

Bal Melas

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Significant efforts are being made in Jharkhand to strengthen the local system in order to encourage the education of children under the TRI-PRIDE project. Through this project, the endeavour is to ensure continuity and quality of children's education through community participation.

Vidya Bhawan Society is working in various ways to ensure that this goal is attained. These include: increasing interaction between parents and children, strengthening engagement between parents and the school, as well as the participation of the local communities with the schools and meeting teachers to motivate them to educate every child. The objective was that every child should get education and in order to achieve this, from January 2017, team Vidya Bhawan started working in Jharkhand's Gola, Ramgarh and a few other areas.

First, we strived to make sure that discussions on education were not limited to individuals but were held collectively in groups. From the experience of Vidya Bhawan's associate organisation, PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action), we felt that the Village Organisation (VO) was the perfect platform for raising educational issues. It ensured that efforts to find solutions were made jointly. At this point, the need for Change Vector/Education Change Vector (CV/ECV) was felt as they are seen as an important link between the community and the school. With the help of the members of PRADAN team, the members of the VO selected the ECVs.

To work in the field of primary education, the ECVs, popularly known as *didis*, have to undergo three rounds of orientation, namely, basic training, soft skills training and training in Vidya Bhawan's strategy. Members of our team provide complete support to the *didis* in their area of work and organise meetings for them to share learnings and experiences at the block level on a monthly/bi-monthly basis. *Didis* play a very important role in different activities under various strategies. They also involve other women of the community in these activities.

In the initial stages, when we were trying to get basic information about the region and the schools, we felt that there was a gap between the schools and the community. Parents used to come to the school only when they were required to collect the material distributed under government schemes. It was necessary for us to help the members of the community to overcome their hesitation in visiting the school so that we could move towards ensuring community participation in primary education. Among the various activities that we planned, *Bal Mela-s* provide an important platform for connecting communities, schools and children through a tangible context. It is a great learning experience for children outside the classroom because it fosters interest and understanding in children. Various games based on memory, accuracy, concentration, creativity and imagination are organised in *Bal Mela-s*. These include activities such as drawing and painting, brick-bucket game, glass-coin game, electric circuit cell game, guessing game/memories, leaf-thread design, ring game, puppet show, the world of books and games played on the ground.

A *Bal Mela* was organised in the village school of Sangrampur in February 2017. Vidya Bhawan team members shared the entire scheme of *Bal Mela* and its objectives in the meeting of the VO before the planning of the event. Since the ECV *didis* had not been selected at that time, members of the VO took the responsibility of organising it. It was decided that a group of VO members would go to the school with the Vidya Bhawan team members and get permission from the teachers to organise a *Bal Mela* there for the children. Several people were given the responsibility of bringing materials required, which were available in the village itself—floor mats, bedsheets, buckets, and glasses etc. It was decided that apart from these things, other essential items would be provided by Vidya Bhawan.

A meeting of the School Management Committee (SMC) was convened in connection with the organising of the *Bal Mela* with the support

of the people of the community. Members of the SMC, teachers of the school, Vidya Bhawan team members and members of the community participated in the meeting where the idea of *Bal Mela* was introduced and explained by the Vidya Bhawan team members. In the end, details of the various activities were shared. Although the school management did not object to the idea, there were many queries regarding the conduct of the mela, the activities and other details about food and participants.

After the meeting, everyone understood that the fair is being organised for children and they are the focal point of it and that it would be totally different from the other fairs held in the village as there would be activities for children related to teaching-learning organised by community participation. It was decided in the meeting that the *Bal Mela* would be organised on February 3, 2017, between 10.00 am and 1.00 pm. Children of primary classes from two nearby villages—Bisa and Murudih—also got permission to participate in this fair.

The *Bal Mela* began with a lot of eagerness. Students, parents and teachers took part in all the activities with great fervour. One does not usually see teachers, parents and children play together, but here it could be seen happening. The men and women of the community were present during all the activities and were watching these with a lot of interest and also eagerly participating. This fair was specially organised for the students of primary classes, but everyone was so excited that we could not stop the upper primary students from participating in various activities because they were equally keen.

As mentioned earlier, the children of primary classes from two nearby villages also participated in the fair with their teachers. There were about three hundred children and fifteen teachers from three schools, nearly a hundred parents, four members from Vidya Bhawan who came especially from Udaipur, three members from PRADAN, and three local members from the Vidya Bhawan team. At the end of the fair, the members of Vidya Bhawan, Udaipur and the local team members presented a puppet show.

The students enjoyed this fun-filled day. It proved to be a great and special opportunity to educate and create awareness among the people of the community. Its immediate impact was seen in an increase in the attendance of children. In the next session, four or five parents took their children out

from the private schools and admitted them to the government school of the village. In Sangrampur village this year, the whole village, children and teachers also took part in the enrolment campaign. Organising *Bal Mela-s* is now a regular feature. In the initial months, we played a pivotal role in organising them on the special demand of children and school.

Meanwhile, *didis* had been selected and Vidya Bhawan conducted an orientation programme for them to work in the field of education. In the beginning, they had to discuss two points in the village organisation—parents should send their children regularly to school and make them study at home in the evening. The *didis* and members of Vidya Bhawan would also make a list of irregular children by visiting the schools.

During recent times, the experience of conducting *Bal Mela-s* has been very good and we also started getting significant support from the *didis* in organising the fairs because they won over the trust of the teachers through regular interaction. To connect the *didis* directly with the activities of the school, Vidya Bhawan prepared an orientation module on organising *Bal Mela-s*, in which the details are explained. After going through this orientation programme, the *didis* have started organising the fairs in their respective government schools successfully. Now, Vidya Bhawan has to only look into the arrangement of resources for the fairs.

One can clearly see that activities like *Bal Mela-s* help children develop a liking for school and as a result, they start coming to school regularly. The number of people attending the monthly meetings of the school was negligible earlier, but now, more than half the members are present. The credit for this goes to the continuous efforts of the *didis*. Vidya Bhawan has conducted three orientation programmes to encourage the first batch of *didis* to work in the field of education and they have now teaching-learning activities for the children outside the classrooms in their respective village schools in the twelve villages where Vidya Bhawan started this project. The *didis* come to school for two or three days a week. They issue library books, organise poetry recitation and story-reading activities among the children and help with the preparation of the cultural programme that is organised at the end of the week.

Vidya Bhawan is working on further plans in view of the growing interest of the children in various

activities of the school apart from the textbook-based studies in the classroom. Work has begun on this direction and soon we will be able to arrange activities like *Bal Mela-s* in other schools of the block. The *Didis* working voluntarily in the field of education and those from the VO are the main collaborators in this significant work. Vidya Bhawan has now decided to provide basic materials required to conduct *Bal Mela-s* to be kept in the VOs offices in the village so that people of the community can organise *Bal Mela* every four to six months without having to wait for them.

Taking this experience forward, we are looking at the VO's office as an activity centre outside the school/classroom. This has been done with the consensus

of the community. In every VO office, Vidya Bhawan is providing storybooks for the children, materials required for *Bal Mela-s*, strings of beads to learn counting, reading material related to the education for *didis*, etc. In the evenings, children of primary classes will be able to take part in sports and other teaching-learning activities under the supervision of the *didis* near the VO's office instead of playing elsewhere. Our aim is to develop the VO office as an activity centre and to recruit a few women as *didis* for change in every village so that the work in the field of education continues, the children get quality education and the spirit of ownership of the school gets inculcated in the community.

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