

# Festivals of Our Selves : *Melas* as Learning Exchanges

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*How can we share our selves, our work, our interests and experiments, in a deep and dynamic way?*

*How can we explore the possibility of new partnerships, collaborations and friendships?*

*How can we have multiple conversations about the challenges and opportunities before us, when our time and space are often limited?*

All over India, for several hundred years, people have come together in *melas*. These unique public spaces emerge through the people that gather to share their crafts and wares, talents and skills. Often these gatherings occur during special times in the season or are linked to particular cultural-religious celebrations. In a traditional *mela*, you might find artisans trading and selling their products — pots, utensils, woodwork, shoes, clothes, weavings, earthenware, etc. You would also discover local foods and drinks, services like tattooing, photography and body piercing, and entertainers like dancers, singers, musicians and acrobats. People of all ages come from miles around to partake in the festivities. They go where their eyes, ears, noses, tastes and touch lead them, moving through the fair at their own pace and taking as much time as they desire at any particular place.

Several simple learning principles can be extracted when looking at a *mela*:

- Each person is their own best judge of where to go for their learning; their senses, intuition and interests are their best guides.
- There cannot be one standard time limit put on meaningful interactions; each situation is unique to the people involved and the needs of the moment.
- Spontaneity and freedom of movement are extremely important for building relationships and for unfolding our own learning paths.
- Bringing together people of different ages and backgrounds, who utilize diverse media and tools, can generate many unique kinds of interactions. Often, new connections and deeper understandings are formed among people about their lives, issues and complex situations.

With this grounding, Shikshantar <[www.swaraj.org/shikshantar](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar)> and friends around the world have been continuously evolving a *mela* process to link our individual learning and questioning with our organizational work or life's journeys. We have drawn upon the traditional dynamic and spirit of a festival, and re-contextualized it for the hopes and demands of conferences, workshops and seminars.

In this format, the participants of the meeting take on the roles of the artisans, entertainers, food sellers, etc. Either as individuals or organizations, they set up a 'stall' to share their ideas, practices, resources, questions and challenges. Most create visual presentations of their work, and some include interactive exercises or games as part of their stall.

Depending on the size of the group and the amount of time available, the participants are divided into half, or thirds, or fourths. One sub-group puts up their stalls, while the remainder visit

them; then, they rotate so everyone has a chance to host and engage. So, for example, if you have 15 different organizations present and three hours to learn about each other's work, you may decide to have three rounds in the *mela*. Each round takes one hour, with five organizations hosting their stalls simultaneously, and the remaining ten organizations visiting them. Our experience indicates that the people visiting stalls should be allowed to move freely on their own, rather than being herded around together (as often happens in schools). Sometimes participants demand to be herded around because they think that this will save time or they are afraid to miss something. This demand should not be given in to as it takes away from the depth of interaction and creates a stifling formality to the *mela*.

The *mela* can be organized in many different ways. For example, each individual present can host a stall, or people can group according to organizational affiliation, common interest, shared identity, etc. to jointly host a stall. The *mela* can also explore particular themes or questions; for example,

- *What gives you life and what do you give life to?*
- *What are the growing edges of your work today?*
- *How do you live and work? What inspires you to be in this way?*

Or whatever other areas are deemed of interest and necessity by the conference participants and organizers.

We have used the *mela* process in a number of different settings. For example, in the Unfolding Learning Societies conferences (December 2002 and January 2004), it was a means for enabling the many participants gathered to share their organization's work with each other. We hosted two rounds, each for two-three hours, with about 12-15 'stalls' in each round. In the process emerged a theater workshop, several artistic creations (masks, clay sculptures), new partnerships and plans for future collaboration, as well as the beautiful humming of people expressing themselves to one another.

For the Walkouts-Walkons Network gathering (September 2003), the emphasis was more on each individual's life journey -- how they saw themselves as a self-path-maker, what questions they were living with, what opportunities they were looking forward to... So in three rounds of 1.5 hours each, 15 individuals hosted their stalls, with the other 35 people interacting with them. The more intimate one-on-one conversations enabled people to go deeper with their feelings, to articulate their struggles and dreams, and to thus form close bonds with each other.

In the Leveraging Privilege for Social Change Youth Jam (May 2004), we wanted the *mela* to bring out both individual and organizational stories, and so posed the question, "What gives you life and what do you give life to?" People took time to self-reflect and then create their 'stalls' -- mostly visual posters of their lives and work. We then warmed up with a few other dialogue processes -- going around quickly in the whole circle to give a 'taste' of ourselves; having a '*garba*-style dance' of conversation in two concentric circles -- before jumping in to a more intimate *mela*.

We used the *mela* process in a workshop in December 2001. The workshop participants had gone in teams to various villages to explore peoples' stories, knowledge systems, kinds of work, and views on education and development. Rather than have each team come back and make a presentation to everyone, a *mela* was organized, so that each team hosted a stall, and the others moved around and visited them. This not only saved everyone the tedium of listening to several hours of presentations, but people found themselves sharing the stories they had heard, the questions raised and the understanding they came to, in a synergistic and fluid way.

So high was the energy that people continued talking late into the night, despite having worked hard all day.

From all of these experiences, I have realized that the *mela* is simply a starting point. It creates a space and collective energy in which people begin conversations that continue throughout the course of the meeting/conference. The benefits of this process are many. It is flexible and fun; there is a lot of creativity and variety. It gives people a chance to show multiple sides of their selves and their work. Ultimately this results in deeper connections among people, which makes them more comfortable to share more meaningfully for the remainder of the conference. They seem more willing to be vulnerable, to take risks, to listen and engage honestly.

Of course, I cannot attribute all of this to the *mela*, but I think it does set the tone for a different kind of meeting. Mainly because the starting point is one of trust -- trusting people to share openly, and trusting people to go where they will find the most meaning and interest. A *mela* sends a clear message from the meeting organizers to all the meeting participants; that they don't need to lock everyone in one place, but rather have faith in each person to take charge of themselves and their learning, and to make the best use of the time they have. It's a good way to ensure real participation, high energy, and purposeful engagement.

As with any process, there are a few limitations. The biggest complaint is that there isn't enough time to get to be with / listen to everyone, in the same level of depth. Of course, this makes sense. You may be more interested in food and tattoos, and less curious about pottery and music, so to speak. Equality (as in sameness) is not a goal of the *mela*; rather, dynamic and meaningful interaction is. Each person will have their own unique experience, because each person's learning interests are special and specific. They cannot be standardized and controlled.

Unlike some conferences, which give each person 10 minutes to make a presentation, while the rest listen, on and on for hours and hours, the *mela* hosts many presentations simultaneously and in a more informal, spontaneous way. Often, a dialogue happens among 'hoster' and 'visitor(s)' with real questions and answers, in-depth and dynamically. So you may miss something happening elsewhere, but you are alive to the interaction where you are at that moment. Only you are the best judge of that.

On the other side, as a hoster, sometimes people feel a bit bit sad/lonely/jealous if no one comes to their 'stall' immediately, or less people come to them than to others. It is important to establish up front that each participant is responsible for taking his/her learning into his/her own hands, and so such fluctuations should not be taken as a personal attack. Rather, the hoster can also move about if s/he desires and can find other ways to engage with people.

Also, the urge to compete should be initially discussed with the group as well. The *mela* is fundamentally a cooperative, sharing process, in which we are collectively trying to create a rich learning environment with each other. Trying to be 'better' than the others, or adopting a stance of self-pity (two sides of the same coin), really has no place in the process. Each person has gifts and stories to contribute; they are all welcome and important for the wholeness of the gathering.

Therefore, the *mela* ends up being what you make it — literally. In this way, I see it exemplifying the heart of dialogue. Each person is contributing all what they have, either as a stall visitor — in terms of listening, asking good questions, being interested, or as a stall host — in terms of offering one's work and life, sharing from the heart, being open to deeper inquiry and exploration. On both sides, you are growing and learning. If dialogue is, in part, about building mutual understanding, then the *mela* provides ample opportunities to do so with each person attending the conference.

Moreover, as must be true in dialogue, this process respects people to be the best judges of their own time, movement, and quality of engagement. Conversations and interactions are never forced by an outside party; rather, they are mutually decided upon in the moment between the people involved. What happens in that moment is spontaneous, honest and just right. This, to me, is another characteristic of dialogue.

Lastly, the *mela* helps to invite each person to see themselves as a co-creator of the gathering, which will have a dramatic effect on the remainder of your time together. With each person taking responsibility for themselves and taking care of each other, the *mela* continues to send ripples throughout the gathering. The festival energy is electrifying!