

Manavodaya Case Studies

STRUGGLE AND HOPE IN A REMOTE INDIAN VILLAGE

25th January 2001, at Manavodaya Training Centre : Self Help Group members of block Gondlamau, district Sitapur, (Uttar Pradesh) India had gathered for a training programme. They received a phone call from one of their members that the husband of one of the participants of village Kursi was arrested by the local police under false allegation of theft of electricity wire made by Brahmin landlord of that village. No meaningful discussion could be held further in the programme and women leaders at the centre did not eat or sleep that night apprehending torture of the arrested man to frighten the people.

Did this happen for the first time. No.

Manavodaya, is committed to people's empowerment in the rural areas had been working in this village for last five years and had organised the poor families of the village into ten Self Help Groups (5 women's groups and 5 men's groups) covering 105 families. The village having about 300 families is dominated by high caste money lenders. Many members of the Selp Help Groups had lost their agricultural land for not repaying small loans of say Rs. 200 or Rs. 400 (USD 5 to 10).

The reason for non repayment being a very high rate of interest i.e. 10% to 20% per month, which gets compounded if not paid regularly. Now that people are organised, and have access to money through self help groups and revolving fund (provided by Manavodaya in emergency) they have stopped going to money lenders. Children too, who used to work on their fields have started going to the school initiated by Manavodaya. This has infuriated the Brahmins. Starting a school in such a set up was itself a challenge for people as well as Manavodaya. It was started four year ago with 25 grown up girl students and one teacher whose stipend was then paid by Manavodaya. The school presently has a strength of about 250 students and is running independent of Manavodaya.

The teacher of this school was beaten up severely by the high caste people during school hours, so that he gets afraid and close down the school. Reason for anger against the school "If they get educated who will work on our field". At that time, the police protection had to be facilitated by Manavodaya. On another occasion, a staff member of Manavodaya was robbed and threatened by the same group of people. Such actions were meant to disturb the groups. With patient guidance & support by the organisation, however, the people have understood the need for solidarity.

On January 25th the people seemed to be ready for another attack. They immediately organised themselves and on 26th January, a few members went to the local police station. The station incharge put two options for releasing them. Either they pay Rs. 1000 or ask for forgiveness by touching that Brahmin's feet. The members decided not to agree to any of these. They came back to the village hoping to organise more strength this time. They hired a tractor in which 40 women, some of them having infants in their arms, and 20 men went to meet district officials 50 km away on that cold winter evening. They kept sitting outside the residence of the Chief Development officer of the district till 10 o'clock in the night. When they could not meet him, they all went to meet the superintendent of police. He met them and enquired on the wireless connecting the local Police station, if the concerned person has been arrested. The answer was "NO". It was learnt later that the local police was informed about this group's mission, so in fear he had set him free. Although the people did not have woollen sweaters to protect themselves and their children from the cold and had no food to eat at that late hour in the night, they returned back happily as if they have got everything. It took nearly three hours to chug back to the village. It was then 4 a.m. in the dark winter night. But to everyone it seemed a morning of hope and pleasure. The struggle was not over. It was the beginning.

Case of Avsaan Bibi Group

Avsaan Bibi Regional Group in village Kursi, district Sitapur, has a membership of ten Self Help Groups. Most members belong to the Scheduled castes and Muslims. This village had always been dominated by a few landlords belonging to the Upper Caste who also lent money at exorbitant interest rates. When groups were formed

here the fear of landlords in the minds of the people was so compelling that initially they held secret meetings. A school started with the resolution of the groups met with direct opposition i.e. beating teachers and prevention of children from attending. After years of struggle the school is now running well. We wish to present here a description of a reverse process i.e. the Self help Groups making a resolution for raising the level of a mud road and making of a brick road in another section with a small bridge on the road. These were first discussed in group meetings where members identified areas for road construction in their locality. The combined plan was then presented in writing in the village council (Gram Sabha) meeting. These were taken positively by the village head and now the whole scenario of the village has changed. There are brick roads at all places suggested by the groups, a tribute to the slow struggle of the group members who now have an identity as well as a voice in local planning and development. The murmur is that the village head who belongs to the upper caste landlords and was considered an enemy of the group concept, has an eye on the next panchayat election and is wanting to have the majority in his favour. Ten strong groups and their families easily have a majority vote.

Case of Sangam Group

The Sangam Kshetriya Samooh (Regional Group) in village Hindora, district Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, consisting of eleven Self Help Groups passed a resolution for construction for a drain for draining out spilled water from a handpump. This had been causing water logging on the main road of the village and had become a source of nuisance and disease. The resolution was handed over to the village head with a request to use Panchayat (Village Council) Funds for the purpose. The resolution had the support of all group members, a formidable section of the population. The village head is a Brahmin and group members are mostly Muslims or Scheduled Castes, who had never tried a collective approach earlier. However, the representation was successful and the panchayat has constructed a 200 meter long drain. This has encouraged group members to prepare similar plans of community welfare.