

# Children's carnivals as a tracer method

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*The author is a consultant in Child Development and Education and has been working for some years with the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) situated in the State of Gujarat in India. The members of SEWA mostly live in the rural areas; those in the urban areas tend to be migrants with rural connections. In any case, the poverty they share overrides any significant rural-urban differences. Among its many activities, SEWA trains local women to work in its childcare centres/crèches. This article includes a discussion of a novel way of tracing very large numbers of former programme participants.*

In both rural and urban areas a carnival is called 'Mela' and the families go to it in large numbers, enjoying the chance to be dressed in their best clothes and to buy trinkets or other things for the household. Knowing the place that a Mela has in the lives of the people, SEWA decided to get the 'alumni' of the Child Care programme to come to a children's carnival, or 'Bal Mela' as it is called. This was to be the beginning of a different kind of tracer study.

The plan originated in an informal meeting of the SEWA organisers, supervisors and crèche workers. Once the plan was made, putting it into operation provided no obstacles. To begin with, the children were from the neighbourhood, as were the teachers.

The teachers and supervisors first made a list from their past records and went around their areas to locate the children. Several of the older children would greet

their former teachers when they crossed each other on the streets. So the study began with the children that the teachers met frequently. Each of these children was asked to remember the names of children who were in the childcare centre or crèche in their time. Two or three names would be recalled; and these children, in turn, would give more names. Almost organically, the network grew. The teachers then conducted an informal census, by visiting each child's house personally. They noted during their visits whether the children were attending school or not. They asked the children about their interests and plans for the future and made brief notes. Needless to say, word spread and entire communities heard about the Bal Mela. There was much excitement.

Of the total of 2,906 children traced, 2,798 were attending school and 108 were not. This shows that over 95 percent of all the children who had

attended the SEWA programme were in school. If one considers the socio-economic category in which the families fall, it becomes clear that SEWA's role has been significant.

At Anand, Kheda District, which was the first location of SEWA crèches for the children of the women workers in tobacco fields and factories, the list of children went to 1,125. So the organisers decided to invite the number of children that could be accommodated in one session at one place: 750 children were invited for the first Bal Mela while the rest would be invited for a second carnival.

I was present at the meeting at which the idea of having a Bal Mela was mooted. About two months later, I was in the SEWA office in the same district. By this time, the entire list of all the children who had passed through the SEWA crèches in Kheda was available.

I told them to take a photocopy of the document and to keep the original 'census' in a bank vault! This was mainly to impress upon them the value of the information that they had collected and the continuing need for documenting their own activities.

At Ahmedabad, a similar exercise was undertaken. The childcare workers (teachers) began to identify the children in their areas, who had been with them in the preschool years. Several urban habitations were combed for the SEWA. And what a harvest! More than 950 children turned up at the carnival.

For the children, the festivities had all the elements of a Bal Mela: games to play, skits to see, and music and other activities to join in. In addition to a formal lamp lighting ceremony, there were talks by visiting dignitaries and by SEWA organisers. The children were meticulously groomed and dressed;

some wore their brightest and shiniest clothes, others came dressed up as well-known historical or fictional characters. Niches were set up for various children's activities and games: crayon drawing, vegetable printing, making caps, puppet shows, music and dance and so on. Some groups of children had come prepared to stage skits or do mimicry. Some had been learning, laboriously, to introduce themselves in English! More than anything, they were happy to meet their friends and run around the place, savouring the excitement of a carnival.

For all of them, a hot lunch served by their teachers, was most welcome. The lunch brought back to their minds the wonderful snacks they had eaten as children in the SEWA programme. They were also given a souvenir to take back home (something like a small bowl, filled with candy). There were minor variations in the three Bal Melas: two in Kheda District and one in Ahmedabad city. One had more outdoor equipment like swings and roundabouts, another had a display of the children's art work, the third had more emphasis on races and sports for children and so on.

SEWA, as an organisation, is known for its ability to work with the Government and to access the resources that Government schemes allocate for children's programmes. In each of the Bal Melas, relevant Government officials

had been invited and given visible roles in the formal part of the inaugural function. Their help in getting more space for the centres and crèches was sought, as space continues to be a perennial problem.

#### What children and mothers said

During the carnivals a small team of researchers went around talking to children and mothers. Selected extracts are given below.

*I am now studying in the 9<sup>th</sup> Standard. My mother told me that I was only three months old when I was sent to the crèche. I cried a lot in the beginning, she says. What I know is that I became fond of the teachers and enjoyed the activities in the crèche. My mother and my father work in the tobacco fields. They are working hard so that they can educate us. My sister is in the second year of her College. I wish to study and become a lawyer, so that I can help others to get justice. (Meriel aged 13, from Kunjrvav Village)*

*I study in the 6<sup>th</sup> Standard. My father and mother are tobacco workers. I always loved going to the centre. My teachers there were very good. My favourite subject is English. When I was on the stage, I was not afraid of introducing myself in English. I have not decided what I would like to be in*



India: # 1 teacher in Sanjaynagar centre (Bapunagar) acts out songs with the children so they become enthusiastic about learning.  
Photo: Sara Gomez, HART Fellow from the Center for Documentary Studies, USA.

*the future, but my parents say that I can study as much as I want to. At the Mela, I loved the Magic Show and I was happy to play cricket with my friends. (Martin aged 15, from Chikodra Village)*

*She was three years when I put her into the centre. She was one of the first batch in the centre. Today, she is in the 7<sup>th</sup> Standard. She loves to study and goes to school without hesitation. My older daughter had not been to such a centre, so when I put her in school, she was not eager to study and dropped out. But Mona is very smart. She stands up boldly in her class and answers questions. Her teachers at the primary school are also praising her. (Manguben, mother of Mona, aged 12)*

*I sell Agarbatti (incense sticks) and other small items. At first, I did not believe that anyone would take care of my child when I was away. When I sent him to the crèche, he was not speaking. He would just take off his clothes and wander about. The teachers were very patient and trained him to have proper habits and not to take off his clothes. After joining the crèche, he brushes his teeth and says his prayers. He reads books and respects others. These are behaviours that are appreciated in our society. Therefore, I am satisfied. (Geetaben, mother of Montu, aged 8)*

The interviews all tell the same story. It is certain that the intervention in early childhood has a positive impact on the development of cognitive and social skills in later years. ○