

Trip Account to Lok Shikshan Sansthan (LSS)

(May 04 and 05, 2007)

Lok Shikshan Sansthan is a part of Prayas and operates among the tribals and socially and economically backward classes in the Chittaurgarh district of Rajasthan. Their office is in the village of Amarpura. I reached Amarpura around 8 AM on May 4, 2007. Madhulika (AID Jeevan Saathi), a friend from Austin was there to receive me. She took me first to the LSS office. I met Khemrajji and Sumanji. The office is attached to Khemrajji and Sumanji's house. Or rather it's all the same building and there is hardly any sort of private area for them.



LSS Office in Amarpura village of Chittaurgarh district

Khemrajji is the founding member of LSS and is married to Sumanji who leads the education part of LSS initiative. LSS's main aim is work with the farmer and wage laborers in the region. I also met Shyamji (or Shyamlal Bheel) at the office. He also works for LSS. After having the introductions, we went to Madhu's place for lunch and that is where Shyamji told me his story.

Shyamji was born in the Bheel community. They had some agriculture land but to make enough money his father worked as a bonded laborer with a

Zamindar. Shyamji as kid used to help his father out in the work. He was married at the age of 5. Within a couple of years his wife died and he was married again. His mother had died when he was still an infant and later his father married again as well. Along with helping his father in the bonded labor work, he also went to school and studied up to 5th standard. Meanwhile his father fell ill and was unable to work anymore. So Shyamji was sold as a bonded laborer to support the family expenses. He worked as a bonded laborer for about a year and half. After a year and half... one fine day he decided to run away. That is the most interesting part of the story. His landlords had gone for a death ceremony and he knew that they wouldn't be back home for quite a while. He took the cattle for grazing, which is when he felt like running away. He fed the cattle more than the usual amount, tied them back in their shed and then walked over 25 km to reach home.

After 5 days his owners came and asked him to come back and he refused. They even offered to take him out of bonded labor and instead give him regular wages like a worker but he refused. Of course they couldn't go to court because bonded labor is illegal but the good thing is that they didn't try to use force or beat him up or anything like that. They tried threatening him but he stood his ground and they had to let him go. But once he came back he realized that his father had died, leaving behind 2 children from his second wife. The second wife ran away. So at the young age of 15 he had to support an old grandmother, a wife, a half brother and a half sister. He worked on his own meager land holding to support the family.

Meanwhile he used to participate actively in all LSS activities in the region. He attended every meeting and helped in getting the people of the village together. So when LSS needed a dedicated worker to help out in the villages among the Bheels, they offered the job to Shyamji. For the last two years Shyamji has been working with LSS.

After lunch and the conversation with Shyamji, we went back to the LSS office. At the office almost all persons working in LSS had gathered and we had a long chat and singing session. This was really nice.

I have already mentioned Khmerajji, Sumanji, Shyamji and Madhuji who work for LSS. Along with them the other LSS volunteers present at the office were Sangeethaji, Ram Chanderji, Ramzanji, Prakashji and Prashantji.



Khemrajji along with Sangeethaji and Prakashji

During the next four hours we discussed various activities that LSS is involved in. I started out by asking about the **Residential school for girls project** that Asha Austin is planning to review. The school was the idea of Sumanji. The residential school is meant for girls of the local tribal community of Bheels and other socially and economically backward classes in the area. The idea is to bring the girls up to a level where they can appear for 5th standard exams. They plan to initially take in only girls who have never been to school before. (There are some girls in these communities that do go to school up to 5th standard) The girls will be in the school for 3 years. Along with learning the usual subjects like English, math and social sciences, the girls will also be given some vocational training. The aim is to provide these girls with an alternative path. Instead of continuing to be daily wage laborers, they will have an option to take up further schooling. LSS has already seen a few locations where the site of this school could be. There is a building up for rent/lease/sale right opposite the current LSS office, which is being considered. They do not plan on building an elaborate facility. They are looking for a couple of large halls where the children can live and learn at the same time. A couple of people that work for LSS have B.Ed degree and can function as teachers (at least part-time). Also Madhuji could teach English and probably some basic computer knowledge to the girls.

LSS has been talking to the families of the girls and they have convinced about 20-25 families to send their girls to the school. All the parents really want to send their girls to school. But the local schools are sometimes too far away to travel everyday. A bigger problem they need to face is the caste-based discrimination in the local government schools. The government residential schools are not very hospitable to girls of these communities. The objective is not just to make the students literate and knowledgeable enough to attend mainstream education, but there will be an active effort to make them aware of the social problems in their community and may be equip them to fight for justice.

While LSS is not in absolute urgent need for funds, they need an organization committing to provide funds for 3 years of the project. They cannot start planning for the project unless the commitment is received.



Singing songs and discussing LSS activities. (From Left to right: Madhuji, Ramzanji, Ram Chanderji, Sumanji, and little Vishu)

After the discussion of Residential school for girls, we continued discussion on other aspects of LSS's work. Khemrajji explained their work on emancipating bonded laborers. In the villages that LSS works, when they find out that a person is a bonded laborer, they try to talk to them. They inform the laborers that it is possible to be freed from the bond. There are basically two ways, use of legal power or use of muscle power. The pros and cons of each

method are explained. LSS will support the laborer in whatever decision they make. There have been cases where the laborers have chosen not to be freed. The bonded labor law is pretty strong according to Khemrajji. The laborer does not have to prove that he/she was bonded; the owners have to prove that they did not have any bonded laborer.

The work that some of the LSS volunteers were most busy with was getting students to apply for the summer camp. In fact Harlalji had on just that day been to 20 villages getting students signed up for the summer camp.

Khemrajji mentioned that his main focus for the coming year is going to be NREGA. The villages in the Chittaurgarh district have been chosen for the employment guarantee program. LSS had taken a cycle yatra to all villages and distributed pamphlets informing about the provisions under the NREGA. They have also been conducting several meetings in every village to discuss NREGA and motivate the people to put in the application with the local panchayat. Khemrajji practices Homeopathic medicines. He goes to each village with his medicine box and while distributing medicines to any sick villagers; he talks to them and their neighbors about the provisions of NREGA. All the LSS workers adopt a similar strategy. Irrespective of their focus area, every time a worker visits a village family, along with all other issues, they discuss NREGA and make sure that the families get their job cards made. Of course they face some difficulties. LSS's main role is in awareness generation, but since they talk so much about NREGA, some villagers assume that it is LSS that is going to give them work and pay them for it. It takes quite an effort by all the workers to mention that they will support them in whatever way they can, but the job card and other details have to be worked out with the local Panchayat. The NREGA time line in the district has begun from May 2, 2007.

Between all the discussions we sang some local Rajasthani folks songs as well as a few 'Kranti Geet'. After a few hours of chat session, it was time for glimpses of some fieldwork. I went with Sangeethaji who was visiting a family in a village 4 Km from Amarpura (I forget the name). Sangeethaji works on the SHGs and health component along with education. She also makes sure villagers get the required compensation from the government as per rules. For example, widows who do not have an adult son are supposed to get Rs 3000 as pension from the government each month. But many a times, either the widow does not know of the scheme or they get only the partial amount. Sangeethaji helps these women by applying for the pension as well as petitioning with the local tehsildar when the appropriate amount is not received. Similarly, women from villages that give birth to their child in a hospital are eligible to receive Rs 2000/- from the government hospital. But typically the hospital gives only a part of the amount and gets away with it. This family that we were visiting had a problem of that kind. The daughter of the house had given birth to her baby in the government hospital of Chittaurgarh city, but the hospital authorities only gave her Rs1000/- as opposed to the Rs 2000/- that they are supposed to receive. We went to the family and asked them the complete story of the delivery and what the hospital authorities gave them. Sangeethaji also explained the law to them and made sure that they wanted to appeal for the remaining amount. Once the family

understood and agreed, she collected all the receipts and helped them write a petition to the local Tehsildar to ask for the remaining amount. Sangeethaji had 3 other such cases in the neighboring villages and a couple of cases of widow pensions. She will collect all the applications and appeal to the Tehsildar. The thing I really liked about her approach as well as others working in LSS is that they do not impose these struggles on the local people. I've seen them patiently explaining the provisions under law and then they talk about the pros and cons of appealing for their rights. After this entire exercise only if the concerned families understand and want to fight the LSS volunteers support them. They act purely as a support structure, but the decision to fight for the rights is with the concerned families in the villages. This is true about all their initiatives like the bonded labor, minimum wage struggle and even education. The other interesting thing is that LSS workers do not just talk about their concerned area. For eg, while NREGA and education camps are not Sangeethaji's focus area, whenever she talks to any village family she makes sure to mention other activities of LSS that could be relevant to the family members. She enquires about the kids' enrollment into school for the next academic year, mentions about NREGA provisions for the village and what they can get through this act. I saw the same approach when I went to villages with Khemrajji and Madhuji the next day.

The next day since I had expressed interest in the minimum wage struggle, Madhu had planned a visit to a village that was actively involved. This village is called 'Manji ka Guda'. The people of Manji ka Guda are working in the road construction project. Basically there were four villages involved in the minimum wage struggle. People from two of the villages worked for the road construction project and the other two villages had people working for the school construction project. On May 4, 2007 (the day I reached LSS) Ramrajji was in a public hearing. The local court had finished listening to all witnesses and the final hearing is to be on May 18, 2007.

On May 5, 2007, Madhuji and I started early around 6 AM to reach Manji Ka Guda. The idea was to beat the high heat of midday. We also wanted to reach the village before 8 AM so we can catch the laborers before they leave to work for the day. We didn't get to the village till 8:30 but we were lucky enough to catch a couple of laborers as they were leaving for work. I followed Madhuji as she went to every house in the village talking about the latest public hearing and the developments under the NREGA act. It was amazing how even the kids in the village knew her so well. I had borrowed Madhuji's dupatta to protect me from the heat and small girls in the community came around telling me that I was wearing Madhu's dupatta. She has over time established a very good rapport with most of the workers families.

The houses are sort of divided into three portions. As soon as we entered, we went to the houses of the Mewall (I think) community (or Mewall ka Gaon as they call it). This community belongs to the scheduled caste section of the society. After the Mewall ka Gaon come the houses of the Rajputs (or Rajput ka Gaon) who are obviously the forward class socially and economically in that

region. After that comes the Bheelon ka Gaon or the section of the village where the Bheels (the local scheduled tribe) live. If you spend about a couple of days in the village, you could easily recognize which community a certain person belonged to just by the way they dress, their dialect, their houses and in fact most of the mannerisms.

The minimum wage struggle in Manji ka guda mostly happened with the workers in the Mewall ka Gaon part of the village. The Bheels were not a part of the workers in the road construction project. Among the houses that we visited one of them was of a woman called Kamli. Madhuji told me about her story. Kamli was one of the workers in the road construction project. She is from the Mewall community and along with her parents she lives with some 5 siblings. She is married to a person living in the near by village to Manji ka Guda and must be around 18-20 years old. She along with her two other sisters were significant contributors to the minimum wage campaign. Kamli in particular was very vocal. When the campaign started she was very interested in all the meetings, she would vociferously argue with the contractor for their rights. Madhuji tells me that she inspired many more people in the village to join the struggle. But when I met her, she was a soft-spoken individual and did not show any interest or excitement when Madhuji gave her an update. She listened to it more out of courtesy than out of interest. There were two major incidents that brought about this change of attitude in Kamli. The first was when the contractor fired all the workers of this villages and brought in laborers from a different village. Kamali was devastated with the loss of livelihood just like other laborers were. Eventually the contractor took back these laborers. Now her husband was completely against her standing up against the contractors. He started beating her at home. She decided to leave her husband and moved back with her parents but she never got back her enthusiasm for the struggle and she has also stopped working for the contractor. Despite her bold step, life in a village is not easy for a single woman. While she is not looked down upon or considered at fault for breaking her marriage as a woman she still does not own anything and has to be dependent on a man. I will talk more about the marriage structure in this region later. Kamli's younger sisters Durga (around the age of 8) and Kali (around the age of 5) are still very driven young girls (BTW both Durga and Kali are married as are most young girls and boys). Though they are below the age to be directly involved in the struggle, but both of them sit in the meetings that LSS conducts, go to every house in their village gathering people for the meeting and do all any minor work needed to make the meetings a success.

Madhuji and I also met Babuji. This man was another extremely active person during the struggle. He was one of the few people in the village who was still with LSS and the struggle during the low times when all laborers were taken out of their jobs.

Madhuji also helps Khemrajji in distributing Homeopathic medication to the villagers in need. After meeting people in the Mewall ka Gaon, we headed to the Bheelon ka Gaon in Manji Ka Guda where Madhuji had to give some medicines to the people. We went to a family of Bheels that day to give medicines. One guy (who I later found out was a Rajput) brought up the topic of the minimum wages

struggle. He was curious about LSS work and asked if Madhuji was among those working on the labor struggle for minimum wages. He kept asking about why you are trying to increase the wages to Rs 73 from Rs 50. If these laborers get Rs73, then no one would come to work for Rs50. He was not a contractor, but he recruited for the contractors I think. When Madhuji explained, that the government pays the contractor Rs 73 for each laborer, he quickly changed sides saying yes the laborers deserve it. Madhuji then said... 'You need to make a decision whether you are on the side of the laborers or the contractor. You cannot talk for both sides'. He quickly changed the topic to how the Bheels drink too much. As though that was the reason not to pay them enough. Madhuji responded saying... everyone drinks not just the lower caste people. And then he started asking which caste Madhuji belonged to and started inviting her to his place for lunch. Madhuji of course flatly refused saying she doesn't belong to any caste and food is the same whether we eat with the Bheels or with the Rajputs.

In the evening we went to Shyamji's village (Bheelon ka kheda). This is the village where there were 3 marriages and hence Madhuji couldn't have the meeting she had planned originally. We saw one of the brides and she was not more than 6 years old. In fact all the brides and the grooms were not more than 10! Child marriage is a rampant phenomenon in this region. Everyone gets married by the time they are 10. Madhuji showed me a 10-year-old girl who had a 1 and a half-year-old baby in her lap. She said the baby was the girl's sibling. What shocked me was that both the sisters were married. So this child that is 1 and half year old is married!! It was explained to me that marriages themselves are an expensive event so people get all the children married at the same time. And typically families exchange the brides, your son marries my daughter and my son marries yours! This is true about most of the local volunteers in LSS as well. They were all married first as children.

Now breaking marriages is not as uncommon. As I had mentioned before in the case of Kamli, even women can and do walk out of marriages. This surprised me, because domestic violence is very prevalent in this region. I always thought the reason men get away with domestic violence was because they were confident that women wouldn't walk out of the wedlock. But in Kamli's case she did walk out when her husband beat her. Madhuji later explained to me that wife beating is pretty accepted here. Kamli walked out only because her husband was beating her for no reason. But if he has a reason such as she didn't cook well or didn't do something she was supposed to then the beating is perfectly acceptable by the wife and the society.

But what happens when the wife walks out of the marriage? She still needs to depend on a man because women never own anything. If not husband, it has to be the father, brother or son. Now re-marriages do happen... well not quite the remarriage. Now the first wedding is called Shaadi as we all know. Now if a woman has broken her first marriage she can marry again. But the man who marries her again has to pay a certain, mutually agreeable amount to the first husband. This is technically not a shaadi but is called a Naata. In a Naata, there is no wedding event and festivities. The guy just comes, pays the money to the

first husband and takes away the girl. So typically, there is only one Shaadi but there can be many Naatas. But then this also means that the girl can get re-married only if she finds a rich guy willing to pay off for the Naata. This is typically not easy. Life for a single woman never is easy.

This ended my visit to LSS. One interesting thing before I finish the report is the way most LSS workers and well wishers greet each other. They do not say Namaste or Ram ram but say "Zindabad". One of the reasons behind this is that most other greetings are religious, while Zindabad is a neutral one and it celebrates life ... a decent life that everyone has a right to.