

Need Opportunity not Sympathy

Bal Mela for Children with Disabilities

Shankar Badaga with Anwar and Venkatesh

Just like any other day, I was on my regular school visits, but the school I visited that day was special and invoked an insight in me. The school that I am talking about is the Government Higher Primary School in the Kupagal village of Shorapur taluk (Yadgir district). I was talking to the children of grades 6 and 7. One child was not responding since she could not grasp my words. Then, her friends helped her with hand signs, and she could understand me. I found out that her hearing was impaired, and her siblings too had the same condition. Even though I could not have normal communication with her, her friends did not seem to face any trouble communicating with her. This incident somehow got me thinking that these children also have special abilities and if only we could understand them better and provide them with diverse opportunities, they too could be successful in studies. I realised what they need is opportunities, not sympathy, to bring out the competencies waiting to be unfolded.

On a closer look, we found out that every school has a minimum of three to four such children. In the Shorapur block, there are 573 children with disabilities studying in primary classes and we have never treated them on equal terms with other children, instead, we show sympathy for the disability and curse the creator for bad luck and never explore ways to give them opportunities to bring out their hidden competencies. In every intervention, we talk about Constitutional values such as equality, equity and freedom but ensuring the same to these children is overlooked most of the time.

Education is a fundamental right of every child. Ensuring it, is the responsibility of the society, government and school. Every school should be accessible to all children and ensuring quality education to these children should be the ultimate motto. It is not only our wish but a constitutional mandate to give quality education to children with disabilities in order to bring them into the mainstream society. They must be able to sustain

the dignity of their life just like any other children and to sustain it, there is a need for equitable opportunities. The Education Department has a special cell for training in inclusive education with respect to children with disabilities.

Objectives of Inclusive Education

According to Samanvaya Shikshana Kaipidi 2018-19, Handbook of Inclusive Education 2018-19, these are:

- Opportunities shall be made available for admission to regular schools.
- Social relationship between children with and without disability should be built.
- Special teaching-learning materials (TLMs) and resources for better learning processes must be employed.
- The negative attitude towards children with disabilities must be corrected.

Over the past decade, we have been engaging with the children and teachers of public education sector on various platforms, but there has never been any initiative to include children with disabilities, nor has there been any exclusive events for them.

Finally, an initiative was taken up by Adivappa, the then Block Coordinator, Azim Premji Foundation and a discussion with department functionaries followed, in which they responded constructively to organizing special events for children with disabilities. A preparation meet was organised by the Foundation and the department collaboratively and we discussed the concept of a Bal Mela, exclusively for children with disabilities and prepared a document on the objectives of the event. During the discussion, some important notes were listed:

- Parents and community have misconceptions about these children's abilities.
- These children are believed to be products of past sins.
- There is a lack of medical awareness.

- School environment also segregates them from other children.

Attempt to remove such misconceptions and bring out the abilities of children with disabilities was the main objective of the Mela.

Objectives of the Mela

- To create awareness among parents and community and to create an environment for recognition and respect for the abilities of children with disabilities.
- To create awareness about child rights and constitutional values.
- To spread awareness regarding various government policies for the welfare of children with disabilities and to help them avail of these.

Preparation for the Mela

This Mela was a challenging one for us too. Using appropriate pedagogies to bring in learning among these children with the help of the teachers, was the first hurdle to be crossed. Secondly, we had discussions with various departments – Education, Taluk Panchayat, Social Welfare, Women & Child Welfare, Health, Transport, Disabled Welfare, Municipal corporations and the Association of Divyang Children – to enquire about the provisions and schemes of welfare for these children. All these departments were asked to participate in this Mela with an activity of their own.

A plan was charted out for the members of the Foundation to identify 30 schools that had children with disabilities and work in collaboration with the resource persons of the department and the respective teachers to include them in the learning process for a month. We engaged with these children through various activities in the domain of simple mathematics, language and encouraged them to share their needs and talents. The process enabled the teachers and parents to understand the abilities of these children better and it helped us to work with parents and teachers collaboratively.

The day of the Mela (February 8, 2018)

The Mela was inaugurated by a former Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), Mr Madhangopal Naik and officers from various departments attended. Approximately a hundred children with disabilities participated in fifty different activities – simple mathematics, social science, language and daily-life management skills. Various departments (Education, Taluk Panchayat, Social Welfare, Women & Child Welfare, Health, Transport,

Disabled Welfare, Municipal corporations) and associations of children with disabilities also participated to create awareness on provisions and welfare schemes in their respective stalls.

There was an air of celebration. It was a different experience in comparison with other Melas. Functionaries of the block expressed their sense of satisfaction and pride in organising this special event. Children discussed the topics of their choice with the audiences to the best of their ability.

Post lunch, achievers with special abilities were given the platform to share their thoughts. Mr Basavaraj Umbrani and Dr Shivaraj Shastri spoke about the challenges in their paths and their success stories. Mr Basavaraj Umbrani, visually impaired, is a recipient of the National Award and he shared the thought that disability is only in terms of the physical world and not the mental. In the state of Karnataka, Shorapur has pioneered in giving opportunities to these children with disabilities. He could solve mathematics operations like addition, division and multiplication to the sixth-place value within a few seconds without any aid, which mesmerized the audiences. He also opined that children with disabilities have special abilities and that we need to identify and support them in bringing out their talents. The other speaker, Dr Shivaraj Shastri, Kannada Lecturer at the Sharana Basappa College, Kalaburagi, who has a visual impairment, shared that the human species is special, and one must make full use of what one has; saying, 'if you don't have one arm, use the other'. There were about two thousand people in the audience, including children, parents and the members of the community.



Glimpses from the Mela



Insights from the Mela

- A sense that children with disabilities can learn on par with other children was exhibited. During our school visits, we could see the teachers actively involving them in the learning process with the help of their peers.
- If the teacher has the conviction to teach these children, then the children will emerge successful.
- The slogan, 'Need opportunities not sympathy' has initiated a critical thought process in everyone.
- These children do not need sympathy but opportunities along with patience, love and respect to become successful.
- Parents realised that their child with disability is not a burden and that the child can also live a normal life like the rest.

The day ended with a sense of satisfaction among

our members for having achieved something extraordinary and the smiles of happiness and pride on the faces of children was invaluable. The Mela provided a platform to recognize and respect the abilities of children with disabilities along with ensuring the constitutional mandate.

'A policy of inclusion needs to be implemented in all schools and throughout our education system. The participation of all children needs to be ensured in all spheres of their life in and outside the school. Schools need to become centres that prepare children for life and ensure that all children, especially children with disability, children from marginalised sections, and those in difficult circumstances get the maximum benefit of this critical area of education. Opportunities to display talents and share these with peers are powerful tools in nurturing motivation and involvement among children.' – NCF 2005 (4.3.2. *Policy of Inclusion*)



Shankar Badaga is currently an Inclusive Education Resource Trainer at the Block Resource Centre, Shorapur, Yadgir, Karnataka. Previously, he has been in various roles in the Department of Education as Cluster Resource Person (CRP) and Assistant Teacher for Kannada and Social Science. He has a 25-year long experience in this sector. He can be reached at shankrappabbadaga@gmail.com



Anwar, a Resource Person for Kannada at Shorapur, Yadgir, Karnataka has been with the Azim Premji Foundation since 2008 and has been part of various programmes, such as Learning Guarantee Programme and Child-Friendly School Initiative. He has also handled the responsibility of coordinating block activities of the Foundation at Sedam, Kalaburagi. He may be contacted at anwar.m@azimpremijifoundation.org



Venkatesh is currently a Fellow at Shorapur, Yadgir, Karnataka and has experience in Steel Industrial Project Management. He is a Bachelor of Technology in Mechanical Engineering from the National Institute of Technology, Karnataka. He can be reached at venkatesh.k@azimpremijifoundation.org