

**WOMEN'S EDUCATION
AND
RIGHT TO INFORMATION MELA**

**SAHJANI SHIKSHA KENDRA
AND NIRANTAR**

**15-16 June 2007
MEHRONI, LALITPUR**

12 noon, July 13, 2007

In the breezy green-and-whiteness of the Sahjani Shikshan Kendra in Mehrauni, Lalitpur district, things seem remarkably calm. Remarkable especially if you know what's brewing in the packed meeting room across the courtyard — a medley of opinions on government schemes, on food, employment and health, on the right to information, event management and much else. And meticulous — with an organised frenzy - planning for a women's mela that involves the mobilisation of three to four hundred women from across the district.



Introduction



June 15 and 16, 2007 were the dates of the second biannual mela organised by the Sahjani Shikshan Kendra and Nirantar in Mehrauni, Lalitpur. This year's mela was substantially more ambitious – in scale and in planning – than the first, and so this documentation tries to capture the process and a little of the history behind the event.

The mela was conceptualised as an opportunity for women - from approximately 30 villages in Mehrauni block - to come together and meet others involved in similar literacy efforts in neighbouring villages. The mela provides a platform and an occasion for more than 400 women to share their experiences and perceptions of exploitation, and articulate various forms of struggle. From the last experience, the sense of solidarity that the mela creates – eating, dancing, sleeping, talking together – provides a very powerful opportunity for the women them to see the importance (and relevance) of learning and knowledge in their lives.

Central to the planning of such a mela – on Women, Education and the Right to Information – is a very specific, feminist understanding of education. This, simply put, involves widening the concept of education beyond skills of literacy – reading and writing – to knowledge that enables women (and among them especially Dalits and the poorest of the poor, for whom access to information is severely restricted) to better the quality of their lives. With this as a fundamental perspective, Nirantar's Sahjani Shikshan Kendra in Mehrauni runs literacy centres at the village and cluster (a group of 5 villages) level for women. Apart from these regular centres, (that are presently being run in 7 villages) camps are organised and run by the Sahjanis at the village and block level. The 'education' that is shared at these centres and camps places literacy firmly in the context of the lives of the women; it shows the connections between being literate, and being aware of the structures – whether social, economical or political – that their lives are lived within. Rural women's lives, especially, are directly affected by structures like caste, gender and so on. Their awareness of and access to basic rights and needs is determined by these structures. And so by being aware of these

structures and also learning the tools to question them (Who has access to which resources? Why? Who is answerable?), written or vocal, these women have the agency to act.

The women's lives and experiences have, therefore, been the primary resources to develop the curriculum and literacy material and at the centres. For instance, an early health primer, Padhein Jaane Apna Swaasth combined basic literacy with information on gender, food security, health, and the connections therein – using folk stories and examples from everyday life. The women's lives become the context also to learn about political structures, the fundamental rights they can demand of the government, and the schemes the government provides to fulfil its duties to all citizens. These connections, then, between education and knowledge of power structures, between power structures and access to rights, and between education and the right to information about the system they live within – are what form a foundation for the SSK's work in Mehrauni, and what guided the planning for this year's mela. Over the past 5 years, the SSK has engaged with issues at the community level: food security (such as PDS and mid-day meal scheme), right to health, and so on, after learning from the women in various villages which issues affect them. Initially, work started on health, but over the past two years, surveys have been done on the employment guarantee scheme, ration cards and mid-day meals. Three years ago, surveys had been done by the women on the PDS, and most recently, women from the community had themselves formed monitoring teams to study the how the mid-day meal scheme was being implemented in schools.

The immediate impact of the lack of information on government schemes – something that emerged also from the work that the Sahjanis had done – is what necessitated the structuring of the mela in the way that it was. Three important issues – health, food and the employment guarantee scheme, which the SSK had a history of working in at the community level – were chosen. It was hoped that women would share their experiences and problems relating to these issues, and the recent Right to Information legislation would be

presented as an important tool in the hands of all the women, to enable them to take action. This was also seen as a way to make the right to information very real and 'practical' in the lives of rural women; a way to locate it in their experiences.

This note must acknowledge the influence of Arti Srivastava (1964-2004) on the Lalitpur programme. Arti was a feminist activist with a passionate commitment to continuing education in women's lives. She was a

major inspiration for the community education programme at Lalitpur, and the form and scale of this kind of mobilisation is very much a dedication to her energy and her initial work and efforts in establishing the programme.

The documentors' initiation to the process of planning for the mela began with joining the Sahjani meeting on the 13th. Here, decisions about what applications for what RTI applications to file for each topic – food,



Meena (33 years) and Chunni (25 years) are from Banda, and are coordinators at the Sahjani Shikshan Kendra. They worked as teachers at the Mahila Shikshan Kendra in Banda for almost 10 years, until 2002 when MSK disbanded. After a brief spell at an NGO called Swashakti, they moved to Mehrauni to be coordinators at the Sahjani Shikshan Kendra. They did a lot of the preliminary work of going to villages and mobilising women, and their experiences in the initial years was not all positive – the villagers used to chase them out, and they had to put up with much badmouthing. It was thought that the Centre would sell their daughters/daughters-in-law. It was in these circumstances that they had to get women out of their homes to the centre. In the beginning, their work was to train teachers at the village and block level.

Now, villages which have had successful centres for 3 years are clustered together. According to Meena and Chunni, there is quite a high rate of literacy in the villages where the centres have run for 3 years. They are able to read and write letters. The women who are not able to attend the centres often come for the yearly residential camps. Among the women, some are only interested in being able to read and write and count, and some are not interested in literacy at all, being given other information is much more stimulating for them.

Meena talks about how hard it was to get the women to come for the first mela in 2005 – they had to tempt them with the bags that were going to be given at the mela! The participants had to contribute Rs 15-20, which it was hard to convince them to part with. Meena sees one of the biggest advantages of having a mela centred on education/literacy as an opportunity for women to see that others like them are studying.

Chunni tells us how the process of planning the first mela was different from the present one; that the responsibility of the Sahjanis was less than this year. For this mela, not only are the Sahjanis fully responsible for the event, but many women from the community have also taken on the responsibility to monitor government schemes. The Sahjanis had handled everything from mobilising women, and collecting their contributions (Rs 20), to planning the event, talking to officials and local media organising the arrangements for the mela.

Apart from the planning of both melas, both Meena and Chunni said that the involvement and interest of the women is greater when specific issues – like food/ration cards, job cards etc – are taken up. But generating interest in this mela and mobilising women was greatly eased by the groundwork done for the last mela: women went back and shared their experiences of the last mela with friends and family. While last year, their own problems had to be explained to the women, this time the women brought up the problems they face on their own – the level of awareness and education has increased substantially. The issues around which this mela has been planned have emerged from the women of the community themselves.

What emerged strongly from our conversation with Meena and Chunni – beyond the increasing awareness and involvement of the community – was how much ownership they felt in the organisation of the mela. They also had a highly experienced finger on the pulse of the community: what would work in the mela and what wouldn't.

June 13: Operation Sahjani Shikshan Mela 2007

health, employment – were being made. The Sahjanis seemed to need some guidance to draw connections between problems (within the 3 broad topics) and deciding those that could be taken as RTI applications to the government. Purnima and Subhalaxmi provided inputs about the connections between education/literacy and the right to information, and recapped the objectives of the mela for the group.

Women's Education and the Right to Information Law Mela:

Objectives

1. to increase education/literacy of women and girls
2. to increase awareness about the issues of food, employment and health
3. to enable women and girls to make use of their education and knowledge through the right to information law
4. to begin discussion of the above issues through groups and presentations
5. for the women to come together and experience strength in solidarity

Post lunch, the Sahjanis (who had already been divided into the food/health/employment subgroups) were given reading material on various government schemes on health, food and employment, and asked to make presentations on these – what were the entitlements according to the scheme; what was the history of various schemes (for example, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 was a result of Aruna Roy and the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan's struggle)

When the group presenting on the NREGA had finished, Subhalaxmi said they needed to clarify meaning of employment; what should it entitle you to? Also, there seemed to be a confusion between what the law says/entitles you to, and what the reality of the situation on the ground is. For facilitating discussions at the mela, it was necessary for the Sahjanis to be clear about this:

- important to understand the implications of the issue;
- what the law is
- what the reality of the situation is



- and what we can do about this – in terms of the RTI law.

She also said how it was important to understand the difference between government schemes, which change from one government to the next, and laws or rights – which are constitutional, which remain regardless of governments. The group that presented on health spoke about the structure of the national health services – Purnima said that there was nothing wrong with this: it's an effective structure. So what happens to make this structure and these services ineffective? The importance of knowing the point of access (to health services) at every level was discussed.

With the food group, as in other presentations, the issue – of the Right to Food - was lost in the often muddled details of information on various schemes, the problems emerging from the schemes not being implemented properly. Again, the Sahjanis were told to be clear about the importance of the right itself, the history of this right.

5.30 pm: Disregarding the distracting smells of rain, the Sahjanis came back after a short break to decide on the RTI applications that would be written. There was still, at this point, some confusion about the details of the schemes themselves. A fairly involved discussion around the details of the NREGS ensued:

If a minimum of 33 % women are supposed to get work according to the NREGS – are beneficiaries of people (men) who get work (or have job cards made) also counted in percentage? I.e., Family members – wives, daughters. Or does the job card have to be made in the woman's name? Or is it that there should be a minimum

of 33 % women at the work site? If that is so, then looking at the lists of people who have been given job cards (asking for that information from the government) won't clarify if enough women are being given work.

The discussion also moved to whether job cards can be made in women's names. Or whether it was always in the name of the 'head' of family, who will almost always be a man?

Purnima also said they should raise questions about the scheme: why only 100 days of work in a year? Were people that needed the work most – Dalits, women – being given work? The evidence that the Sahjanis had was that they were not.

June 14, 2007

The apparent calm of the previous day crescendoed, without warning, into a mini mela in the office itself by the next morning. The Vanangana food team arrived – women, moustachioed men and very active children. Also the Khabar Lahariya team – exhausted from a long, delayed train journey. There was a flurry of greetings, rushing to bathe – in the midst of which some pre-mela panic (below the surface until now) began to make itself felt, seen. There was suddenly so much to do: one team left for the mela grounds – Shri CV Gupta Inter-college, Mehrauni - one to the field to start rounding up women. Another team formed an assembly line to prepare the 350 jholas for all the participants.

There was, by now, a distinct change in the atmosphere: a transformation from an organisational event - 'work' - into a celebration. There was a feeling also, of

ownership of this celebratory event. Even if unconsciously, the actual objectives of the mela seem to make themselves known. The event and all that it included – the issues, discussions, the planning, infrastructure – seemed to be a part of every Sahjani's, every woman's lives, instead of being imposed as an obligation, something they had to do and that was a burden. And this was enhanced by a sense of togetherness, of solidarity, of the real possibility of mass mobilisation for empowerment. As more participants also began to arrive - sajh-dhajh ke, complete with very pink lipstick, very red sindoor, neon pink painted feet – this sense of festivity grew.



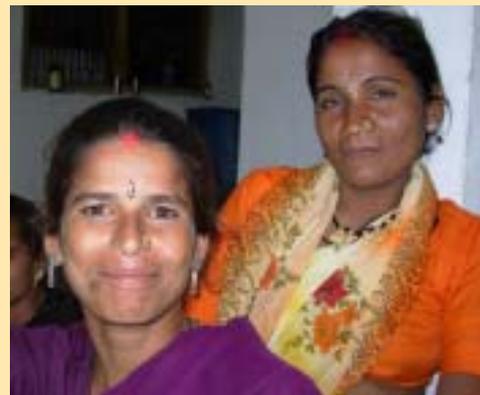
Haribai is from Gadora village, and tells us that she was married at 11 or 12, and has been married 14-15 years, and so her age is our guess! She has a son and a daughter. Her in-laws were hassling her about her dowry, and would beat her, so Haribai has been living with her parents. Her son lives with her husband, and her daughter with her. Her brother pays for her daughter's education.

Haribai has attended 2 residential camps at SSK. She learnt how to read, the names of the months, and how to tell the time here. She says, "At the camps, we're free of the hassles of the house and from the ghunghat. We can live our own lives – that's why we like coming here."

She's attending the mela for the first time, and is very excited about it. On asking why, she says she will get to learn, but also to meet many friends!

Feisty and intelligent Renuka is from Satmasa, and is about 28 years old – though she and Haribai have quite an argument about this. She has come for camps twice, and tells us how she learnt more than just reading/writing and counting – but also gained knowledge about other things. She heard about the Centre and the camps at the last mela in 2005, which she had decided to attend out of curiosity. After that, she studied in the Centre for a year.

Both Haribai and Renuka emit a certain festive air – they are all decked for a celebration, and tell us how besides other things, they learnt to sing and dance, do plays at the camps. (The memory of Bindiya taking pictures of them with moustaches painted on at the last block level camps elicits many giggles.) They never miss home – they were always having too much fun!



3 pm, Documentation meeting

Post lunch, as the team grew more complete, a meeting was called of all the various people in charge of documentation of the mela, facilitated by Subhalaxmi. Responsibilities were divided as follows:

Written documentation (Mela report) – Snehlata (Hindi), Disha (English)

Videography – Munna (Vanangana)

Photography – Disha, Shalini

Mela Bulletin - Khabar Lahariya team + Asha, Ramkuar, Savita from Jani Patrika team, Shalini, Snehlata

The content for the bulletin was discussed: it was decided that there should be information/articles on how many women had attended the mela, and from where. One article was to be on the right to information. Apart from this, the bulletin team would interview various women who had come for the mela about their experiences, talk to the women who were active in the samiti, who had filed RTI applications (for example, women of Pathrai); women who had done preliminary work on midday meals (women of Nauve, Korvas). There was also a brief discussion about problems of language - Hindi versus Bundeli, and also Banda/Chitrakoot Bundeli versus Lalitpur Bundeli – and how this would affect the editing/writing of the bulletin. It was decided that all interviews should be in the dialect they were spoken in, and other pieces would be in Hindi. The rest of the evening/night was spent in energetic rehearsals of plays that were to be performed the next day, detailed planning of the inauguration and division of responsibilities at the mela. It was only in the early hours of the next morning that everyone fell into a restless, stressful sleep.





Duties were assigned from 5.30 am; groups left in batches for the Shri CV Gupta Inter-college grounds to set up. The first group – led by a puffy-eyed but enthusiastic Subhalaxmi – sleepily surveyed the grounds, and then slowly (very slowly) began to think about the registration area and the best ways to hang big thermacol posters on a nylon wire. People and aesthetic senses were just about to awaken when a much more efficient Group 2 arrived from SSK and bundled the early shift off to bathe. By 8 am, the grounds had started filling with people; over their heads, Purnima darted around stringing up colourful flags and cardboard letters that brought the grounds to life. And officially, the mela acquired a life of its own.

Registration

For starters, 'official' registration from 9.30 to 11.30am was soon seen to be wishful planning. Groups started trickling in from 8 am, and kept on trickling till late in the afternoon. At best, registration was exciting and heartwarming – the steady flow of women, the sometimes-shy, sometimes-boisterous, always

significant putting pen to paper to sign their names, the unabashed enthusiasm to check the contents of the jhola they were handed. At worst, it was chaotic and highly staggered. But nothing that disrupted the energy around the beginning of this two-day get-together.

“Kiska mela? Didiyon ka mela!”

Inauguration started on schedule, as most villages had arrived and registered by 12 noon. Purnima's rabble-rousing introduction to the mela revealed that the majority of the women were mela first-timers: they did have some idea what they were there for, but were tentative and curious. It took just a little convincing for them to see it was not a didiyon ka mela, but a janiyon ka mela. After Purnima's introduction – explaining the reasons and objectives behind the mela - a few women were called up on stage to speak: some Sahjanis, Shanti from Khabar Lahariya (to share her experience of adult literacy), Shyambai, who recently passed her 5th standard exam, and some women from the community who had done work at the village level in the months leading up





to the mela. Post the speeches, there was a play by Vanangana on the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, much of which could not be heard but which reignited some of the attention that had petered out in the audience. The inauguration wound down with some loud and tuneless singing, again gathering wandering inattention and refocusing the group for the discussions to come.

Registration, lunch and inauguration fairly successfully completed, the next challenge was to move participants to three different locations for the discussions in smaller groups on food, employment and health. Everyone had colour-coded badges in their jholas, which they were asked to pin on as soon as they sat down, and which they did with great enthusiasm. Pink (for health), yellow (for food) and green (for employment) groups were lead off by various Sahjanis. It was afternoon by this time, and the thick blanket of humidity eclipsed all hints of rain, as a consequence of which, focusing the groups' (and their children's) attention on to the issues at hand was an uphill task. Below is a brief report of the discussions in the different groups; some were more

complete than others, since the documentors were moving from one discussion to the next.

Health

Facilitators: Nini, Roshni, Chunni, Mamta, Nanhi, Rajkumari, Ramsakhi, Jashoda

Chunni opened the session by explaining what 'health' means; also, the discussions taking place in the other groups. There was a short skit on health soon after, to set off the discussion, which demanded some attention, even just virtue of being a play. The health group was broken into 3 smaller groups, facilitated by Chunni, Nini and Roshni, and began by discussing the play, and the truth of the situation portrayed (the lack of access to health facilities). To some extent, the dynamic in each of the smaller groups was dependent on the facilitator: Nini and Roshni were seen less as teachers, as Chunni was (this has to do with style of communicating, and determines how attention flags often in this group). The former groups were seated more or less in a circle, and the issues raised in all (failure of government to provide



what it's promised, the caste/class based difference in access to medical facilities, the kind of medical problems that occur in certain class/class contexts) were acknowledged and more or less agreed with. More often than not, the discussion took the form of private conversations amongst each other sharing their own experiences – of blood test reports that came after days, of medicines not available in government hospitals because they'd been sold to private hospitals. Once the hint of an audience has been scented out, the enthusiasm to share stories of all kinds blurs the line of 'issue' so meticulously drawn. So Preetam, in a bright yellow sari, can think of multiple stories - yellow khichdi, BPL cards being made only made for higher castes, or people who can pay; job cards being made, but no work provided. Parallel conversations become a hum in all the groups, but there is a sense of participation by all, and also an awareness (both through facilitators and by the articulation and sharing of experiences) of why the system fails, and at what points there are fractures.

Nini wrapped up by adroitly drawing the stories from different villages into a macro picture about the lack of health facilities, and the inadequate access across the board: these facilities should be available in all villages according to government/laws. In the end, we don't know what we are entitled to because we don't have

information, and this is necessitates the Right to Information law.

Roshni interacted with the group about the new National Rural Health Mission (valid till 2012), and spoke about how this scheme should have been made after checking with people at the grassroots/village level what medical facilities they had access to. Instead, the scheme was made after consulting only district level officers (CMO). Roshni asked about what medical facilities there are at different levels – district, block, village – where hospitals are, etc. As it emerged from the discussion that often it is not known what facilities there are and where – what medicines, and schemes are available – she brought up the necessity of the RTI, and the idea of an RTI application to find out how much money has been allotted for the local health centre was mooted.

The session finished with a song – 'Kheton ki kasam, faslon ki kasam, ye bacchen hamare poonji hain'. Chunni talked about how the government emphasises on family planning, but gives no regard to the fact that the children that are born are well taken care of.

Food

Facilitators: Jaya, Subhalaxmi, Ramkumari, Gyasi, Pushpa, Asha

The session began with a play on the state of the midday meal scheme. This entertaining skit demonstrated the kind of substandard (and minimal) ingredients used in the preparation of the midday meal, the narrowness of the menu (khichdi everyday), the quality of the food, and finally, the caste issues that emerge in the serving of the food.

After the play, the group was asked whether this situation is common, and everyone said agreed that it was. There was great response/participation from the group to share their experiences:

Nanhi (from Kakaruwa) said that when there is kheer made in their school, only the upper caste children are fed properly;



the lower caste children are given little and sent away. As a rule, the children don't get to eat properly.

A woman from Mainwar village said when the food cooked for the midday meal was lying outside the school (because it was so bad that no one could eat it), the Sahjanis went to the parents and asked why they didn't do/say anything. The parents replied that if they said anything, then whatever the children were being given also would stop. At least for the moment, they get something.

From here, the discussion shifted (as was the wont) to the state of ration cards. Gadhai bau (from Dhurwara) said people who have houses and tractors and everything have the red (Antodaya) cards, and those who don't have anything have the yellow cards (APL). Jashoda said the 'bade log' of the village have got Antodaya cards made in the name of poor people and kept them for themselves.

By this time, the discussion had transformed into an impassioned free-for-all on the faulty allocation of ration cards. Like in the Health group, the discussion here too took the form of a sharing of multiple stories/ experiences from different villages. Subhalaxmi tried to move from here to locate the right to food in a historical context, talking about the independence, and the constitution including the right to food as a basic/ fundamental right. There was some resistance to this move away from the micro focus on individual experiences: Phoolan Devi (Gauna) stood and began to tell Subhalaxmi what was what, and the irrelevance of what rules and laws and rights may say. The group swerved dangerously close to losing whatever decorum they had, at which time Asha came on to inform them of the ration rates according to the Supreme Courts. This presentation was quite a pleasure to watch, as it grabbed hold of straying eyes and ears, and awakened interest and curiosity in the very real, day-to-day way in which the government was cheating them, and the difference an access to information makes. The group agreed that not knowing our legal rights made it hard to know that we were being cheated, and that there was a possibility to change this. (Ramadevi, from Mehroni, reiterated to those around her - why can't we change this? We can write an application. Why should there



Mamta, 25 years, from Pathrai village, is striking for how much tenacity and drive she manages to convey in her small body. She gives the sense of being deeply committed and hardworking, and eager to learn, and subsequently oblivious to what people might think or say about her – whether her family or others in the community. She has been attending the Centre for 5 years. she went to school till class 3, and was married when she was 10. She has attended the residential camps for the past 3 years, where she learnt to read – with Pitara and Bolti hai Bhasha. She talked about how literacy efforts should be as regular as possible; how even camps every 3 months were frustrating as the flow of learning was interrupted. She attended the last mela as well, and enjoyed it. She learned a lot. This time around, she looks forward to meeting people, learn, talk about different problems, “aage badho”.

Mamta hasn't done the 5th class exam yet, but wants to, as well as the 8th class exam. She wants to be a Sahjani. She talks about wanting to make something of her life, of wanting her children's lives to be better. She has problems with her in-laws; her husband does farming, but there's usually one crop in the year, and he sits at home the rest of the time. He used to think it was good that she was studying – at least someone in the house would be educated. He also looks after her children when she's away from home. Of late, her husband and other people in the village have started to ask why she's studying at this age. Now, her husband mutters unhappily when she has to go for camps, or for a mela, but accepts that she's involved with the work she is. Mamta, on her part, thoroughly enjoys being away from home – whether at the camps or the mela! She took the initiative to file an RTI application as job cards in her villages were either not being made, or not being signed, or were fake. She didn't think twice about signing her name on it, and didn't feel threatened. But her ration card – and those of some of the poorest in the village – have been cut off, and not remade. No one has said anything to her face about her initiative in filing the RTI application, but she does think that people in the village would talk about it amongst themselves.

be this divide between the rich and the poor?). After Asha's presentation, the work done in various villages on monitoring the midday meal scheme was presented through posters by Gyasi, which drew some attention. Ramadevi went up close to inspect them, and then facilitate the discussion that followed.

Employment

Facilitators: Shalini, Meena, Shabana, Babita, Ramkunwarn

The discussion started by talking about the Vanangana play on the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, that had happened earlier in the day. Later, Mamta (from Pathrai), who, along with a group of women, had taken the initiative to inquire about the state of job cards in their village, spoke about her experience. She said on her job card had no signature or official stamp, so she filed an RTI application. Shalini said whatever info we want, we can fill an RTI application and give it to the Public Relations Officer, who sits at the Block office. Meena (Sahjani) spoke about their own work in this area, and said that the villages in which job cards have not been made, can file RTI applications to ask what they should do if their cards have not been made. Nagina (from Vanangana) spoke about their experience in Chitrakoot. She said that they filed an RTI to demand records of four Gram Panchayats to see how much work had been done. Then they contacted the labourers on the muster roll and found out that they had only got 10 days of work, of the 100 days they were due.

Meena said they had also filed a RTI application to see in how many villages job cards had been made. When they got the records, which said that job cards had been made, on investigation they found out that the actual state of affairs was that many people's cards had not

been made, or did not have signatures. Meena told the group that if the concerned officer does not give the requested information within 25 days, then he can be fined Rs 250 per day, and upto Rs 25,000 can be cut from his salary. Women from Nawai and Pyasa villages said they had done work but got no pay yet. In general, this group was rather disorganised, with attention frequently focussed on unhappy or hungry children, and needing loud admonitions to bring their attention and interest back to the discussion.

In retrospect, the group discussions went off well. The afternoon heat and humidity didn't help the attention span of many – even Sahjanis – but some amount of interesting discussion did occur – if not in the larger group, atleast in the form of conversations among few women. The Health group was perhaps the most



effective; it was the only group which split into smaller groups to discuss health facilities; and the sharing of experiences, and the connection with the larger picture was therefore more focused and better moderated. However, an issue that did come up on observation and among the organizers/facilitators was the workability of small, issue based groups – when

women talk about their day to day experiences, they don't compartmentalize them into food, employment, health. All these are meshed together into the reality of their lives. So why have we structured the discussions in this way? And how is it productive (even if it maybe more practical/workable) in the big picture? Surely we need to be encouraging them to think of their problems as interrelated...and this did come up in some of the group discussions (health).

Some kind of input on moderation/facilitation might be good for the Sahjanis. On many occasions, attempts to moderate, or even quieten the group resulted in the sahjanis themselves becoming involved in smaller

discussions and increasing the amount of distraction. It seemed like they weren't exactly sure what their roles as facilitators or moderators were, and their helpfulness could be much enhanced if they had had some skill-building in this area.

Now, *That's What You Call a Mela!*

After the sessions were completed, masses of hot and sweaty women, with their hot and sweaty children were herded by hot and sweaty mela organisers for chai and then given a bit of a break before the evening's festivities. They came back to a darkened shamiana and a big screen. There was palpable excitement as we – over 400 women and children of assorted sizes besides – got ready to watch UP's first open air, big screen show of *Taza Khabar: Hot off the Press*. Once all the DVD/screen testing was done, Shalini introduced the film by speaking about women and the access to information, and how the film captures this. When it was finally time for the film to begin, the audience was fairly absorbed – at least part of the excitement was because it all felt so close to home, in terms of language, issues, even people (especially since the some of the 'actors' could be spotted around the mela!). Admittedly, it did seem like a long half hour. Clouds of beedi smoke could be seen billowing out from the darkened corners of the shamiana where elderly ladies were taking some time out. After the film, Meera and Shanti spoke about their experiences working with the paper, bringing the issues in the film into the arena of the mela. The discussion was opened up to the audience, and Subhalaxmi spoke about the connections between the

Khabar Lahariya women and the women there at the mela. *Jani Patrika* as some sort of parallel to KL – in terms of dissemination of information, by women and at the level of the community – was also brought up.

There was a break for dinner after the film and discussion, after which the *dhol (digga)* transformed the atmosphere into a party-of-sorts. From Bundeli folk music to filmi tunes, a level of comfort made itself felt in the blur of jumping, twisting, shaking bodies, drawing each other out of the crowd to join in. Mamta (Pathrai) is the heart and soul of the party, charging the group with an almost frenzied energy! It was in the midst of this riot of movement that one glimpsed the success of the mela: in that it had created a platform for women to be and to share experiences in the most comfortable, stimulating way possible.

The adrenaline built up over the evening's activities reached its crescendo with a timely downpour (by which I mean



cats, dogs, cows...). This necessitated an emergency evacuation of the shamiana, where everyone was meant to sleep, into the school building nearby. More than the actual evacuation (which happened fairly smoothly), we discovered the impossibility of moving a group of women that has settled in a room – even if they have to sleep in 4 inches of (rapidly rising) water. Many hours and altercations later, the rain slowed and the hysteria wound down – and Day One was finally, dramatically, over.



Preeti is from Nawai village in Mehrauni block. She is 18 years old, and has studied upto class 9. She attended the 10-day residential camps at SSK for the first time this year. She said she learnt addition, subtraction, counting, as well as the months of the year in different calendars, and different festivals in these various calendars.

Preeti grew up in Wardha, Maharashtra. After getting married, she had quite a tumultuous relationship with her in laws, who used to prevent her from going out or talking to anyone. But for a long time,

Preeti didn't understand what they were saying to her, as she didn't know Bundeli! After coming to the Centre, her Bundeli has become better. Her in laws are opposed to her going to the centre or coming for the camps, but her husband is supportive. Before coming to the Centre, Preeti said she was very shy and nervous to talk to people – partly because she knew if her inlaws saw her, she'd be in trouble. Now she has the confidence to talk to almost anyone! Along with women from her village, she monitored the midday meal scheme in Senkapur village. For the mela, she has also prepared a play on the state of the midday meal scheme.



At the SSK office, however, work on the bulletin – *Mela Samachar* – was on full steam, through rain and attacks of frogs and bugs of all kinds. The team began work at around 9pm, while the party was going strong at the mela grounds. On the editorial team were reporters from *Khabar Lahariya* – Meera, Mira, Geetika and Parvati (out of the action for the most part because of a hugely swollen tooth) – as well as Asha, Ramkuar and Savita who work on the *Jani Patrika*, and Snehlata and Shalini from Nirantar. Some planning about the content of the bulletin had been decided before – the objectives of the mela, interviews with women who had come there from different villages; interviews with those who had passed the 5th class exam and so on. The pieces were divided among the group to be written, and work commenced against the background of the steady downpour. Soon, the electricity was cut off, and the atmosphere of tense activity intensified by having to crowd around the petromax to write. Croaking frogs in every corner of the room (and all the buckets in the bathroom too) completed the drama of the evening. Nevertheless, the intrepid bulletin team wrote, edited, prepared the dummy successfully by 2 am. Asha and Savita photocopied the bulletin early the next morning, and distributed during the presentations.

DAY 2: JUNE 16, 2007

Over 6 am tea, I chatted with Shailesh, from a Lucknow-based organisation called Asha, who works on women's issues and the right to information in Lucknow and Hardoi. The group from Asha had had a gruelling 24-hour journey from Lucknow to Mehroni, and had reached only mid-afternoon the previous day. As a result of which, they had

missed the group discussions on the different topics. They had joined the group for the evening programme; Shailesh mentioned especially enjoying *Taza Khabar*, and was enthusiastically asking about different people's roles in the film and in KL. She had some experience in filing RTI applications in Lucknow for ration cards, and had been chatting with the women at the mela about demanding information on different schemes. She said she was enjoying the mela, the opportunity to interact with so many women and learn so much.

7 am

Day Two began with the somewhat anti-climactic re-pitching and some less-than-inspired redecoration of the shamiana, which had to be pulled down because of the downpour the previous night. Over painstakingly painted posters are flung washed clothes, and they were soon tragically (and a little comically, it must be admitted) streaked! Apart from this, though, there was some kind of calm as 350 women (and many, many children) readied themselves for the second day of the mela – bathed, the flash of sindoor on their forehead almost blinding – the spirit of the occasion seemed to have sunk in, there was a palpable level of comfort between the women, but also with the events happening around them.

8.30 am

The events of the day are kicked off with some more loud and often tuneless singing, which nonetheless draws rapt attention. The discussions of the previous day, on Food, Health and Employment Guarantee are shared back by representatives from each smaller group.

Health

Various people from this group share their experiences, beginning with Mamta (Mehrauni). Chunni, who is the moderator/chair for this group, recaps the broad issues they discussed: the lack of health facilities close by, the danger to people's lives because of the problem in accessing health facilities. Dalit, poor people suffer more – because they can't afford private treatment, and government facilities are non-existent, or bad. The sharing of experiences began to meander from health to job card/work related stories, and the troubles women faced. Chunni expertly took over to talk about connection between not getting work, and poor health. The wider connotation of health encompasses issues/problems like roads, ration, job cards. Health isn't related only to availability of medicines, injections, doctors. This also effectively addressed the problem of overlapping

issues in women's lives, and the difficulty of separating them, that emerged over the two days of discussion

The RTI application which will be filed as a result of these discussions is to find out how much money has been allocated for PHC in Mehroni block.

employment

Representatives from this group talked about how some villages have got job cards; in some villages the cards have been made but are with the Pradhan, who takes Rs 50-100 to give the cards. Pan bai said job cards have been made, but the labour/work forms have not been given/filled in – so there's no form of receipt or proof. No women have got job cards; the 33% reservation for women is in name only. Across the board, the women said that inspite of all these rules according to the employment guarantee scheme, nothing is happening according to the law.

The RTI application in this group was to be to inquire how much pay and work has been given in Mehroni block to Dalits and women.

food

The play on the midday meal situation was re-enacted here for the whole group. The women gave many examples of the state of midday meal schemes in their villages. Some issues were common in all the villages. Though the food is supposed to be cooked by poor, Dalit women, in actuality upper class women only make the food. Mamta (from Nawai village), who had been part of the team that had surveyed the midday meal scheme in her village, shared her experiences. She also spoke about the cost of wheat and rice on the different ration cards.

Ramdulari (from Kakaruwa village) said she had no information about ration cards and midday meal. Her children told her that *khichdi* was made in school, and that there was discrimination between children – the upper caste children got more food, and lower castes got little. Renuka and Kamala (from Satwasa village) spoke about how people who have land and houses get ration cards, and the people who have nothing, don't have ration cards either.

The RTI application in this group was to get a full list of women, dalits, widows, adivasis and *besahara* have got red (antodaya) cards in Mehrauni block.

After the sharing back, there were a few presentations before the group split up to prepare the RTI applications.

Usha from Asha, Lucknow: works on the employment guarantee scheme. She seemed keen to elicit as much

audience response as possible, and so began by asking if the women wanted to work or not. There was a show of many hands, and so Usha asked why they hadn't applied for information, or complained if they weren't getting work. She then shared some information about the scheme – how much work they should get; how the work should not be measured. Her presentation was quite effective in terms of revving up the group, and communicating basic information that had been shared over the two days.

Roshni from Sama, Delhi: Roshni was a resource person at the mela, for the health group. She talked briefly about Sama's work in the area of women's health, and about her positive experience at the mela.

Grameen Development Scheme : This is a group that works on literacy, in Lalitpur. They talked about their experiences learning as adult women. They also tried to link education to the right to employment; specifically using the example of how they now they have information about employment schemes and have consequently got job cards and work.

Nagina from Vanangana, Chitrakoot: Spoke about how she had enjoyed mela; **Chuniya and Chunni – from Dalit Samiti:** Talked about the state of affairs in Chitrakoot with regards to employment and ration cards. They also give a brief context in terms of Vanangana's work, on domestic violence, rights. Chunni talked about her work in the community – getting progressively strident and emphatic – on the importance of not practising casteism between ourselves if we have to spread the message in the community. Chuniya showed how she wears the white badge of the Dalit Mahila Samiti, and the dual strength and vulnerability that comes from this display of identity. In this presentation particularly – but in others also where women share their experiences – its striking how there's such power that comes from control over the mike. Power to show anger, to raise a voice and make a point be heard.

Saurabh Sharma from Josh, Delhi: Saurabh was a resource person invited to make a presentation on the right to information law. His presence on the stage – a man, for the first time in the two days – elicited much curiosity and sparked much interest. Saurabh provided a very short history of the law; how it began with one woman – Aruna Roy – who got the law passed. He talked about how the RTI was the outcome of a fight, which is still going on – now for the law to be implemented. His presentation was simple, yet powerful, and charismatic, in a way. He asked the group if they knew about tax, whether they paid tax? And did they know where this money was going? It is

money paid without an accountability: it goes into paying government salaries, paying for their houses and cars.

Saurabh said that just like they would ask for accounts (*hisaab*) when they bought vegetables or milk, they should ask for accounts for the money they give the government. The Right to Information law is a way for this accountability to be enforced. The officers concerned have to give the information within 30 days, otherwise they will be fined. Saurabh told the (by now almost fully attentive) group about a case in Chitrakoot, in a school where the teacher (a government employee) never used to come; he employed someone else in his place, who he used to pay



After the presentation, the house was open for questions for Saurabh. The crowd was slow to start, but momentum soon builds, as confidence increases. The first few women's voices and questions were muffled by their *ghunghat*; as the women gain confidence, the *ghunghats* drop, voices grow more bold. Soon, there was a line of women waiting to ask questions! The engagement of the women with Saurabh was really productive; so different from what the women are used to with the *didi log!* Saurabh was sharp and informative. His involvement was as an outsider, but he engaged easily with the



local issues. Even the small gap in communication caused by the Bundeli the women spoke didn't cause problems. Two issues that recurred in the women's questions were illegal acquisition of land, and how the cases are pending for so many years. Purnima repeatedly said that they had little information about land related legislation, and if there were cases going on, the process was different. The RTI law could not be used. The second recurrent problem was of ration cards being issued only to people who can pay the 500 buck bribe

Rs 2000 of his Rs 7000 salary. And he started his own business at home. An RTI application was filed, and the teacher was fired. He gave a few more examples, which fully engaged the audience, before ending with the slogan - *Hamara paisa, hamara hisaab!*

One women said that the *naali* in front of her house has not been cleaned for years – as a result of which there were mosquitoes/diseases breeding. Saurabh responded to most such questions by saying that all this can and should be questioned, and RTI applications should be filed. He repeatedly emphasised that they need to get written evidence when they complain to authorities: if the Pradhan

says nothing can be done about lack of ration/job cards, they should have it in writing, otherwise the authorities can and will deny being asked. Without written evidence, no complaint will be valid, and the officials can't be held to account.

After the presentations, the group divided into the Food, Health and Employment subgroups of the previous day to prepare their respective RTI applications.

Employment

The work on the application was preceded by Meena sharing some information about the rural employment guarantee scheme: The wage rate per day for work that starts post 31st May (not including work that has been going on from before) is Rs 80; Atleast 33% of job cards should be for women. Meena showed the group what the job card looked like, and further explained what it entitles you to - work should be received in 7 days, and at the most after 15 days after job card is made. The card is valid for 5 years. By this time, the group was split roughly into two - one half could hear, and was interested in what was happening; the other half was hot and distracted and not really trying to listen.

Meena began to wind up by explaining that they needed to find out how many women have cards, and how many women and Dalits out of this have got jobs and what kind. How much work has been given, how much money paid since job cards have been made

The RTI application was filed in Halli's (from Loharra village) name, since she was the only with ration card/ID proof. Before ending, Meena read out the application.

Health

This group broke into 5 smaller groups to talk about the RTI, and its application in various issues at the village level. This was an effective strategy: there was much more attention, interest shown. The women share problems in the village, and others are far more attentive and interested in listening. Chunni explained about how to apply - that 1 copy should be kept as proof,

and one given to BDO. An ID proof, like a ration card is needed. The format of the application was shown in the booklets provided. Chunni also re-emphasised that any communication/dismissal from authorities was to be taken in writing. Nini's group was quite involved in coming up with ideas of what RTI applications they could file; Nini said there should be as many applications as possible

The RTI application this group wrote was to find out how much money has been allocated in the 2007-2008 budget to this Mehrauni block for the Primary Health Care facility.

Food

The RTI, worked on by Jaya, Subhalaxmi, Asha and others was to find out how many (and get a full list) of women, dalits, widows, adivasis and *besahara* who have got red (antodaya) cards in Mehrauni block.

By the time the smaller groups collected for the closing of the mela, there were some late guests observing from the sidelines. A string of local journalists had arrived mid morning, and were given press kits (much to Meena's displeasure, who thought it was criminal to hand the men freebies, when the participants of the mela had all paid for their *jholas*). The journalists mainly looked on with diluted interest in the proceedings, and more curiosity about who had come from Delhi. They were given a press release, and also invited to a press conference later in the day.

Deputy Superintendent of Mehrauni hospital Dr Sajjan Kumar also arrived (a day late: he was supposed to



conduct blood tests for all the participants at registration the previous morning. He volunteered to do it right then, with the 15 needles he had - between 400 women). The closing began with an appropriate song for the first lot of the officials at the mela – ‘*Soochna ka adhikar kanoon aayo re – adhikari ghabaraye!*’

The women who had passed their 5th class exam were asked to come up on stage with their marksheets. After this, Dr Sajjan Kumar was invited to say a few words. He talked about the health facilities available at various levels, the government schemes that should be used. For instance, Rs 1,400 was given to women who come to the hospital for childbirth. He added some some contraception spiel too: that the newly ‘couple’ wait a while before having children and that there should be a gap between the first and second kid. Forms of contraception were explained: condoms, pills, operations. Dr Kumar said that the male sterilisation operation was much less complicated than the female, and so this option should be explored.

After this, RTI application that the health group had prepared was presented to Dr Sajjan Kumar and the health education officer. The other two applications were handed in by Subhalaxmi, Meena and the samiti women at the Block office. (Subhalaxmi later said that at the Block, the clerks who accepted the applications didn’t even know the rules or procedure involved, and were told sharply by Meena to learn them!)

The mela ended with lunch and a rally of 300 women through the main street of Mehrauni town, with slogans on the right to information, and from the women’s movement lead by an increasingly hoarse Purnima and a clear-as-a-bell Shabana (‘*Gali gali mein shor hai, soochna adhikar ka zor hai*’, ‘*Rozgar guarantee aye hai, nayee roshni layee hai*’, ‘*Hum auraton ka ek hi nara, Shiksha hai adhikar hamara*’, and so on). This attracted most of Mehrauni’s menfolk in curious bunches to observe and listen. At the end of the successful rally, the women split up to return home to their various villages.



Shyambai is from Khatora village, in Mehrauni block of Lalitpur district. She says she is 30 years old, but some in the group feel that she’s much older! Shyambai attended the Sahjani Shikshan Kendra literacy centre for 3 years. In the beginning, she did not attend every day; her husband would drink and prevent her from leaving the house to study. Sometimes he would beat her to stop her from going to the Centre. Shyambai started making excuses – like she was filling water or cutting fodder for the animals – and escaping to the Centre.

For the last four years, Shyambai has been attending the 10-day residential camps at the SSK. She told us, “In the first camp I attended, I learnt to write the name of my village and how to count to 100. I also learnt addition and subtraction.” In subsequent camps, she learnt about different aspects of health, parts of her body, food and nutrition. Now Shyambai can read and even write letters. Just this year, she passed the 5th class exam. When she first saw all the children she was giving the exam with, she felt a little awkward about her age. But from the second day, she enjoyed giving the exam. She said the ‘didi log’ from the Centre had helped her prepare for the exam, and now she wants to do the 8th class exam also.

Shyambai told us how her husband had taken a loan from the bank, and was repaying it with the interest that was asked. Then one day, the back official told them that their loan amount was Rs 40,000 – when in fact it was Rs 4,000, and Shyambai told him this. The official refused to listen, and started pressurising them to sign the loan papers. On Shyambai’s refusal to sign, the official said he would sign for her. Shyambai said she would say that it was not her signature. The next day, the official brought the bank papers to her house, with the loan amount corrected to Rs 4,000. After this incident, Shyambai’s husband was very

happy, and stopped preventing her from going to the Centre. He and his son look after the house when Shyambai comes for the residential camps. Shyambai has come with her daughter-in-law Vinita for the mela. Vinita often helps her study. She has also prepared a play on health with some women from the samiti for the mela.

The evening before a large party was to return to Delhi seemed to move in fast forward. Around 3pm, just as the rally was winding down, a group of journalists (who had to be called up to remind them of the press conference) appeared at the Sahjani Shikshan Kendra. The general impression was that the journalists were open to building connections with the SSK, and keeping in touch with their work. They expressed an interest in knowing details of cases of violence against women – which Jaya and Chunni said wasn't really possible. But the interest level in the organisation's work was aroused, and there is definitely potential for relationships to built with the local media.

Conclusion

The mela passed in such a whirlwind of organisation and planning that it was hard to reflect on its impact/success/weaknesses till a while after. Or in fact, to reflect on anything except that it was over; it had *happened*, as smoothly as possible! In conversations with Purnima after returning to Delhi, we reflected on how the mela was such

a live, large scale opportunity to learn from the women themselves about new materials and new ideas for literacy initiatives. It helped illuminate, and sometimes modify, the very idea of education for people who are living and breathing it all the time. Purnima also mentioned how it helps understand the location of a feminist perspective: what is the **impact**, in a very real, day to day sense, of being a woman in certain circumstances. How the personal and political are so tightly intertwined.

The mela was an active example, perhaps, of feminist praxis: in the sense of the culmination of a participatory, democratic **process** of education. The sahjanis at SSK, and the women in various villages had taken on leadership roles to raise questions and awareness within the community – which was just a beginning for the work that would follow. This, it was felt, was not adequately acknowledged through the mela. Even the fact that the women had contributed Rs 20 each to the mela infrastructure, and so the even was truly theirs, was not really mentioned.

