnataka, they grow white variety of jowar along with 9-10 types of other crops. This way there are hardly any crop diseases. Women described from their experience the names of about 7-8 vegetables which are grown with agricultural crops and which have helped to reduce crop diseases. This, in fact was not known to the resource people themselves.

- * Protection of seeds: This method is also familiar to women. While people from South Kanara give a mud coating to the seeds to preserve them, the people from North Karnataka burn *neem* leaves and cow dung and mix this powder with ash and give a coating of it to the seeds. While *neem* leaves act as disinfectants, the ash absorbs all moisture and ensures that there is no air inside the seeds. The women were told that all this knowledge is slowly vanishing from the villages. The resource people were of the view that this knowledge which the village women possess is in fact their intellectual property. The Resource Person reiterated that various agricultural practices and methods of protecting seeds were in fact environmentally friendly methods and should be appreciated. The women took pride in the fact that they possessed such knowledge.
- * Discussions also revolved around certain village practices such as *hatti (cattle) habba*, *kere (pond) habba*, *Mosarina (curd) habba* etc. Though these practices appear to have their roots in our religion, there was an environmental rationale behind observing these *habba* (festivals).
- * The women were told to view water from three different angles -as public water (borewell, tap), community water (lakes, wells, ponds) and as water for domestic use and to use water more judiciously and to keep it clean and hygienic. The lakes and ponds (community water) around a village are the determining factors of the water level in the village. The natural ground water is receding thereby leading to a situation where the ground has to be dug deeper and deeper to reach the water level. As the women listened to all this they grew anxious and began to think about it seriously.

Moreover, the resource persons felt that the lakes and wells, besides being sources of water also serve as centres for women to meet everyday for sharing their joys and

sorrows and thus help establish cordial relation between them. The borewells and taps in their opinion, do not facilitate this kind of emotional relationship. It only breeds competition and quarrels. As a result, the emotional relationship with water has gradually been eroded. It is replaced by a commercial relationship. This is a sorry state of affairs. It became clear from the discussions that it is necessary to view water as a resource from several different points of view.

- * The women were told that as Panchayat members, along with understanding all these issues they should also understand that having toilet system in villages is not only an important programme from point of view of sanitation but also from the point of view of women's health. Information was also given to them on sanitary systems and kitchen garden.

A.2.8(iv) What next?

After the discussions, the women were asked to chalk out their plan of action. Though the environmental issue seemed so immediate during the discussions, when it came to planning, except for developmental programmes like street light and borewell, the issues related to the environment did not seem obvious to women. However more discussion helped to clarify their ideas.

In this session, it was seen that women related intimately with the discussion! The response of participants influenced by the city life proved to be less intense. However, for most participants, the information on this was most empowering. Women were so interested that they wanted to continue the session even after the tea break. It was evident that the women had already assumed a lot of responsibility regarding this issue. They gave their plan of action in writing regarding the follow-up of this issue. While speaking about it with the UMA team, one group of women said, *"Will you send this to the Government? You should send it"*.

A.2.9 In search of home remedies

- *"In Bijapur, we don't get adusoge (a medical herb), How do we make the medicine?"*
- *"Give us some medication for toothache".*
- *"I have a constant headache. What can I do for this?"*
- *"I have already spent Rs.130 to stop this bleeding. Give me some medicine at least here...."*

The questions about herbal medicine were numerous. The resource person was exhausted. This stall on health was most sought after by all the women. The women could be seen noting down information given here on herbal medicines whenever they found the time.

These herbal medicines were discovered since time immemorial and used by women. But with the passage of time, their knowledge and utility has been dwindling. This is one of the greatest failures of our times. The women who know a little about it are themselves the users! It is no wonder that when there was an opportunity to avail of more information, they showed so much enthusiasm to learn from it. It looked as though they were learning as much as they could.

The women are not used to sitting in groups like this and talking openly about their illness. Many of them feel shy and embarrassed to talk about private matters in public. That is the reason why many of their ailments, though wide spread do not come to light. To talk about their illness with other women was by itself a relief; and the knowledge that remedies existed around them was an empowering experience to many women. Many women shared their experiences on disorders like white discharge and bleeding. The women were seen questioning and learning more and more about diseases and also dispelling the fears founded on misconceptions and disinformation about them. *"If I undergo another operation, will the white discharge stop?"* There were quite a few questions like this as well.

The women were also given information on preventive measures to be taken against diseases. Mainly, information on environmental protection and hygiene were given time and again. In this context, they were told about *Nellikayi (Amala)*. This tree which grows easily on hills and in forests is popularly known as the fruit of Karnataka, is neglected by most people. The Amala is rich in proteins required by our body and has many uses. It is also quite inexpensive. Similarly the nutritive value of papaya and greens was also explained.

The women were told that it is very important to develop immunity to diseases and that mothers should breast feed their babies immediately after the baby is delivered. The common people are not aware that the first feed of the breast milk is very rich in ingredients responsible for building up immunity against diseases in the baby. Most women are ignorant of this fact. They squeeze out this milk and throw it away.

The women were therefore told about the need to create more and more awareness among the public about these vital issues. They were also warned about the dangers of being lured by allopathic medicines (popularly known as English medicines) when life giving herbs are available in their own backyards. Information was given on tablets such as Anacins which in the name of relieving headache, give rise to a number of side effects. It was suggested that for certain common ailments, it is highly injurious.

As there is an urgent and important need to disseminate information on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), in every session information was given regarding this disease. The need to use contraceptives also explained in detail to the women.

Acupressure was not only discussed but some of the women were also treated for headache by way of demonstration. They learnt about herbal medicines used in the treatment of stomach ache, cramps during menstruation, piles, bleeding, white discharge, skin diseases,

cold, cough, jaundice, asthma, elephantiasis, and several other diseases. A special oil was prepared. The women were very happy to learn about this oil which cures 16 types of skin diseases. The oil was distributed to all participants.

This oil is called 'the Asthamoola oil' and is prepared as follows. *Lole sara*, roots of *retavani* (both herbs), *Nugge soppu* (drumstick leaves), betel leaves, *hongē* (the Indian beech), white *Pangri* leaves, onions and juice of *neem* leaves - each of these ingredients should be taken in the measure of 700 gms. The *Hongē* oil and water obtained after washing rice should each be added in the quantity of one litre. This juice is boiled to prepare the oil. For the above mentioned diseases, a few herbal medicines were suggested. When the women heard the names of herbs like *Adusoge*, *Lolesara*, *Moringa* leaves, *Amala* and *Mimosa Pudica* (Touch-me-not), they lamented, "We throw away these plants". "From now on we will grow *Ekka* and *Amala* plants", they said. Women were enthusiastic and eager to pass on the knowledge to others in the village.

Later, the dream of growing a Dhanwanthri (herbal) garden with 50 types of herbs was conceived. As Panchayat members, they were told that it is important to start this in the public land.

They clearly said that if the land was not available, they would at least grow 3-4 plants in their own backyards.

This session generated a great deal of interest. In fact, they spent more time getting to know about the symptoms of various diseases, the herbal medicines that would cure them and their usage, rather than indulging in discussions and reviews.

A.2.10(i) May our lives be bright and colourful

Where there are women there is colour.

When asked whether they would like to play with colours, by the Resource Person, some women were shy. Some giggled. Some others recalled their childhood days when they played.

"How will life be without colours?"

"Dark", "tough", "won't be nice" - was their response.

This was going to be a new experience for them - playing with brush and paint, transcending all barriers of age!

Purpose: The session was aimed at making the women prepare posters based on their experiences in the Gram Panchayat and more than that, to enable them to identify themselves through this medium; "to blossom while playing". "The chair is for working, not for

sleeping" - a few such points were selected as subjects for posters. There were 15-20 women in each of the 10 groups and each group was given around one and a half hour, to prepare a specific poster. However, this seemed a tall order and it was decided that a specific poster could not materialise in such a short time. The session then focussed on expressing ideas through paint and brush.

We can do it - you and I...

This was a game played with empty match boxes. As soon as they heard the word "play", the women were embarrassed! "*Playing! At our age?*" - One woman raised her eyebrows. "*We have forgotten all the games*". another felt sorry. "*We played when we were children...but, that was long ago...anyway why shouldn't we play when we are all by ourselves here*". There were giggles all around. Well, the desire to play was certainly alive!

This game was aimed at helping the women realise the following.

- How not to underestimate their capabilities for any reason what so ever.
- How to face problems and change strategies to adapt themselves to the changed situations.
- How to work by overcoming the initial fear, and realise that they are capable of accomplishing much more.

The game consisted of blindfolding the woman and tying her right hand behind her. She was then expected to place the maximum number of match boxes in a pile one on top of the other using only her left hand. Before the game she had to estimate, how many match boxes she thought she could pile this way.

Invariably the women underestimated their capability.

"We have discovered that we have the ability to achieve what appears to be impossible". One of the women responded - "*Oh! No. I always thought defeat meant humiliation*". However, defeat need not be a humiliating experience. Often, we do not venture out, simply because we fear defeat. But, it is only through concerted efforts that we can achieve success. The game brought to the fore various restrictions that a woman is subjected to in the society and how her potential withers away in the process. The group came to a conclusion that it is very vital for women to make the best use of the opportunities provided to them. The match box game helped the women get over their initial embarrassment and pick up the brush and paint.

When asked what match boxes are used for, one woman said "*It is used to some to burn their victims after throwing kerosene on them*"! Another woman admonished her, "*why*

Think of such horrible things. Let us think of something better"? Perhaps the women did not want to mar their present happiness by thinking of the same old tragic stories.

Group Drawings...

The first activity in this colourful stall was group drawings. The women were given a brush and paint, and were expected to draw anything they liked on the chart hung on a board. Those very fingers which performed many tasks with ease and dexterity, trembled slightly when it came to drawing on the chart. Many said, *"I cannot, I am holding a brush for the first time in my life"*. But everybody was visibly excited as they started painting. The chart overflowed with drawings which had no relation with each other.

Some women imitated others in their drawings. This tendency was regularly discussed. This point was similar to their responsibilities as Panchayat members. In politics people are inspired by new approaches and new thoughts. In politics it is not enough to imitate others, but one must be bold and have initiative. During the struggle for freedom, led by Gandhiji, the 'Satyagraha movement' was a new technique. In the next part of the session, discussions were held to decide what could be drawn. This process was compared to a discussion that was needed before any course of action in the Panchayat. Several women agreed to a remark made by one participant. *"So far, we have been following the dictates of a few people. We have not been using our ability to think and to take decisions on our own. At least now, we should make the best use of the opportunity and participate actively"*.

Most of the groups decided to draw a picture of a woman. Each participant tried to draw one part of the women. The group encouraged those who were shy by drawing their attention to what they had 'missed'. Many of the drawings turned out to be quite amusing, provoking laughter and merriment among the participants. Most of the groups were not ready to draw the figure of a man. Only one group drew a picture of a man holding a *beedi* in one hand and a liquor bottle in the other.

As the drawing progressed, one could see mutual co-operation and, sometime confusion and impatience. Some of them were not interested in group drawings. They felt that the drawing would have come out well if it had been drawn individually. It took sometime to convey to them the importance of team work. According to the resource persons' observations, those who came from the "lower class" seemed to have an innate liking for and confidence in group work.

Sometime, a few women used to draw a line here and a line there which did not have anything to do with the main drawing. The group would admonish them. *"Nonsense. It is no use teasing and humiliating those one or two who make mistakes while all are working in a groupinstead, we could help them to realise their mistakes"*. Once the drawing was completed, the group had to analyse why the drawing had turned out in a particular way. The experience of having worked in a team, with a common purpose was also analysed and

compared with the Panchayat members' roles. The group came to the conclusion that the drawing could have been vastly improved if they had discussed and decided all the details of the women like her age, appearance, clothes and so on. They could also have decided which member of the group could draw which portion of the woman best. In other words they could have spent some time assessing the skills and capabilities of each member in the group.

Nobody has expected that the simple act of drawing a picture could have raised so many issues and helped to understand the value and dynamics of team work.

Individual Drawing...

Besides group drawings, there was time for individual sketching too. The women were handed small chits and was asked to draw whatever was written on small chits. Some started drawing immediately after they were told to start while other found the task impossible. They were therefore helped to draw whatever drawings came to their mind. Though, each one concentrated on her own drawings, suggestions and co-operation were offered from people around. Below the drawing, all the women also painted their names or got it painted by someone else.

Some insights...

- * One of the women who held the brush with her fingers for the first time, was told to draw on the board. She picked up the brush, said a prayer and then started drawing boldly. She drew a religious symbol resembling the 'Shiva Linga'.
- * As the resource person observed, the drawings of the literate women tended to be like class-room sketches, while those drawn by the more disadvantaged tended to be more natural and original.

The resource person also observed a marked difference in the confidence levels of the participants. While the former drew large pictures in the middle of the page, the latter would draw small and hesitant sketches at the corner of the sheet.

Through these simple processes, complex issues like planning and team work, confidence and capabilities were put forth to the participants.

A.2.10(ii) Expression through songs

"Sing a song full of love for the Gram Panchayat child..." - here was an effort to stir the emotions and inspire women to compose songs in groups about their experiences in the Gram Panchayats. The songs which women sing to their children in villages were recalled and sung. "Oh my child, play and come ... your dusty golden feet... I will wash it with coconut water..." And song after song followed. "However ugly the child may be, it is still beautiful to its parents, isn't it so"? It was an effort to make women see politics as their legitimate

activity and to take care of it with love and affection. A comparison was drawn between the two to show that women should develop the same amount of love, affection and responsibility they have for their children towards improving their Grama Panchayat as well.

An attempt was made to capture all information, interesting features and messages of Gram Panchayat through songs. They were trying to disseminate this based on the women's direct experience by composing songs in groups. A few themes were already identified to compose these songs. On the basis of this, the women, about 15-20 members in each group, were given one and a half hours duration to compose songs. The women were reminded of their skills to compose songs even as they are engaged in their routine tasks like playing with the children, while grinding or working in fields or while pounding grains etc. Motivating the women in this manner was going on through out the session.

The machine came and the songs disappeared...

We had so much to grind and pound in the past. Where do we have it now? *Sajje roti* has disappeared, flour mill has appeared - when the natural ways by which the songs evolved in villages came up for discussion, all these points were voiced. Rice is no longer tasty. All these are due to the onslaught of machines only! In a nut shell, this tells the effect of the machine on the natural life style of the villages and the resultant change in life style. How can songs evolve from this mechanical life style? This is a real cause for concern.

The women who had never really sung before felt shy. Those who did know how to sing did not know what to sing about.

"Oh!", one group exclaimed, "we do not know any songs. How can one sing? and that too concerning what"?, and burst into laughter.

One woman said, 'your (resource person's) songs are very nice -- like lullabies sung to the child' and sat back relaxed.

The power of the song to set the people thinking...

The way in which the songs about everybody's day to day life effectively reached the community was explained to the women. The role played by songs from the time of Purandara Dasa, Kanaka Dasa and Akka Mahadevi to the days of struggle for independence was also explained. The songs of the Freedom Movement had instilled a nationalistic fervour in the hearts of the people. Those songs brought them together as a formidable force. The ability to compose powerful songs is not the exclusive privilege of poets but existed in all people, the Resource Person told them.

"Hundreds of songs have been inspired by the lives of the villagers. These songs are sung by women" - encouraged the women. To inspire the women, repeated efforts were made to

drive home the message that 'song is an inspiring force,' and that 'as we sing along, the tune will be set'...

When misery flows through song...

One of the women who had suffered everyday at the hands of her husband shared her anguish with the others. This is how she brought it out in the form of a song -

*My husband Theeru Shetty,
Behaves like a dirty swine,
Beats me up all day,
And shoves me to a corner.*

It was strange to see women give vent to their woes through song and also take it in a lighter vein.

More Songs...

"Do not cry, my daughter, you must be affectionate to your in-laws, bring a good name to your mother's family and worship your in-laws". While this song conveys the message that the girl should be respectful towards elders, it also reinforces the stereotyped image of the daughter-in-law who has to worship her husband's family regardless of how they treat her. Another song, commonly sung, shows how women are regarded as cheap commodities.

*"The broken nose ring can be repaired.
If the wife dies, another one can be bought"*

There is yet another song, which lays stress on the point that 'women should not come out of their house'.

As the women sang along, they observed that in all these songs on women, the portrayal of women was the same. Women were seen as possessions, as easily replaced, as beings who must be controlled in every possible way. The participants expressed their anger and sorrow at repeatedly being depicted in an unfavourable way.

The women were asked if they could write songs on their experiences in the Gram Panchayat. They were asked to compose songs on the problems of the village. Each woman was asked to come out with one problem. However, when they actually started, each participant came out with not one but four or five problems. The list seemed never-ending. "*The government gives only to the rich people, however much we try to draw their attention to our plight, they just don't care*". Many women started wondering why this should be so.

When asked to put their thoughts in verse, women were flustered and looked helplessly at each other. Perhaps it appeared ironical to them that problems of such intensity and magnitude could be put into verse. Could songs solve their problems? The process then shifted to singing some model songs.

Some Model Songs...

Not only folk songs, but some of the other songs composed in recent times, revolving round the lives of women were also presented as model songs. One group sang a song about the life of late Mrs. Indira Gandhi which had been composed after her death. Another woman had composed a song about her beloved friend; she sang it for another woman present in the Mela.

Mr. Siddu, the resource person for this session, never failed to enthuse the women to come out with more songs and there was no lack of inspiration on the part of the women. They listened intently to those songs which gave importance to women which set them thinking about their new roles.

* You are elected as a member

This seat is reserved for you

Come as the President

* Everybody should say 'the women have arrived'

the women have arrived'.

* Rise, women rise to the occasion.

The women as well as the resource persons never for a moment forgot the purpose behind the composition of songs. The driving spirit behind all these lay the women's enthusiasm. A woman called Paravva, composed two lines, other women took the cue from where she left off and keep it going.

- *"Come sister, come, let us go to Panchayat and get all the information"*

One of the woman by name, Parvathamma had composed a song on the problems she faced after getting elected to the Panchayat. Their disillusionment was evident too:

"We made a mistake by coming to the Panchayat. Nobody cares for us. Because we won the elections, they do not let us do any work".

But she had kept her composition a secret. The group came to know of this and insisted that she show it to them. They succeeded in making her sing it out to the group and when the

song was over, heartily complimented her; *"you have composed so well. There was no reason for you to feel shy to sing it before us"*

Another woman from Bijapur, by name Yamunavva composed a song with the help of the group on how to participate in a Panchayat meeting, on the bane of corruption and so on. The group participated actively in the process of composing the song by lending mutual support and inspiration.

The atmosphere of the Mela --- free and happy, with the women forgetting their daily burdens, helped bring out the natural talents of the women. There were no inhibitions, no fear of being snubbed or mocked at. What more conducive circumstances could there have been for free flow of inventiveness, song and laughter?

Their natural exuberance, usually suppressed by the harsh realities of their lives came to the fore.

In fact, as the old melodies, were recalled and new ones composed and sung, the women were relaxed and enjoyed every moment of the Mela.

A.2.11 Session on Communication

Even as the session on environment was going on with the three groups, the resource person Mr. Somashekara Reddy left the session halfway through, due to some personal problems. Thereafter Mahila Samakhya Sahayoginis made efforts to keep the discussion on. However, they could not maintain the tempo of the session in the same vein. With the other two groups, Mr. Vijay from ISST conducted a few activities on communication.

The art of communication was highlighted in a lively conversation with the women. Through one or two short stories laced with humour and laughter, an attempt was made to understand the art of 'speaking'. How thoughts, feelings and gestures play an important role and how they work in speech were made clear.

Barriers of communication were vividly explained through a game. Four women were chosen and sent out. One person was called in and requested to enact in a non-verbal way, the bathing of an elephant. The four women now take turn to watch a person and then perform it. The entire exercise turned out to be hilarious. Each time the message was passed on from one person to another, it got distorted. Finally it was completely different from the original idea and the message conveyed got distorted from the bathing of an elephant to someone opening a tap and collecting water.

There was also a game to show what confusion can occur when two people have a conversation with their backs to each other. All these exercises were conducted to make it a learning process for the women through fun and frolic.

A.2.12 Under the Big Pandal...

In addition to the activities in the stalls, there were general sessions in which everybody participated.

Let Milk and Honey Flow in the Villages...

The land around the village is lying unused. Instead of letting the land around the villages lie unused and lifeless, why don't we grow plants and breathe life into these barren patches. If mother earth is alive, green and fertile, the village will flow with 'milk and honey' - Speaking about health and environment at the plenary on 16th December 1994, Mr. Yellappa Reddy, Special Secretary to the Government, Dept. of Forest, Ecology and Environment, expressed his concern about rapid degradation of the environment and suggested ways in which Gram Panchayat members can prevent this process.

As Panchayat members they can change the scenario. The women should initiate the effective use of Common Grazing Land for the development of the village. For every 2000 acres of land, 200 acres should be earmarked as 'Common grazing land'. The emphasis was to make women understand that the Common grazing land should be the property of the entire village. It should be used by every villager.

"Cleanliness is Godliness, God resides in a clean home". Quoting this from the work of Karnataka's great saint poet Kanakadasa, Mr. Yellappa Reddy said that the poet's words convey a message about clean environment. He also conveyed some interesting facts to the audience. *"India is spending five crores on the research of medicines for cold and cough knowing that there is no remedy through allopathic medicines. Cold and cough can be remedied by home medicines like the syrup of Tulasi and Ginger. But we neglect it"*. Thus, he showed the link between health of the environment and the health of the individual

Mr.Reddy also said that neem, jack fruit and papaya are easily available and are equally easy to grow. He explained the nutritive value of these fruits. He also warned the women against the use of beverages manufactured from chemical mixtures that are dangerous to health. *"For fresh air and a clean atmosphere, plants and trees are very necessary. In the existing conditions it is essential to preserve and improve the natural resources of the village"*, he told the women with concern.

He also called upon the women to develop a *"Dhanvantri Thota"* (herbal garden) in every village. Women should never be subdued. They should unite to make this a reality.

The Beijing Conference...

On 17th December 1994 Ms.Seetha Anagol and Ms.Vishala of the Bangalore Coordination Unit enlightened the women about the forthcoming International Conference on Women and

Development at Beijing, China scheduled to be held in September 1995. A brief explanation about the International Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975 and the Nairobi Conference in 1985 were given to the women. Many people and representatives from various groups could not participate in this conference due to lack of publicity and financial resources. That is why, the Beijing Conference is being given wide publicity. The Bangalore Co-ordination unit has been started for this purpose. It is true that not everybody can participate in the Beijing Conference. But, to develop a relationship with the conference mentally, to show our concern about issues to be taken up at the conference, and to play an active part in its implementation will not be an unrealistic proposal. The conference will be a source of inspiration to all concerned; the speakers also informed the participants that sponsors have come forward to facilitate more Dalit women to participate in the conference than ever before. Interested women could send in their applications to the Co-ordination Unit. After scrutiny of the applications the participants will be selected based on several considerations.

This unit had arranged a beautiful poster exhibition in the 'Mela' premises. An attempt to forge links with the Women's Conference to be held in a distant land was evident in the posters.

Puppet and Magic Show...

A puppetry and Magic show was organised on the evening of 16th December 1994. The aim was learning through entertainment. The theme of the puppet show was woven around the Gram Panchayat, its elections, its politics, the difficulties women face in the Panchayat and several other relevant issues. A. Ganesh and his troupe presented the puppet show. Puppetry was an effective medium in conveying the message to the women. The women's response to issues like poll violence and alcoholism was strong.

The magic show left the women amazed. The ease with which people are duped by magic tricks was explained to the women. Throughout the magic show, social analysis went hand in hand with lighter moments.

A Play about Child Labour...

Sixty children from the Children's Special School, run by the Department of Women and Child Development, presented a play. They portrayed the cruelty with which society looks at them and the treatment meted out to the poor children who are deprived of education and are forced to do all kinds of jobs. The play was held on the evening of December 17th, 1994. This was made possible by Ms. Anita Kaul, Director, Department of Women and Child Development. The play portrayed the feeling of the children. They made it clear to the viewers that more than pity, they need understanding from the people in solving their problems. The play was so moving that it brought tears in the eyes of the audience.

The Stage Belonged to the Women...

On the evening of the 17th December, the celebration of the reached its peak when the women's groups themselves got on to the stage and gave some brilliant performances! Every group was given a time of 15-20 minutes on the stage. There were songs, short plays and collective opinions.

Another group from Bijapur put up a play about a literate husband and an illiterate wife. How the illiterate wife got the better of the husband using the strength of the women's collective formed the gist of the play. They enacted a funny situation in which the couple go to the city to see a movie. The characterisation of the wife, appears to be very innocent and, as the play nears completion, the way the wife uses the powers of the women's collective which her husband had earlier rejected, won everybody's appreciation.

The group showed no hesitation in presenting the best of everything they were capable of. One group even went on to enact a romantic scene from a movie. There were some situations relating to the Gram Panchayats as well. There was more emphasis on the process of disseminating what they had learnt at the when they returned to their villages. They performed some of the dances they had learnt decades ago. While one woman performed the *Keelu Kudura* (horse) dance, another woman performed the *Koravanji* dance.

The atmosphere was festive and brimming over with joy and warmth. A few of the resource persons could not contain their enthusiasm and towards the end of the programme, started dancing. This proved infectious and prompted many others to join in. As the women joined in larger and larger numbers, it appeared as though some new strength had suddenly surged within them. To this group which always showed rigidity and awkwardness in their physical movements, dancing gave a sense of freedom and relief. As the dancing went on, it seemed as if one could reach out and touch the human warmth and joy in the pandal.

A.2.13 Voices At The Mela

"I am happy".

"I had never gone anywhere like this before".

"We learnt a lot of things here".

"Let there be another Mela".

"Here, we can stretch our legs and sit comfortably".

"I felt as though I have come to my parents' house".

.....The women could be heard giving expression to their feelings. Outside and away from their routine life, these four days were very valuable to the women. They showed a desire to learn as much as they could within this period. One woman was heard asking the resource person with concern, "*whatever information you have given us, have you given it to others also*"? Never did they seem impatient or say "*finish the session*". During the four days of the Mela it was a treat to see the women walking around enthusiastically and making the best of their time. They could be seen either reading to themselves or helping others read. The posters were displayed all over the Mela. Some of them women were seen noting down information in all earnestness.

The CYCD provided excellent food which everyone enjoyed. On one of the days, Mrs. Suman Kolhar had arranged for Bijapur *roti* and *chutney* (made of groundnuts). The place where the Mela was held was slightly narrow and for four sessions, the women had to climb up the stairs. They said amidst laughter "After a wonderful meal, they make us climb three flights of stairs!". The women were photographed in batches and they took every care not to miss this opportunity. When the photographs arrived, they managed to get copies for themselves.

It was evident that the women were very eager to capture every single memory of the Mela and cherish it. Frank opinions such as this also were expressed, "*staying here, we look more beautiful. Don't we? Happiness, it seemed, gave their faces a special glow. It would be nice if my husband had accompanied me to my mother's home...*" Some of the women felt that the was so enriching, that they were returning to their villages like new people. In the midst of all these, some of them had a feeling of anxiety that the new Government may remove them from their posts.

On the whole, the women participated in the UMA , with a sense of shared purpose, determined to make the most of this rare opportunity. The resource persons managed their roles with a high degree of efficiency. The Mela went on without any hitch.

Truly the women found a common purpose at the Mela. But they know that to work for a purpose is a challenging task. However, small their constituencies may be, these women, each of whom is a representative of 400 people, are symbols of power.

Learning to grow...

There can be no doubt about the success of the Mela. It provided a rich learning experience for all involved in it - participants, organizers, resource persons and guests. It will always remain a cherished memory in their hearts. But if we are to learn and to grow, we must not ignore the failures and confusions, however small, experienced during the Mela.

These failures have not been identified by a third party from outside the Mela, but are identified by the participants and organizers themselves jointly. This is evidence enough to show that we are not resting on the laurels of success.

- * First and foremost, failure to make arrangements for the women to go sight-seeing around Bangalore on the last day despite the fact that the women were looking forward to this opportunity.
- * No proper arrangements were made to reimburse travel allowances to women and to distribute *Ashtamoola* oil to all the women which resulted in some confusion.
- * The conference was given the name 'UMA 'I Because of this name, there was some difficulty for the women in identifying themselves with the Mela as their own. The name should have been a more suitable one with which women could identify more easily.
- * An important event like the inauguration of this women's programme was conducted by two men instead of by women.
- * When Mr. Somashekara Reddy, resource person on the session for environment left mid-way through the session, there was no other resource person to handle the same subject.
- * Inability to fix up an adequately spacious open space for the Mela.
- * A little more preparation was necessary on the part of the resource persons.

Apart from the above, it cannot be said that all the sessions in every stall went off without a hitch. However, the learning process went on despite ups and downs. Nevertheless, the total atmosphere of the Mela was conducive for learning.

The participation at the Mela was an enriching experience for the Resource Persons and the organizers of the Mela, not only in terms of tangible knowledge and information, but also by providing an opportunity to witness at first hand, the courage, enthusiasm and conviction of the participants. For ISST which had attempted organising such a Mela for the first time in the Institution's history, it proved an invaluable education. In the words of Dr. Revathi Narayanan, Research Co-ordinator of ISST, "*close interactions with these women lent a sense of purpose and fulfillment to what we do and keep us rooted in the realities of life*".

We have the right to be happy, we have the right to grow...

The end of the Mela was fast approaching. Time for the participants to get back to their usual routine. Feelings were mixed - joy over the learning and experiences of the past three days and regret at having to leave, fatigue ... Everyone felt that the closing function of the should be something special and unforgettable, an enchanted time that the participants would cherish forever.

It was the afternoon of the 18th. Everyone had gathered under the big pandal for the last and final time. The women stood in three concentric circles, each with a candle in her hand. The candles were lit and it was a marvelous sight. On the first day, during the inauguration, a few women had held this light of learning, of hope, of renewed pledges. At the valedictory function, every woman present held the light. It was as if the three days of the Mela had helped to spread the light of knowledge and power. Everyone held aloft a lighted candle filling the whole pandal with light. The song "O nanna chethana" (Oh, my inspiration) could be heard in the background. The women moved slowly in their circles, which looked like a flower unfurling its petals, came up to the stage and placed their candles on it. The singing by the Mahila Samakhya group continued, the pandal reverberated with the resonant call "Banni, Banni" (Come, sister come). In a burst of spontaneous joy, the crowd began to sing and dance in gay abandon, greeting each other, laughing and crying all at once. The moment was charged with emotion... yes, we have a right to be happy too, we have a hope that growth is possible. we are capable of bringing about the change. Singing, dancing, shouting slogans...greeting each other, expressing their love for each other.

The Mela was a beautiful experience. Did it contribute to growth? Can growth be measured, captured or expressed in words? Was it possible to see growth or was it abstract and intangible, something the eye cannot see. In the words of Sourabha Gowda of ISST...

*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 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*

