

# Anand Melas

*For Newly Married Couples*

Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal

**ANAND MELAS**  
**FOR**  
**NEWLY MARRIED COUPLES**

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## PREFACE

We have great pleasure in publishing the report of our *Anand Melawas* (Joyous Gatherings), that we held in many villages of Purandar *taluka* as part of the 16 day campaign against violence against women (November 26 to December 10, 2004). We thank all of MASUM's staff and volunteers (especially the teams that work against violence against women at the village, *taluka* and city levels), the various couples who actively participated in the gatherings, residents of all the villages and Prasanna Invally who documented the entire proceedings of the fortnight.

During the past twenty years, MASUM has intervened in two drought-prone rural communities of Purandar and Parner *talukas* of Pune and Ahmednagar districts of Maharashtra State. Women's health, domestic violence, micro-credit, de-addiction from alcohol, instilling constitutional values with school children, adolescent empowerment and so on have been addressed through training of local women, most of whom come from marginalised and oppressed sections of rural society.

In the earlier years of MASUM's intervention in violence against women, most of our clients came from their mothers' homes, indicating that their rights to the marital home or any chance of re-negotiating with the husband were minimal. Most often, the husband had re-married and the woman had returned to her mother's home for good. Sadly, women were 'brought' to us by brothers or parents in order to somehow send her back

to the husband, with little concern for her life and safety. In an environment of unwantedness and neglect, we often saw women suffer mental trauma, depression and having gone through suicide attempts. Some women killed themselves or were killed by their families. Justice from the family, community (where the political, socio-cultural and economic leadership of the village is often related to the husband by blood) or from the law was not forthcoming to women when they suffered patriarchal violence.

While we were setting up our counselling centres, training village level para-legal workers and setting up pressure groups in the village to take up violence against women as a community and human rights issue, women's narrations constantly haunted us. Right from the 1980s, women had spoken of the almost absent communication between them and their husbands. Many women spoke with remorse about how elders interfered with the relationship of the young married couple, how young frightened adolescent brides rebuffed the sexual advances and desires of their equally young husbands, how fear, suspicion and insecurity were born out of these miscommunications and how adolescent quarrels and egos had led to irreconcilable permanent separations between couples. Women spoke of how the violence began and escalated – some of it having links with the inability of the couple to communicate with each other in the first few years of marriage. Lack of friendship with one's partner led to disastrous consequences for women, as they were the ones to be deserted, thrown out of homes and disinherited. In the absence of property rights for women, with so much power and control in men's hands and in the absence of the opportunity for re-marriage for women, they were losers all their lives. It is in fact amazing that women survive and continue to laugh and smile in spite of so

much injustice within the home.

The idea of bringing young couples together came up in the late 1990s, when we had gained enough credibility with the parents-in-law to send their young daughters-in-law for such a gathering (families will gladly send the women for micro-credit or for accessing loans for seeds etc, but are suspicious of legal and other 'empowerment' inputs). We began tentatively with a couple of villages, got together newly married couples and created a playful and festive environment for a day. Games which necessitated cooperation between the couple, finding out what each other liked (and finding out that the wife know the husband's likes and dislikes, but rarely did the husband know vice versa), encouraging affectionate, non-sexual touch and non-malicious teasing, talking to them about contraception and abortion rights etc were part of this day's deliberations. For the first time the husband saw his wife playing outdoor games and swinging a bat. He learnt to rely on her intelligence and quick wit when they played games and brain-teasers. Flashes of respect and pride for his wife were seen in his eyes throughout the day

Laws related to family, inheritance, property, violence, wife-beating, rape and so on were explained to the couples. In order to prevent bigamy, marriages were registered on that day too. The food and the ambience were reminiscent of the wedding day. Amidst fun and laughter a lot was achieved ! People had so much fun that much older couples in the villages grumbled for weeks after that about being 'excluded' by MASUM.

The responses at the end of the day and after the *Melawas* were also very telling. One bride narrated how she had been terrified on her wedding day because one of the husband's relatives had started creating a scene



related to dowry. At this point the husband mentioned that he had been equally terrified. As they spoke, they reached out for each others' hand. This would have been the first time that they may have shown affection and camaraderie in public. Many couples said that this day was better than their wedding day, as this day was not bogged down by social and cultural expectations. One young man poignantly summed up the day by saying "three years ago, we had an arranged marriage, but today we've had a love marriage".

Women narrated the effects of the *Melawa* weeks later. One said "whenever we have an argument, he begs me not to come to MASUM. He says that you all have a good impression of him. He tells me that we'll resolve the problem amongst ourselves". Another bride said that whenever they have a fight, she walks down the lane where MASUM's office is. Her husband watches her from the top of the road, hoping that she doesn't enter the para-legal worker's office!

The immense success of this single day's interaction between couples led us to evolve these gatherings as a preventive and promotive strategy whilst intervening in domestic violence. It was easier to dialogue with a man before he became an abuser. Conversely, it was wiser to empower the bride before she took beatings from her husband. We therefore decided to hold *Anand Melawas* in more villages during the fortnight against violence against women. This report documents the methodology, details, vignettes and analysis of the same. We hope you enjoy reading it as much as the couples enjoyed participating.

Manisha Gupte  
Co-Convenor, MASUM

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## ANAND MELAS : A BACKDROP

*Anand Melas Fun-Fairs for Newly Married Couples, Towards Bringing Equality Within Couple Relationships : A Beginning.*

MASUM a rural women's organization, formed in 1987, has been working with the people, especially the women, of the Purandar and Parner talukas for women's rights and empowerment. MASUM conducts various programmes such as the women's health programme, interventions against family violence, women's self employment programme, women's resource development programme, women's economic empowerment programme, children's programme, tribal empowerment programme, training, networking and advocacy initiatives, with a feminist perspective and a democratic approach.

MASUM under its intervention against family violence Programme, decided to make a beginning at preventing violence within intimate relationships in the most simple but innovative manner. That was by striking at the most delicate chord of the couple relationship – the sense of togetherness. 'Anand Melas' with newly wedded couples has been the way out. The 'Anand Mela's is a beginning towards experiencing the joy of togetherness, and enhancing sensitivity, respect and understanding. The *Melas* have activities constructed with the purpose of helping couples locate their own

special space – a space for friendship, sharing, mutual trust and support – and respecting each other's 'humanness'.

## **HOW THE IDEA OF THE 'ANAND MELA' FOR COUPLES EMERGED**

The women (who live in the drought-prone, poverty-stricken areas of the Purandar taluka of rural Maharashtra), while discussing health issues with Manisha – the founder trustee of MASUM, have shared the most intimate aspects of their lives with her. They spoke about the way in which these aspects have manifested into the visible problems of today such as desertion, separation, and isolation – that have shattered their marital lives.

There was Meena\*, who had parted from her husband, who told Manisha that he was really a 'nice' person – and could not understand what had gone wrong with their relationship. Asha disclosed that she refused sex to show her displeasure and disappointment at her husband's behaviour thus causing a strain in their relation, which then slowly manifested into violence followed by a separation. It was Shobha – married at 16, who, loaded with the tasks of serving her in-laws, thought that she was married into the family for this very purpose, and therefore did not understand the reason or need of getting intimate with her husband in any sense. The consequence was a discord, violence and separation. Message of An "I don't need you" prevailed in the marital lives of Meena, Asha and Shobha and all three of them were living with a feeling of not being wanted.

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\* All names of women and men who have interacted with MASUM during the meals or otherwise have been changed, in order to maintain confidentiality.

Manisha explained that she soon learnt that the rural, traditional and rigid norms never really provided the space for intimacy between the couple. The wives and husbands had bound into roles that did not allow space for even a basic dialogue. Also, their sex life was mere ritual, and conception soon after a marriage a proof of masculinity or femininity. If emotional intimacy did not develop during the initial period of passion and sexual attraction, the chances of it developing later were really low. Such a state of affairs can never bridge the gender gap between the husband-wife as man-woman and the state of domination-subordination is bound to continue – especially with the prevalence of patriarchal family structures. With it injustice and violence against women would continue.

One of the ways out was to provide the space and opportunity for amicable interactions – child like friendly sporting interactions in the early years of marriage. Such an experience can help in breaking communication barriers between the couple. It can prove to them that it is possible to relate to each other as friends and experience the joy in each other's company. Manisha thought that exposing the couple to experience joy in being together in a situation where there is no apparent job to be completed or no particular goal to be fulfilled, would be a good beginning.

The mutual gentleness and grace required to nurture any relationship, especially a couple relationship, is a distant possibility, in a society that presumes that man's manliness lies in his aggression. Making the men undergo an experience of satisfaction and sense of fulfillment by adopting non-aggressive and gentle ways is one of the ways of breaking aggressive male stereotypes. Hence it has been one of the important objectives of the *Melas* - to provide an experience to



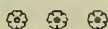
men of finding a sense of fulfillment, satisfaction and joy of behaving in gentle and non-aggressive ways with their wives.

Hence such *Melas* were organised as a beginning for promoting a healthy, non-violent relationship within the couple.

**THE OBJECTIVES OF THE MELA WERE THEREFORE DEFINED AS FOLLOWS**

- 1 To promote dialogue between the couple.
- 2 To provide a space for amicable couple interaction.
- 3 To conduct activities that would help the couples to know more about each other.
- 4 To help couples undergo an experience of having child-like fun together.
- 5 To encourage verbalization of the experience of being together.
- 6 To provide information on important aspects of marriage such as marriage registration, sexuality, and ways of strengthening the marital relationship.

Such *melas* were conducted in the last two years. The experience and feedback of the couples encouraged MASUM to make the *melas* a regular annual feature. For eg. One couple after the *mela* declared that they had married each other once again 'today' - the earlier marriage had been an 'arranged' marriage and today's was a 'love' marriage!



## 2

### OUTLINE OF THE ANAND MELAS

Based on the past experience of conducting the *Melas* for the last two years, MASUM decided to organise a *Mela* this year too. With little improvisation and more confidence, MASUM held the *Mela* for this year during the period 25<sup>th</sup> November to 10<sup>th</sup> December – a period which is internationally recognised as a period of 16 days of activism against gender-based violence.

Various activities and games were designed in order to fulfill the purpose and the objectives of the *Anand-Mela* for newly married couples. It was decided that the couple participants of the *mela* would be those married for five or less than five years, and that it would be a one day *mela*.

#### THE FOLLOWING WAS THE SCHEDULE OF THE ONE DAY MELA

- 1 Introduction of MASUM and Explaining the Purpose of the *Mela*.
- 2 Conducting Participatory Activities and Games with the Couples, as follows
  - Activity no. 1 : Introducing your partner to all others present.
  - Activity no. 2 : Constructing the jigsaw puzzle together as a couple.
  - Activity no. 3 : Three legged race.

Activity no. 4 : Weaving flowers as head-dress for  
their wives

- 3 Informative Sessions on - Relationship Building
  - Registering the Marriage
  - Sex, Sexual Relations,  
Conception,  
Contraception and other  
Related Issues
- 4 Photo Session - of Each Couple and the Group.

The *melas* being a part of the Family Violence Intervention Programme, the para-legal indigenous and trained workers formed an important task force in organizing the *mela* as well as maintaining a follow-up. These *melas* would help the people look at para-legal workers not only as those who are engaged in women's rights issues and questioning violent men/ families, but also as those who intend to bring in to joy marital relationships. "Happiness lies not in violence but in harmony" – is the peace message that MASUM intended to give.



### 3

## THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE MELAS

- 1 The environment was kept as informal as possible – with no formal inaugurations or no participation of any sarpanch or any other “prestigious” person. There were no tables and the seating arrangement was squatting on the floor covered with a mattress.
- 2 Visually, the atmosphere was that of a wedding ceremony or a village celebration, with the pandal made up of cloth of gay and bright colours and with cloth festoons or chandelier like cloth hanging from the ceiling. Some villages also had film music playing through loud speakers.
- 3 While the *saathis* were there to welcome the guests, the other staff and facilitators played a major role in making the participants feel at ease – through informal talks, talking to the infants and children who accompanied the couples and teasing them too.
- 4 Archana, the main facilitator of the *mela* was always encouraging while the participants were performing various activities. She used non-confrontational language even when certain answers to questions in the introductory session were untrue (for eg “My partner never gets angry” or “There is nothing that I dislike about my partner”.) She gave messages subtly by using humour, or generalizing statements rather than personalizing an observation. She appreciated



their participation time and again and this was really necessary for helping the couples to open up and be more free. Every activity for each couple was followed by applause. This coaxing brought in the child-like atmosphere into the interaction with the couple – so that the couple too would enjoy the child-like fun of the games and activities together.

- 5 Discussions following the activities were not lengthy – the couples were encouraged to express what they felt about the activity – and more serious talk was reserved for the session on relationship building. The next activity/ game followed the earlier activity almost immediately.
- 6 The *melas* except for the one at Pondhe and at Waghapur ended with a feed-back from the couple about the mela.
- 7 The *Saathis* engaged in assisting with material distribution and in conducting the games.
- 8 Vehicles were arranged to bring and drop the couples residing at a distance from the venue or residing in another village, as the transport system in the villages is extremely poor.
- 9 The photograph of the couple was a gift to the couple from MASUM.



## THE ANAND MELAS IN 5 VILLAGES

The *melas* were held in five villages of the project area of MASUM. In all 54 couples participated. The table below gives the distribution of the couples who participated in the *melas* in the five villages according to the duration of the marriage.

| Years of marriage | Names of the villages where the Melas were held |                     |                    |                     |                    |       |
|-------------------|---|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------|
|                   | Pondhe<br>26/11/04                              | Pargaon<br>28/11/04 | Naigaon<br>3/12/04 | Waghapur<br>5/12/04 | Vanpuri<br>8/12/04 | TOTAL |
| Below 2 years     | 4   | 4                   | 2                  | Not available       | 4                  | 14    |
| 3 - 5 years       | 1   | 4                   | 4                  | Not available       | 8                  | 17    |
| Above 5 years     | 3   | 0                   | 2                  | Not available       | 1                  | 6     |
| Not Available     | 0   | 0                   | 0                  | 15                  | 2                  | 17    |
| TOTAL             | 8   | 8                   | 8                  | 15                  | 15                 | 54    |

The couples who participated in the *melas* came from the neighbouring villages. The Pondhe village *mela* had couples from Pondhe, Rajewadi and Tekawadi villages.

The Pargoan village *mela* had couples from Pargaon and Rajewadi villages.

The Naigaon village *mela* had couples from Naigaon and Mavadi villages.

The Waghapur *mela* had couples from Waghapur village. The Vanpuri village *mela* had couples from Vanpuri and Pimpri villages.

The para-legal team of “*Saathi*” played an important role in identifying couples and motivating them to participate in the *Mela*. They made personal visits to the homes of the newly married couples. They had to convince not only the couple, but also it was important for them to seek permission of the elders of the family, for participating in the *mela*. Many a time, the *Saathis* had to make repeated visits for persuading them. They also had to escort the couples from their residence to the venue. They had to be “pulled” out of their houses. So much was the inhibition and resistance to participate in the *mela*. Hence, most *melas* started later than the schedule. However, it was interesting to note that as word passed around, the participation and co-operation increased – which is evident from figures in the table above – from the first at Pondhe to the last *mela* of Vanpuri.

The *mela* in the Pondhe village was the first *mela*. It had 8 couples who participated. Although 3 couples who were married for more than 5 years did not fit the criteria, they were allowed to participate with the expectation that the word would spread and participation at other villages would increase. Also one such couple who witnessed the introductory talk, was impressed and sought permission on the spot to participate.

The *mela* at Waghapur was held in the evening because that was the time convenient to the participants. However, due to electricity failure and lack of light, it was not possible to note in writing the years of marriage, and hence the table shows the data as not

available. Also all activities as scheduled could not be completed due to lack of time and the delay in starting the *mela*.

The group at Pargaon and Naigaon were small with 8 couples each and started about 2 hours later than scheduled. The *mela* at Vanpuri, the last of the series of *melas*, had many participants and also started earlier than the other *melas*.

### PHYSICAL SET UP

All the 5 *melas* were held in open spaces covered with a pandal. The pandals were made of colorful cloth – as in weddings, and were covered from 3 sides for maximum privacy. The banner of MASUM was the only thing that was hung on one of the walls of the pandal. The floor was covered with large mats. The partners sat beside each other and the seating was circular. Arrangements of drinking water and food for lunch were provided at the venue. Arrangements for microphone and for music were made at all *melas* except the last one. The power failures during the day really did not allow the full use of the microphone.

Two separate stalls were also provided of which one was inside a room that had proper privacy. The open stall was the legal information stall where posters on laws of marriage and violence against women were displayed. The senior 'Saathis' were there to guide them on law and registration of marriage. The closed rooms were the stalls where information on sexuality was provided where the "Sadaphulis" (women health workers) and the sister of the Women's Health Centre, Ms. Lata Mohite of Saswad guided them.





## THE PARTICIPATORY ACTIVITIES AND GAMES

The details of each participatory activity/ game - the objective, the rationale, the tasks, the points for discussion and observations is presented below.

### ➤ **ACTIVITY 1 : ABOUT OUR PARTNERS**

The objectives of this activity were

- 1 To get to know each other better.
- 2 To get information about each other by enquiring with each other.
- 3 To understand how to use this information for strengthening the relationship.

### **RATIONALE**

A couple relationship is defined as a dyadic relationship in which the two individuals expect to have a long-term intimate relationship. Any relationship begins with knowing each other. The growth of the relationship as well as its intimacy depends upon what each individual in that relationship does with the knowledge he/she has about the other. It can be used either to strengthen it, help each other grow, or to exploit the other.

In the villages of the Purandar taluka, where the space for even the basic dialogue for the couple is limited, information about each other is obtained by

chance - just in the course of day-to-day living. Many things got assumed or were taken for granted. Hence, the partners often remained ignorant about ways of pleasing each other or abstaining from doing or saying things that a partner disliked.

## **ACTIVITIES**

Hence the first activity that was scheduled was an introduction of one partner by the other using a guideline of 8 questions about their partner. They were required to write the answers on a sheet of paper in consultation with their partners in order to ensure that the answers were correct. The questions were as follows

- 1 Your partner's name and age.
- 2 Duration of marriage
- 3 Your partner's favourite food item/ delicacy.
- 4 The food delicacy that is disliked by your partner.
- 5 When does your partner get angry?
- 6 What makes your partner happy?
- 7 What are the things that you like about your partner?
- 8 What are the things that you dislike about your partner?

Each one was then expected to share the answers with the group as an "introduction of the partner".

A Discussion on this activity, was how did they feel while asking questions to each other, listening to the other, and taking about oneself and one's opinion of the other.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

The partners introduced each other with a guideline of the 8 questions. When Archana told them that these questions were to be answered in consultation

with each other. there were many men like Harish from Naigaon, who said "What is there to consult about – I know my wife fully well", but was surprised to realize that he was unable to answer questions like – what food item she liked or what she did not like about him. There were 4 couples from Naigaon who denied getting angry or denied disliking anything about the partner. It may be just that they were taking the activity very lightly or did not want each other or the others in the group to know about their feelings or were not able to really express these feelings in a way that would not feel hurtful or wanted to show the group how "good" they were. Having realized there were things about likes, dislikes and negative qualities that were shared by the others, and realizing that they had not given serious thought to such things, they became more serious in the activities that followed.

Women were more serious but many were also shy while they disclosed what they had written. While many women were shy, not many hesitated to say the names of their husbands. (those who were unable to write, were helped by the Saathis). The twinkle in their eyes as they disclosed their positive and negative feelings about their partners and the giggles that passed around, gave the *melas* a gay and lively feel.

They used this opportunity to communicate their expectations from their partners and their feelings about them. For eg. Shobha told her husband that she does not like the way he brings other people into their mutual quarrel and makes the quarrel bigger. Sunil appreciated his wife's looks and her language skills that made things so much easier for him. Sneha gave the message that she enjoyed her husband's company, while Girish expressed that he knew that giving a surprise gift to his wife made her happy. Also Mohan communicated to his



wife that he realized that she did not like him drinking and declared so frankly to the group. Many men conveyed to their wives that being disobedient made them angry, while women conveyed that not doing work that they had promised to do, coming home late, roaming with friends, made them angry.

The introduction activity was used by men and especially women to communicate straight away what they liked and disliked about their partners. It made them feel good when their partners appreciated them. Very few gave concrete answers to questions like what makes their partners angry or what they like about their partner. The answers were as vague as – “I like his good qualities” or “I like her nature”. Very few – only 33% – were really able to say concretely what was the kind of nature or the specific qualities that they liked. For example one woman said that she likes the way her partner's behaviour changes according to the demands of the situation. A husband appreciated the laughing nature (being happy) of his wife, while a wife declared that her husband is too quiet and does not speak much and hence makes things difficult for her – to understand him and his feelings.

The body language of the women – their shyness and the blushing as their partners were talking about them and when they were talking about their husbands, showed that they were happy to be with their husbands. They also said that they were happy that this was the place where they were giving time exclusively to each other and getting attention. One couple from Mavadi village who lived separately on account of the nature of job – ever since marriage was happy to spend time together at this *mela* (out of the joint family), they declared, and thanked MASUM. Quarrels, conflicts and anger was generally verbalized as things they disliked.



Many couples who were present at the *mela* at Waghapur were school teachers. While some were able to verbalize easily there were others who could not. A wife whose marriage was 2 ½ years old declared that she has not seen her husband angry even once, but she herself did not like him coming home late! One husband – also a teacher from Waghapur accepted that he did not know what eatable his wife disliked, because he never paid “so much” attention to her as theirs was a joint family! This may be true with many others. The uniqueness of the woman as an individual gets hidden irrespective of whether the family is educated or enjoys a high social status.

After each couple had finished the introduction they wrote the names of their partners on the badges provided, and pinned them up on their partners shirt/saree.

A few women told us, after the activity that this was the first time their husbands had enquired about what eatable they liked. On two occasions it so happened that the wife had to correct the husband about her likes and dislikes. This introduction activity made the couples realize that one needs to take special efforts – for eg ask questions or enquire, in order to know the partner – even in the case of a five year old marriage. One cannot take for granted or assume even simple things – about what a partner likes or dislikes to eat. Simple and small things matter a lot in an intimate relationship and therefore all the more reason to take special efforts to know the partner to the greatest possible extent – was the message that this activity had tried to give.

## ➤ **ACTIVITY 2 : THE JIGSAW PUZZLE**

### **OBJECTIVES**

- 1 Solving the jig-saw puzzle together.

- 2 To experience the sense togetherness on an equal footing that holds no gendered norms.
- 3 To experience the joy of a co-operative effort at construction of a completed picture.

## **RATIONALE**

Men and women are restricted within stereotypical gendered defined roles. Responsibilities of running the family and the household are therefore divided rather than shared. Men are bread winners and decision makers (especially those decision that are important for maintaining or raising the status of the family) Women are home makers and care takers who may at times are also expected to supplement house hold income, and are not expected to participate in any major decisions.

Providing them with an experience of relating to each other in spaces in which such roles are undefined, and one participates using ones utmost potential (intellectual, analytical, and estimation skills – as in this game) would be the strategy.

## **ACTIVITY**

Each couple was required to sit together (facing each other). The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were given to each couple. They were required to solve the puzzle together so as to form the complete picture in the least possible time. The couple that completed the picture first.

The Discussion was based on the following questions

How did they solve the puzzle, how did each of them contribute in solving it, what helped them construct it and what delayed them, how did they feel while and after completing the puzzle.

## OBSERVATIONS

The game of jig-saw puzzle was conducted. Except for three to four couples, all the rest were playing this game for the first time. Through some of them had seen their children play it in school.

The pictures that were selected for the jigsaw puzzle were those of fruits and vegetables that they were familiar with. After explaining the rules of the activity, all the couples who participated in the mela played it together. This game was played more seriously as there was less of verbal communication and the two had to do it between themselves (it did not have a public face). It was observed that the involvement of both was to the same extent. None of the participants sat back or surprisingly, tried to pull or push, or for that matter, dominate.

It was very interesting to see a wife - in a couple at Pargaon village - whose husband seemed a little slow, guide him for putting the pieces in place - so that he feels part of the achievement. It was worth observing her sensitivity to his needs, all through the *mela*. A personal talk with her later on (by student social workers) revealed that she is an ambitious woman - who is a graduate and even knows how to drive a four-wheeler. In pursuit of a fulfilling marriage within the traditional norms of the village, she is expected to be a "superwoman" taking responsibilities of their farm, the shop and the house, but at the same time needing to seek permission and approval from her mother-in-law - to make sure that she is well under control. Coming to the *mela* was an ordeal. She said she had to tell her in-laws very assertively to bring her husband along.

Co-operation within the couple was to the fullest as every couple wanted to win - no matter which partner



did what with the piece of puzzle! – hence, there was no scope for ego problems and neither were there any roles defined for each of them –It made them work in unison with each other – using their observation, intelligence and analytical ability – and together. It provided them with an experience of working and interacting in an environment devoid of any gender norms.

While some couples were observed to be joining one part with another together, a few others tried to make larger parts of the puzzle separately and then join them together – but they took longer than those who made it together (probably because the number of pieces were not too many).

While some couples finished in reasonable time, some needed a little bit of help from the facilitators. The facilitators made sure that all of them completed the picture.

The observations given above were verbalized by the group and by the facilitators. These observations were used later while talking about ways of strengthening the relationship and resolving problems. As the couples completed the pictures, everybody present gave them a big hand. The environment was charged with encouraging reactions from the facilitators and the rest of the MASUM team.

### ➤ **ACTIVITY 3 : THREE LEGGED RACE**

#### **OBJECTIVES**

- 1 To overcome the shyness of being in close physical proximity in presence of others.
- 2 To provide the experience of being in tune with each other in order to reach a goal.
- 3 To promote the feeling of togetherness.



## **RATIONALE**

In the conservative environment of the village life, physical proximity in public between the couple – especially the newly married – is not permitted. Physical proximity is limited to the bedroom or only while performing religious rites – where again a dialogue is almost absent. However, touch, outside of sexual life – is so very important in showing feelings of care, closeness, and friendliness – which in turn enhances the sense of togetherness and gets acknowledged by others too.

Being in tune with each-other means establishing a pattern of thought, communication and behavior, that would make the couple more compatible. Compatibility is defined as the quality in a partnership in which partners act in ways that are simultaneously pleasing to oneself as well as rewarding to the other, in order to achieve the relationship goal. Compatibility is not achieved automatically only because the personality of the two "match", but it is attained out of understanding, sensitivity and adjustment. Communication forms the basis of this compatibility.

The game – "Three legged race" attempts to provide an opportunity and experience of planning for the race so as to take care not to hurt, or allow the partner to fall, but at the same time move as fast as possible in order to win. The achievement of reaching the winning post successfully – with proper co-ordination, is itself a fulfilling experience. Although the game in itself may not call for such a deep implication for understanding the meaning of compatibility, it definitely expects to stimulate the couple to think about the sense of fulfillment out of a co-ordinate and joint effort in which the well-being of both partners is taken care of by each

other. Physical proximity adds greatly to the feeling of togetherness.

### **ACTIVITY**

It is a race that has a starting post and a winning post. At the starting post, the partners are made to stand beside each other. The ankle of the right leg of one partner is tied to the ankle of the left leg of the other, so that it makes three legs. The couples with their legs tied are then expected to run together to reach the winning post. The couple that reaches the winning post first is the winner.

### **DISCUSSION**

What enabled the couple to co-ordinate, what were the hindering factors? How did it feel to be close to each other and run together?

### **OBSERVATION**

This game was explained by Archana. This game provided for lot of physical proximity between the couple. Wives who were pregnant backed out of the game, as they feared that a fall could harm them. There was considerable hesitation to hold each other together initially. They were shy to show their proximity in public. however, since the game cannot be played without holding each other by the shoulder or atleast by the hand, they had to overcome their shyness.

Most couples ran together coordinating their movements so that they moved fast, smoothly and without falling. Many of them were not familiar with the game, while some had only seen it. Just a handful had actually played it. As a couple all of them were playing it for the first time. Hence it was more exciting.

A few couples who seemed to have understood the whole purpose of the mela were just happy to move one leg at a time, together, maintaining the proximity and with absolutely no hurry to reach the finish line. These were however the more educated couples of which some were part of the staff of MASUM.

There were one or two couples in each *mela* who moved together not letting the tied foot touch the ground – as if while playing “*langdi*” – hopping on one leg. This was more difficult. But holding each other, they also reached the finish post successfully, but were a little slower.

There very only two-three couples among whom the husbands tried to just pull their wives along without caring to see if she was at his pace or not. This was followed by a fall, but they realized that they needed to move together. The facilitators made sure that every couple - whatever be the pace or the falls, reached the finish line.

Co-ordination, achieved more by way of planning before the start of the game, by talking about it to each other, was discussed as the means towards the smooth journey. There were others who said that they adjusted their pace of putting their feet forward, without actually talking to each other, and had reached the goal. However sensitivity of the movement of their partner, without actually speaking, had allowed them to synchronize their own steps, they explained. This game provided an experiential learning opportunity for co-ordination, being sensitive, importance in deciding upon a common goal and working for it together – that brings success to a relationship and makes it more fulfilling.

In this game, there were no rules provided as who should lead. Either of the couple initiated in the



planning. However, the aggressive tendencies of a few men did emerge in cases where the women were at first just pulled. But when the men became non-aggressive, they were able to make the journey to the finish line more smoothly.

It is important to note that positive problem solving experiences and achievement of common goals through mutual support in the early years of marriage become important sources of confidence building in resolving more complicated problems that may come up later in life. The mutuality and interdependence starts developing through this kind of experience in the early years of marriage.

#### ➤ **ACTIVITY 4 : WEAVING FLOWERS AS HEAD-DRESS FOR THEIR WIVES.**

##### **OBJECTIVES**

- 1 To bring in a gentle atmosphere of romance within the mela.
- 2 To provide an experience of fulfillment to men arising out of non-aggressive and gentle ways of expression and behaviour with their wives.
- 3 To sensitize men about the need for making their wives (especially in a patriarchal society) feel important in the couple relationship.

##### **RATIONALE**

Flowers symbolize positive feelings of love and respect. They also symbolize grace, gentleness, beauty and tenderness. This activity was conducted to press upon the men the gentleness and grace required to nurture the relationship and therefore a change in the aggressive male stereo-type. It is very rare for men to do things that women normally do, especially delicate



tasks like weaving flowers. Hence this activity proposed to provide the experience of doing delicate "womanly" tasks to prove that it was possible for men to perform such tasks, and that men had nothing to lose due to such behaviors, and in fact could make the couple relationship more intimate, satisfying and friendly. They would also begin to acknowledge the efforts that women put in to carry out delicate tasks.

### **ACTIVITY**

This activity requires small flowers that can be woven to be worn on the hair, a small basket, needle and thread. The wife stands with the basket containing the flowers, and holds the needle, threads it and then weaves the flowers on it. He is expected to prepare a long and well-woven *Gajara*, and dress it upon her hair. Both the quality of the *Gajara* and the quickness in preparing it, matter in winning the game.

### **DISCUSSION**

How did each of them feel after the activity. What novelty did they experience? What they experienced due to this new kind of task that they performed – was it mutually fulfilling – in what way?

### **OBSERVATION**

This activity turned out to be a very exciting activity. The intention was to bring in romance and gentleness within the couple interaction.

The *Pondhe mela* – the first *mela* in the series, saw this activity as a race – the winner being the husband who finishes stringing the flowers ("*Gajra*") first and dresses it on his wife's hair. However, we noticed that there was so much hurry that the beauty of the activity was lost, the *Gajras* woven were small and the were

dressed quite shabbily on the hair. Hence, keeping the objectives of the activity in mind, the facilitators, in the other melas made it a point to tell the couples that the look of the "*Gajara*" and the style of dressing it on the hair was more important than speed. The quantity of flowers given was unlimited.

This was the first time that most of the husbands were threading the needle and for all of them it was the first time that they were weaving it and also dressing it on the hair. The wives were told that rules of the game did not permit any help to their husbands in any way. However there were three to four instances when the wives did thread the needle when their husbands just gave up. There was a twinkle of joy in the eyes of the women, who watched their husbands struggle as they tried to thread the needles. There were waves of giggles especially when the piece of thread just slipped through the eye of the needle, and roars of laughter as the flowers that were strung just slipped out of the thread just because they had not tied a knot to the thread or had pulled the flowers a bit too much on the thread. They had to be gentle or the flower stalks would tear. There was further excitement when the husbands sportingly laughed at themselves for such silly mistakes.

Some wives were seen telling their husbands as they wove the flowers that it was sufficient while some were telling them to weave more flowers for them. Many of the husbands asked for more flowers. They made long *Gajaras* and again had a tough time in putting it on the hair. The wives were not supposed to help them in any way – except pass on a safety pin or a bob-pin if they had one. Some of the men handled the hair really delicately, as their wives were full of shy smiles. They wanted their photographs to be taken while they dressed the *Gajaras* they had prepared on their wives hair. There

was an air of pride as the couples finished the given task.

The men had prepared the *Gajaras* for the first time, they said and this was also the first time that they had dressed it on their wives hair. Some of them did buy *Gajaras* for their wives, they said, but they had a "different" sort of experience when they made it with their own hands, they said. The women expressed their joy at receiving it and wearing it because it had a different significance and considered it as a token of love.

All the activities were scheduled pre-lunch.

This session was followed by lunch in most melas except the ones in Pondhe and in Waghapur where the melas started in the afternoon and evening respectively.

#### ➤ **OTHER ACTIVITIES**

There was one additional activity that was conducted at *Pargaon Mela* – "the opening of the fist". Archana instructed the couples to stand in front of each other. The wives were asked to close their fists, while the husbands were asked to open it. Opening of the fist was taken as a challenge – a game- and the wives held their fists tight as the husbands tried to force it open. Many wives soon gave in – except for one who contested for a longer time – and there was that glow of victory!

The next activity of making the *Gajara* followed immediately. Except for bringing to the notice of the couple, jokingly, that the husband could have used just a simple statement or a request to make his wife open a fist instead of force, there was no discussion. It is important to mention here, that during the feedback session at the end of the *mela*, this husband whose wife contested for a longer time than others, appreciated all other activities, but enquired with Archana that he



did not understand the significance of this activity. He seemed hurt that his wife had challenged him and seem to wonder whether MASUM taught them to challenge. Archana apologized for having missed out the discussion on this activity as it was conducted just to fill up the time gap between two activities, and clarified that the activity actually was half done – and would have been completed if roles of fist opening were reversed. She explained further that communication, persuasion were the skills that were required for a harmonious relationship. Nobody like to be forced and force in defiance and challenge – which were not beneficial for the relationship.

At Waghapur an activity of putting straws into the hair of their wives by their husbands was conducted. However, none of the natives of Waghapur village participated in it. Only couples (two) who were part of staff of MASUM from Pune participated. – The reason was that they were conscious of the people who were watching – somehow they did not like the activity.





## FEEDING EACH OTHER

The menu for lunch was typically the conventional lunch provided in marriages. It consisted of a vegetable - "*rassa bhaji*" or pulses - "*usal*", a spicy variety of rice- "*Masale bhat*" a sweet - "*bundi*" or "*Jebebi*". The lunch began with saying the partners first name - poetically "*uukahaane*" and putting a piece of sweet in the partners mouth. This again is a tradition followed by the bride and the groom, in wedding lunches, popularly known as "*ghaas bharavne*" in Marathi.

Two men through their "*ukhaanna*" expressed the aggression and the right of beating the wife. The facilitators took note of it but did not confront them.

Lunch was followed by more serious and informative sessions.



## INFORMATIVE DIALOUGE

More serious talk and discussion on relationship building, information on sexuality – conception, contraception, problems etc, and importance of marriage registration, were scheduled post-lunch.

The para-legal workers – “Saathis” – were expected to bring marriage registration forms to be filled up by couples whose marriages were not registered.

### RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The purpose of conducting this session was to allow for expression of the couples' experiences in playing the games and doing the activities together. The intention of the facilitators was to translate these feelings into a better understanding in relationship building and growth. This was a serious session, though participatory – in the form of a discussion. This session was conducted by Archana in the first *mela* and then by Prasanna – a resource person, working on violence and marital issues with “Susamvad”

Some of the issues in relationship formation and building a healthy intimate relationship among newly weds were as follows

- 1 The pressure of expectations from the family to which the newly couple
- 2 Superficial knowledge about each other.

- 3 The values and understanding about the in-laws influenced by the upbringing of each partner.
- 4 Respect that the partners show each other.
- 5 Limitations for the basic dialogue due to the community norms of the community.
- 6 Expressing to the partner that he/she is "special", showing appreciation, bringing friendship into the couple relationship.
- 7 Expression of emotions – especially those of anger and other negative emotions.
- 8 The elements of understanding, cooperation, sharing, expression of emotion.
- 9 Enhancing communication, joint decision making
- 10 The notion about the family as being "two wheels of a chariot" and other such notions.
- 11 Differences – and how to look at them and understand why they can exist
- 12 Skills in making the marriage work – enhancing happiness and sense of fulfillment.

In order to elicit participatory discussion some leading questions were asked by the facilitators. References were made to the experience of the games and activities. They were as follows:

- 1 Why does one marry? – for companionship, sex, progeny .....and making a home/family.
- 2 What are the things necessary to make a home? – good partner, money, stable income, house etc....
- 3 Out of these – which are those necessities that are dependent on factors that are out of our

control? – for eg rain – if there is no rain it will affect the income. And which of these are perfectly within our control?- our relationship

- 4 How would you like your relationship with your partner be? Caring .....etc. etc..... sharing both happiness and sorrows.
- 5 When can you really support each other or be "together" in happiness or sorrow? ....among other responses ....unless you know what a joyous or sorrowful event means to your partner...ie unless you are sensitive to your partner...
- 6 How can you be sensitive to your partner? ....the beginning is by getting to know each other – more deeply (explain) – for that communication and dialogue becomes necessary.....and for this each partner should provide the space or the environment to give and take or tell and listen.....her "small" things matter ...give examples of what is the real feeling when a gift is given to your wife ....what becomes important ... the gift or the message that "you are special for me"....Now referring to the questions asked to each other in the introduction activity as well as other remarks made by the participants...
- 7 How would you use the information ...including the positive and the negative information that you have obtained about your partner ... for strengthening your relationship? .....among other responses highlight appreciating the partner – which then gives the right to criticise the partner – other wise only criticism would occupy the relationship space...and hinder intimacy and increase conflict. Talk about conflict resolution



and how a conflict situation can go beyond the issue of conflict and emerge as a battle – an ego battle where loyalties can get questioned – by giving examples – and how this becomes sufficient for communication to stop.

- 8 Do you communicate to the partner about the things you have liked about him/her? Why is this important (accepting the partner – with positives and negatives) – to look at each other's qualities as being different and not as "good" or "bad".
- 9 What would you do with the things you do not like about your partner ? –use information given by the couple as examples. ...assess how significant that negative is to you, your relationship and your family....allow space for each other to discuss – i.e speak out and listen, be objective ... eg drinking ...there are no two opinions about drinking ...the fact is it is bad for health...then look at it as a problem to be solved rather than a complaint to be made and then take steps to resolve it together. This can never happen if it is not perceived a "problem". Certain things cannot change – for eg physical characteristics, likes, dislikes, interest etc... which are a part of upbringing.
- 10 Have you ever thought about the change in the environment that occurs due to marriage for a woman? What are these changes (even the change in the attire)? – what are the adjustments that she has to make and what the marriage – when the newness means to her? –discuss.
- 11 If you want to have a happy and fulfilling relationship –can you define this as the goal of

your marriage? – and achieve it by strengthening your relationship? If so then just as you need to take special efforts to reach any goal (even for eg – going to Saswad), you need to give time, thought and take efforts to strengthen your relationship – you cannot take it for granted. Compare the sense of fulfillment by giving and seeking cooperation and that which is obtained by force or coercion – which is better – and therefore importance of joint effort and joint decisions – so that the responsibility of the consequence of the decision will be with both the partners – a factor that would enhance togetherness.- again highlight importance of free communication (the space to speak and listen)

- 12 Reference was made to the activity of the jigsaw puzzle – in which some couples needed just a little help to complete the picture – accept that at times we may need help of others or of experts for resolving problems or differences. MASUM is one such organization that can help couples in doing so.
- 13 What are some of the barriers in communication? – among others ...labeling the partner that he or she “will never understand” .. and so stop communication....which would further puzzle the partner about certain decisions taken —give examples.
- 14 In which ever corner of the world you may go, whether it is urban or rural, India or America, relationship building skills between two persons are the same – whatever “big” words you may use. And if we feel that my happiness lies in a satisfying relationship with my partner then it is

necessary for me to give time and thought to myself, my partner and my relationship. – You can make this commitment now.

- 15 Would your relationship not strengthen if you don't keep in mind the points discussed in this session? —it can – but would be left to chance – and the possibility of existence of unresolved differences can also rise. Achieving a small set goals, of which each one is aware, can make the effort more enjoyable, increase the enthusiasm and enhance the sense of togetherness.

- 16 The session ended by expressing best wishes.

This scheme of discussion was followed in two camps – Naigaon and Vanpuri, while in the other camps, the session had to be adjusted according to the time available and the mood of the participants at the time – after the games and the activities. The *mela* did not provide scope for question-answer session, due to time constraints and issue could get personalized and that would need a serious follow-up.

### **REGISTRATION OF MARRIAGE**

In this session, Archana explained how a marriage becomes a legal bond between the couple. She also explained that the proof of this legal marriage helps in many practical transactions – such as securing the wife's name on the ration card, securing the passport, securing loans, in property deals, and in many other formalities for securing benefits of government schemes. She explained that the only valid document for proof of marriage is registration of the marriage and that for those who have not registered, the procedure can start today. The “*Saathi*” of the village was ready with the registration forms and many couples came forward to make the registration.



At Waghapur, this activity could not take place in the schedule and Archana announced that they could visit the "Saathi" Centre for this purpose. Some of them were married at a place outside the jurisdiction for registration, and hence they could not be registered. Maximum registrations were made at Pondhe (5 out of 8) and 1 had already registered. A total of .... registrations took place as a result of the *melas*.

### **SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP**

The couples were then left to opt for consulting at the sexuality stall – guided by Sister Lata Dudhane who works at the Feminist Health Centre at Saswad. They all opted to visit the stall together as couples. Earlier experiences of MASUM have been that only women came forward to take the information while men had remained out. However in the *melas* there was a change. Almost all couples opted to seek consultation together. However this session could not be held at Waghapur because of the time constraint - the *mela* here was scheduled in the evening and the power failure added to the delay.

At Pargaon and Vanpuri, two-three couples went in for consultation at a time while at Naigaon three couples preferred to consult one at a time. At Pondhe all the couples were instructed at the same time – together. In the mean while, the others were engaged in registration of their marriage or in the photo session.

Sr. Lata used charts and models to explain the male and female reproductive system organs, how fertilization took place, what was ovulation and when did it take place. She explained what caused menstruation, where were sperms produced, what was semen and what were the determinants of the sex of the child



The contraceptives – such as pills, condom and copper-T were shown and she explained how each contraceptive worked, what was to be done if a pill was missed out, tube pregnancy – detection, risk and treatment, the life of sperms and the precautions to be taken for three months after vasectomy for pregnancy prevention. She also explained hysterectomy and process of vasectomy. Information on how to plan for the first child or for the second child was also given. The more important part of the session was the information on how the contraceptives worked – (those used by women and those used by men.) The objective was to inform them that male contraceptives were harmless whereas female contraceptives interfere with the body functioning. She explained that female contraceptives such as pills affected the body secretions (hormones), Copper-T worked as a foreign body for preventing pregnancy and was in the body all day and was required to be removed and replaced every two years. Hysterectomy means a more major operation that required prolonged post-operative care. 'She questioned the couple as to which then would be the better contraceptive method.

A number of questions then poured in, they were as follows

- 1 How are pills harmful – do they bring infertility?
- 2 Does vasectomy reduce desire – does it make the man impotent – if not how and why?
- 3 Why does my wife get irregular periods – will it affect conception or childbearing? – what should we do about it?
- 4 Why is there unbearable abdominal pain when my wife/ I -gets her periods – what to do about it?

- 5 Why does a woman not conceive inspite of not using any contraception?
- 6 How to use a condom?
- 7 We suspected a second pregnancy (not confirmed)- our first baby is small- what can we now?
- 8 My Wife has a uterus prolapsed, it is painful, what should we do about is?

## **OBSERVATION**

At Pondhe, where there was less privacy and the session was conducted with the entire group together, only one couple and one husband actually sat in front of the facilitator to listen to the information. The others were distracted by the photo session and the noise that was being caused by this that was being caused by this excitement – next door. Learning this lesson, the place for this session was organised at distance for the main venue, which had more privacy. It is significant to note that at Pondhe, men were more interested in listening to the session than the women – who were more attracted by the photo session. One husband was seen standing at the stall listening and he kept calling his wife to listen and take it seriously!

At Pargaon, a couple who had a history of marital discord, violence and alcoholism were the first to opt for a couple consultation and the first to go together to seek consultation. It was the wife who suffered the prolapse uterus – that was causing further strain in their sex life and had added to the discord. It was also observed that husbands showed considerable concern about irregular periods, pain and an expectation that their wives take care of themselves – take treatment

and eat well. Most of the newly weds were not practicing any contraceptive methods as they intended to have the first child as early as possible –after which they would think of contraception and planning.

At Naigaon, couples went for consultation in pairs. Here there were more questions pertaining to vasectomy, abortion (not wanting the second baby so soon) and use of pills. All the couples who took the consultation – even those whose marriage age was above five years had questions about hysterectomy and vasectomy.

At Waghapur, this session did not take place on account of lack of time and power failure. However, couples were informed about the *Sadaphuli* Centre in the village and the Feminist health Centre at Sawad where they could come for consultation.

At Vanpuri, couples sought consultation in groups of two-three couples. Among other general questions on menstruation, production of sperms and contraception, one couple had more questions on the after effects of hysterectomy. A husband finally declared that after the second baby he has decided to go in for vasectomy.

We observed that barring a handful of women, it was men who were taking initiative in going for the consultation, asking questions – while the women were more shy and asked lesser questions. This conformed to stereotypical expectations and behavior. MASUM did provide a common platform to talk, discuss and negotiate, but it did not go beyond seeking only information – and together as a couple. It must have been the first time that the couple was consultation on sexuality issues together.





## SWEET MEMORY SESSION

The day was scheduled to end with a photo session. For the women of the villages of the Purandar taluka, which is not more than 30-35kms from the city of Pune, women – especially newly married women are expected to follow the traditional dress code – of a 5 - yard saree, green bangles, a necklace of black beads called as "*ganthan or the mangalsutra*" in Marathi, toe rings and anklets. The nose ring is optional. *Salwar-kamiz* – which is commonly worn by women in Pune city, is not permitted. It was thought to be a good idea to provide an opportunity for the women to wear the "*Salwar-Kamiz*" under the pretext of taking a photograph. Many of the men who had attended college in the city/taluka place, may have had friends who wore such dresses. This would enable them to look at their wives with renewed identity, and that would bring in a sense of friendliness. Also the couple's photograph, with the new dress, would be a memory of the *mela* experience.

This activity was conducted with the objective of helping the present generation men participating in the *mela* to look at their wives "differently" - not as the stereo-typical wives defined by their tradition – in traditional attire – but more as their friends. It could remind them of those female friends that they had in college. It could also provide a beginning to accepting that there is nothing bad or abnormal in wearing an



attire other than the saree. and permit married women to continue wearing the '*Salwar Kamiz*' as they had worn before marriage.

*Salwar Kamiz* sets for women were provided by MASUM. The clothes were cut for wearing on special occasions – embroidered, synthetic and cotton and one or two with *zari*.

Archana's announcement was inevitably followed by a spate of giggles as well as shy and anxious looks of women that left the men thinking and looking at their wives from the corner of their eyes. There were just three women who could assertively and immediately express their willingness and desire to wear the new clothes for the photo session. While women were hesitating to say "yes" the men seemed to hesitate to say "no", in presence of MASUM – whose objectives and intentions were well known.

Excuses such as what will others say, parents will not like it, I/ she used to wear it before marriage, came in. A LOT of time was taken for the couple to decide whether or not the wife should wear the *Salwar-Kamiz*. Women were waiting intently for their husband's permission while there were about four-five women who refused to wear the clothes inspite of the permission of their husbands – the reasons were not explored. It was quite obvious that the women could not even exercise their choice of clothes that they wore – and hence the need for this activity.

The couples – especially women – whether they had changed their attire or not were extremely happy to have themselves photographed together . At Naigaon and Vanpuri, couples clicked photographs – both in the traditional saree as well as in the *Salwar kamiz*. The traditional – to show to people at home and the other

specially for themselves! This in itself was a great achievement for MASUM – that certain secrets like these that challenge traditional norms, remained within the couple's private space.

This session was marked with a lot of excitement, noise, teasing, coaxing the couple to stand really close to each other, smiling and without any “anxious” or “serious looks” as the photographer Archana put it. Again, at Waghapur, this photo session was not possible due to time constraints and power failure.



## SOME OBSERVATIONS

Each *Mela* started with an introduction of MASUM, its activities and the purpose of the *mela*. Archana, the counsellor of the '*Samvaad*' Kendra Counselling Centre, welcomed the couples and explained that the couple melas were being held for couples to have fun and enjoy the games together. The second objective she explained was to get to know more about each other and also talk freely and interact with each other in a tensionless environment where there are no pressures for any tasks to be done or work to be completed.

The other MASUM representatives introduced themselves to the group, followed by a song in Hindi "*Main tuzh ko vishwas do, tu muzh ko vishwas do*" which talks about mutual trust, love, give and take, communication, giving space to each other, respect, harmony, co-operation and happiness. The lyrics are noted in appendix.

Some observations as couples came in Most women wore sarees that were bright, or of silk or with attractive borders – as worn for weddings and ceremonies. Only three women wore *Salwar-Kamiz*. Men wore simpler clothes which gave a look of coming for a casual function. From the attire, it seemed that the *melas* were more important to women than to men. Also women's looks and clothes reflected the status of the family, and hence the attire.

As the couples came in, they were shy and hardly spoke to each other. The men separated from the women and formed their own groups. At Pondhe village where the first *mela* was held, a couple who had come from another nearby village at 11am had to wait until 3pm for the programme to begin until other couples came in. However, in the mean while, they remained away from each other. After the *mela*, they were both sitting together on the step beside the health centre of MASUM, chatting with each other.

Some couples came with a lot of apprehensions. Some feared that their precious work time was being wasted in this fun activity. The rains had been good and it was after many years that they had got so much work in the fields, they explained. Some had come prepared for having fun, and some had come out of curiosity and in the beginning of the *mela* they did scorn at the first activity. Maximum resistance was more evident in the first *mela*. The 'Saathis' had to even go to the fields in search of couples, who on the previous day had promised to come, and fetch them to the venue. The resistance however decreased as the *melas* took place in other villages. In the last two *melas* it is seen that participation was 15 couples as compared to the first with 8 couples.

Archana, the counsellor of the "Samvaad Kendra" conducted the activities and the *Saathis* assisted her in conducting the games.





## FEED BACK FROM SAATHIS

The following *Saathis* who primarily held the responsibility of organizing the melas in the different villages were as follows

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <b>Pondhe Village</b>   | Prakash Gaikwad<br>Sheela Taskar<br>Shalan Raut<br>Kalpana Yadav<br>Anandi Yadav<br>Mangal Amble<br>Malan Zagade |
| <b>Pargaon Village</b>  | Sugandha Khedekar<br>Sunanada Khedekar<br>Suvarna Band   |
| <b>Naigaon Village</b>  | Sushila Kad<br>Babita Golande<br>Jyoti Chaundkar<br>Vatsala Deokar<br>Nirmala Moghe<br>Mangal Waikar             |
| <b>Waghapur Village</b> | Pramila Pawar<br>Mangal Kunjir   |
| <b>Vanpuri Village</b>  | Shobha Lawande<br>Manda Konde<br>Kavita Jagtap<br>Rani Kedari<br>Vandana Mahamuni                                |

An interaction with the *Saathis* for feedback after the *melas* at the five villages, was conducted on 20th December 2004. A feedback on their perception about the purpose of the *melas*, their experiences in organizing and conducting the *melas*, their observations as paralegal workers and important change agents, their assessment of the impact of the *melas* and their suggestions, was obtained.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MELAS AS PERCEIVED BY THE SAATHIS**

The paralegal team of MASUM, have a very important role in the Family Violence Intervention Programme. for the people, they represent MASUM and are identified as those speaking up about women's rights and conforming violence. For the organization, the *Saathis* are the persons most accessible to women in distress, and therefore important resources that can provide door-step aid and intervention. Hence their understanding and perspective becomes significant in carrying the concept of the funfairs ahead.

The objectives of the meals were quite clear to the *Saathis* they looked at it as a beginning of MASUM's attempt for promoting intimacy and democracy within the couple relationship. Besides providing an opportunity for couples to have fun together and realize the joy in each other's company, it had other outcomes that the *Saathi* a new identity in their village. MASUM is many a times perceived as a group of women our to break families, which makes it difficult for the *Saathis*-many of whom are residents the village where they are working. The *melas* whose objectives was to strengthen the couple relationship gave the village a different view about MASUM and made it simpler for the *Saathis* to make their roles clear. This has increased their motivation and confidence, they said.

## THEIR EXPERIENCE IN ORGANIZATION AND CONDUCTING THE MELAS

As mentioned earlier in this report, the *Saathis* had a hard time in getting the couples to come to the 'Anand Mela'. Many of them expressed to the *Saathis* that they had better things to do they did not want to waste time. Many of those who promised to come never turned up. The *Saathis* visited the houses of the newly married couples four times to persuade them to come, and talked to the elders for seeking their consent. The *Saathis* also had approached one or two couples within whom there was discord and the wives were being harassed- but they too had not turned up. In many homes, the *Saathis* observed that women were very keen to come, but husbands had not consented. In some cases the husbands had promised their wives to go to the meal, but never turned up and kept wives waiting.

The *Saathis* had tired their best- They even had to hear humiliating comments- like- " You are conducting the *melas* because you are paid for it" and felt offended. Some asked them to pay Rs.500/- if they were wanted at the *mela*! Some people even spread rumors that they had got Rs.1000/- for their participation, informed the *Saathis*. Some made fun of the programme declaring that *Saathis* probably had work to do, and hence were organizing these 'meaningless' meals.

The older couples and older women who were close to MASUM and actively participated in MASUM's activities, felt left out when they were told that the *mela* was not for them. Some said that if the meals were organized in their village, they would have participated. However the *Saathis* felt these all-lame excuses, and the reluctance was more, because the *melas* were not significant for them.

About the activities, The *Saathis* felt that there needed to be more games that gave more scope for physical proximity. Some felt that more time should have been given to providing information. They felt that more information about dealing with difference of opinion, conflict resolution, concept of equality and strengthening the friendship between the couple should be given. Effect of conflict on children should also be addressed, they felt. The duration of the *mela* should be longer or the time should be managed more meticulously, they suggested.

Some *Saathis* suggested that next year, they should be involved in deciding and planning the day's activities/games and the schedule. They clarified that they did not have any thing against the present games, but for a long lasting effect, they should be made to think about the future quality of their relationship, and could be given activities such as-drawing the future picture of you family, or 'completing a picture' game- which gave very important and relevant messages.

They debated as to whether the *melas* be held in the village or at a place from the villages and away from the routine. Both had its benefits and short-comings, they argued. Some suggested that initially it is important to have them in the villages so that the people know its nature, or else they are likely to cast doubts and suspect that their women and being 'taught' to challenge.

## **THE IMPACT AS OBSERVED AND ASSESSED BY THE SAATHI**

*Saathis* felt that the *melas* really helped the partners in knowing each better and in experiencing a sense of 'friendliness' i their relationship. Discussing intimate affairs and information on sex and



contraception helped open up more avenues for communication and break barriers. Activities like making of the delicate tasks- which is often the task of the wife. The couples like this activity, and women told the *Saathis* that now they felt more free to demand for the *Gajaras*. In fact, one woman told a *Saathi* that she had now planted the flower creeper in her garden!

Another impact that the *melas* had was that the Sarpanches of two villages- Naigaon and Vanpuri appreciated MASUM's attempt. at Vanpuri, he handed over the keys of a room for the use of MASUM's activity, immediately, said the *Saathi*.

They however felt that the impact of the *melas* would be term. for a long lasting effect, the *Saathis* suggested that gifts such as a poster with a message could be useful. A follow-up in the form of an 'activity'- an ongoing activity, so that the 'fun' in being together gets reinforced, is essential, they felt. *Anand Melas* could be a good beginning for such ongoing activity, they said. The couples are extremely eager and are waiting to see their photographs, they said.

They also strongly pointed out that MASUM ought to organize such *melas* for the *Saathis* with their partners. They would benefit and would receive cooperation from their families they felt. They hoped out that mother-in-law, daughter-in-law *melas* should be organized and also family *melas*- with the hope that it would help resolve differences and *Saathis* would enjoy a better status in thier respective families.



## GENERAL COMMENTS

The *Saathis* had a real hard time in getting the couple come for the *mela*. In spite of several visits and promises, they were disappointed when the participants did not turn up at the scheduled time and venue. They had to go back and personally bring them to the venue. This created considerable anxiety – especially in the *Saathis*, who were newly enrolled. They were happy and relaxed when the *mela* began. The fatigue showed on their faces.

Although the *Saathis* were asked to engage a cook for preparing the lunch, the village women who were staff of MASUM, took a lot of responsibility of cooking – cleaning vegetables, cutting them, etc. Whether this was because the women were unable to come out of their defined role or find fulfillment in this role needs to be explored.

Overall the couples expressed that they had real good fun and were happy that they came to the *mela*. Some of them said that they got a lot of information, while some felt that the *melas* should contain more informative sessions – and not just games. Some felt that there should be more such *melas*. Many women expressed that they will never forget the fun they had in the *mela*. Some felt as if they were on a picnic. A wife said that it was the first time that she had seen her husband in such a playful mood and so happy. A

husband expressed that the style with which he was able to interact with his wife was very different and liked it – which other wise is very suppressed and unnatural, especially in public – he thanked MASUM.

The physical proximity and eye contact within the couple was very poor as the *melas* began. The more educated couples were seen to be more free. However the shyness was reduced as the *melas* progressed. Although the introduction activity saw considerable hesitation by wives to express what they disliked about the partner, many also used it to express their expectations.

The couples did not like observers – friends or relatives watching them. They wanted more privacy. Some couples even requested the facilitators to ask them to go away.

Although lunch began with fun activity, the couples did not talk much to each other.

Many women were glad that they had the opportunity of not only wearing a *salwar-kamiz* and show their husbands how they appeared in this dress, but also to have a photograph that would keep this memory and feeling alive.

Over all, the *melas* provided the couples an opportunity of having fun together in public space. It is important for women's organisations who advocate for protection and assertion of women's rights and bring the negatives of an intimate relationship into the public arena, to vouch for bringing the joy of intimacy also into the public arena. While such interventions would reduce the "private" spaces of the family/home for the couple, it would create the spaces for women within their intimate relationship – a space where she can assert and exercise choice.



## **Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal**

Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM) was formed in 1987 after the women in some village of Purandar Taluka in Pune district of Maharashtra were organised through local Mahila Mandals so as to address the burning issues affecting their lives. Most of these women were from oppressed castes and minority religions, whereas those belonging to middle castes lacked familial support. Many of them worked as daily wage labourers on the fields of rich farmers where they were at risk for economic exploitation and abuse. They came together to support each other and collectively fight for their rights.

MASUM gradually evolved as a development group with a feminist perspective and democratic approach.

### **MASUM's Objectives**

To Make Women Self Reliant and Conscious of Their Human and Constitutional Rights and to Put Pressure on the State for Fulfilling its Obligation Towards its People.

To Nurture Women's Physical and Emotional Health

To Provide Vocational Training and Credit Facilities to Women for Self Employment

To Create a Sustainable and Human Mode of Development Through People's Active Involvement in Rural Maharashtra

To Create a Progressive Space in Society for All its Deprived People, and to Specifically Resist Casteism, Sexism, Religious Chauvinism and Homophobia