

# **School for Democracy Annual Report 2014-15**

## **Month-Long Training Programmes**

### **National Law School Training (October and November 2014)**

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangatan (MKSS) and School for Democracy (SFD) together hosted a one month course for the students of National Law School of India University (NLSIU), Bangalore. Forty three students pursuing their 'Masters in Public Policy' attended this course.

The objective of the course was to break the compartments of ideologies and perceptions the students are trapped with, and bring in the real issues, breaking inside the exclusive contours of public policy as it is commonly understood today. The orientation seeks to contextualize their experience and to anchor their perception in the existing policy framework within which the under-privileged worker and small and marginal farmers are empowered to access their rights. It seeks to establish that relevant policy and implementation lie in participatory processes of policy making with people. It not only ensures better policy, but much better implementation as people know what the laws and policies contain.

The structure of the course was designed choosing a balanced approach of using both academic and practical methods of learning to understand social contexts and issues. The course was divided into theoretical sessions, field visits, individual and group work on themes and reflections on the whole exercise.

### **Law, Government and Social Responsibility Training (June 2014)**

SFD conducted a month-long module for 30 MKSS interns, mostly undergraduates who came from different universities. The first week included classroom sessions on law (including the laws MKSS has helped formulate), society and government, human rights and civil liberties etc. Two weeks were devoted to field work. The aim was to raise awareness about the Right to Hearing (RTH). Teams fanned out in panchayats in the following blocks (Bhim, Kumbhalgarh, Jawaja, Raipur, Deogarh and Asind) helping people register complaints under the RTH. They also helped villagers file the complaints under RTH in the panchayat office and helped them obtain a receipt. The teams also helped people to register their names for work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

The RTH yatra was a learning experience for the interns as well as for MKSS. The interns were mostly undergraduates from diverse academic backgrounds: history, economics, law, development studies and engineering.

## Aman Cricket Tournament

Loktantrashala (School for Democracy) organized the Aman Cricket Tournament from July 19-21 amid bright sunshine and lots of enthusiasm. Ten teams registered to play, which brought together youth from villages and colleges alike on a shared passion for the game of cricket.

Apart from competitive matches, the tournament also saw teams playing friendly matches in between the main games. The evenings saw a motley group of youth playing a vigorous game of football for an hour. The ground in which the games were played is adjacent to the Loktantrashala campus in Thana panchayat of Bhilwara district, Rajasthan. The ground was cleared of boulders some months back and the rains resulted in a green top, perfect for field games. Loktantrashala, led by Taru Singh, took the initiative in organizing the tournament: informing the teams, printing posters, preparing the ground, measuring the field, marking the boundary, preparing the pitch, it was a collaborative effort by team loktantrashala.

The format devised was to have 20 over matches where each team would get to bowl 10 overs. The first day saw 2 competitive matches, one with a close score line. The other match saw team Devdungri score a massive 107 runs. A small tent was set up equipped with chairs, table and a mobile mike. Every match was accompanied by live and lively commentary in Hindi. The commentary - done by local youth - was witty, sharp and scathing. Commentators seized upon anything and everything: players' names, score lines, umpiring decisions and much more.

After the teams registered on the first day, team Loktantrashala, led by Dean Lal Singhji read out the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. He also talked about the activities that Loktantrashala did, such as constitution trainings, RTI and NREGA trainings, jan sansad and the Vyakhyan lecture series. The aim of loktantrashala is to get young people interested in participating in Loktantrashala activities through sports and study programmes. Some of the kids expressed an interest in participating in Loktantrashala's academic curriculum.

Day two saw the maximum participation since it was a Sunday. Eight teams and their supporters turned up to play cricket. The spectators occupied every bit of space available to get a better view of the field, sitting under the tent, on the wall, from the rooftop and up trees. Teams like Sujawat Cricket Club, Hathibatha and Mahavir Bal Mandir played matches. The spirit of competitive sport was mixed with an easygoing and cheerful camaraderie. The umpire came under fire for "wrong decisions" and wickets were celebrated with gusto. Team loktantrashala formed a local team called Aman Cricket club. "Sports is the perfect way to connect with youth not only for the sake of sports itself but beginning a dialogue on a range of issues," Lal Singhji, Dean, Loktantrashala said.

A team from the nearby village of Thana would come in the evenings to play football for an hour or so. It was a "competitive" non-competitive game played with great vigour and enthusiasm. Cricket stumps were converted into make shift goal posts and Lal Singhji was the referee. The high scoring games were played with pace, though not with precision.

The last day was reserved for the knockout stage of the cricket matches. The semi finals saw the losing teams fall by the way side and team Devdungri met team Thana for the final. Devdungri, batting first scored 104 runs while Thana was 66 all out. The victorious team lifted the trophy and each player got a certificate for participating. A hurrah was raised for everyone, a fitting finale to 3 days of sports.

### **Right to Hearing Yatra**

School for Democracy participated in three Right to Hearing (RTH) yatras in the second half of 2014: two in June and one in October. The RTH hearings were undertaken by the MKSS and SFD full timers along with 30 interns. The pad yatras involved travelling by foot through panchayats to gauge the awareness about Rajasthan's Right to Hearing law, which is a form of grievance redressal. Teams fanned out through villages in designated panchayats and talked about the importance of RTH and helped villagers write down their complaints and file it at the gram panchayat office. They also persuaded officials to keep the RTH "window" open to receive complaints. The window is supposed to be open between 10-12 a.m. every day. However, in most cases it is not. Getting people to understand the importance of the RTH and using it was the main objective of the yatras.

Two of the yatras were conducted in South-Central Rajasthan (Rajsamand, Pali, Ajmer and Bhilwara) where MKSS is located, and the third was conducted in Northern Rajasthan (Bikaner and Hanumangarh districts) in June during the "sarkar aapke dwar" programme.

### **The Girls' School Agitation**

Raajakiya Balika Ucha Madhyamik Vidhyalay (Government Girls' Higher Secondary School, Bhim) is located in the heart of Bhim. About 700 girls, from Std. IX to XII study there, but the number of teaching staff is just three. The Principal's post has been vacant for eight years and one teacher is the acting Principal. There is no teacher for basic subjects like Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Hindi and Sanskrit. The 11 first grade teacher posts have been vacant since the school was upgraded around 10 years ago. Repeated petitions to authorities have gone unanswered though the school is just a stone's throw away from the Block Development Office.

Feeling frustrated and helpless, on the eve of Gandhi Jayanti, a few students sought the help of Shankar Singh, a senior activist of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Bhim. He tried to persuade them to get their parents to petition the government authorities and begin a dialogue. But the students knew that since most of their parents were daily wage workers, they would not be able to leave their work. So, the students successfully convinced Shankar Singh and the MKSS to provide guidance and moral support. They planned to organise a

peaceful rally the next day and submit a memorandum to the Block Development Officer demanding immediate action to appoint teachers.

On October 2, around 450 girls locked the school gate and put up a banner — ‘700 students, 3 teachers; fill up the vacancies now’ — across it. A memorandum was prepared and signatures of all the students obtained. SFD participated in the girls’ struggle. Apart from lending moral and material support, SFD and MKSS members shot clips of the protest on phone cameras which was edited into a film. They also produced a series of writings to help document this important struggle.

### Youth and sports

An important objective of the School for Democracy has been to get local youth involved. This was achieved when youth from the neighbouring Badi-ka-badiya village started using the sports infrastructure. A group of 20-25 youth have started a regular game of volleyball every evening in the “sports ground” adjacent to Loktantrashala. SFD has invested in sports equipment in order to encourage local youth to come and play. A sound mind requires a sound body and sport builds camaraderie and team spirit. In fact, SFD’s future plans include developing the ground further to include a volleyball court, cricket/football ground, a running track etc. so that youth from the surrounding villages get a chance to develop their sporting skills.

#### Kabaddi, Kho Kho Tournament

Loktantrashala hosted around 45 school teams for a district level Kabaddi and Kho Kho tournament. The tournament was being organized by Thana panchayat, where Loktantrashala is located, and the sarpanch and other officials felt that the best ground was the one adjacent SFD. The ground was readied for the games and the teams consisted of school children from class V-VIII. They stayed on the SFD campus for the duration of the three-day tournament and used the facilities provided by the School.

#### Culture and democracy

**The Folk Music of the Langas:** Rajasthan is home to a rich tradition of music. In October SFD invited Hyatt Khan Langa and his troupe from Jodhpur to perform at SFD. The Langas are traditional balladeers and legatees to a rich tradition of folk music. Their music uses instruments like the khamaicha and dhol with vocal accompaniment. The Langas music is laced with the emotions and tones of traditional Rajasthani life. The audience consisted of students from Bangalore. Before the performance the Langas held a music workshop where they taught the lyrics of a traditional wedding song to the audience, mostly students from NLS Bangalore, to the accompaniment of their traditional instruments. The grand finale was when the students came onstage and sang the song.

## **Constitutional Awareness and Celebrating Independence Day**

August 15 is the day when the Indian state became sovereign and this date marks the beginning of a new social contract between the state and its people. School for Democracy celebrated Independence day by inviting young people to tell us what independence means for them. School children from the nearby villages of Shivpur and Thana dropped in for a flag hoisting ceremony and stayed on to narrate their experiences. Independence from illiteracy, hunger and want, these were some of the themes discussed. The day was rounded off with sports. Cricket, volleyball and football were played with gusto by the kids and SFD staff.

## **Understanding Atrocities**

School for Democracy along with MKSS went on two fact finding visits. One concerned a dalit atrocity case and the other was gender discrimination. In both cases the fact finding team went to ascertain the true facts of the cases and to lend moral and legal support to the oppressed party. The first was a case in a village 30 km from SFD in Bhilwara district. Some Rajputs in Bhimdiyas village burnt dalit homes on Diwali eve, in a dispute concerning land. Our fact finding team visited the village, and interviewed the victims, police and others and prepared a report that can be used to file a chargesheet.

The second case was in Rajsamand district where a woman was paraded naked in her village by her family. In both cases the MKSS/SFD fact finding teams reports will come in handy to deliver justice to the victims.

## **Right to Information Training workshops**

Loktantrashala (School for Democracy) has started a series of training programmes centred around the Right to Information. The idea behind it is to take one topic in each programme and explore how RTI can be used to unearth information and empower communities. The RTI workshops are held every month at the Loktantrashala campus and activists from around Rajasthan and further spend 2 days interacting and sharing their experiences. So far two RTI workshops have been held

RTI and Dalits (Feb. 8-9): Dalit activists from across Rajasthan came to deliberate on how they could use RTI to bring information pertaining to atrocities, discrimination and reservations to light. The deliberations of the workshop are being compiled into a booklet.

RTI and Education (March 28-29): Education is a vast and important field. The workshop saw activists and community organizers from around Rajasthan and locals deliberate on how best to use RTI to find out the shortcomings in the education system in Rajasthan. The

workshop also evolved a strategy for the “Shiksha ka Sawal” campaign that will be undertaken in 2015-16.

The next workshop will be on Budgets, scheduled for May.

### **Organised School visits:**

School students from two different types of schools visited Loktantrashala as part of their academic programme. Students from the Imlee Mahua school in Jharkhand came for 4 days to learn about MKSS and the work it has done. This school is for tribal children and the students who came were from class V and VI.

The second visit was by class XI students of The School in Chennai. The class visited along with their teachers in December and stayed for 3 days. The highlight of the visit was meeting the girls of the Bhim Girls School who launched an agitation demanding the appointment of teachers in their school. Both sets of kids were inquisitive about each other and asked a lot of questions, the language barrier notwithstanding.

### **Delhi Charcha series:**

Loktantrashala’s Delhi dialogues (Charchas) got a huge boost in the second half of the year. Charchas have been held on a regular basis since January 2015 and they have seen a large participation, especially from the youth. Charcha topics have included “Sex Work”, “Love Jihad” and “Secularism”. There was also an informal discussion on “Understanding Budgets”.

### **Workshops:**

Loktantrashala is a space meant for hosting events that further the understanding of democracy. Workshops are an important format for furthering this aim and Loktantrashala hosted some interesting workshops:

#### **The Peace and Justice workshop:**

Aman Biradri, the Delhi-based organization that works with disposed and marginalized people, had a 5 day workshop at the Loktantrashala campus. Around 70 people attended the workshop, including the people that Aman Biradri works with: namely riot affected victims and the urban homeless. Riot survivors and activists from Muzzafarnagar, Gujarat and Bhagalpur along with urban homeless activists from Hyderabad stayed, worked and dined together as they shared experiences and talked about the way forward. Personal accounts,

legal strategies, policy interventions and more were discussed as people got to know each other in the informal setting at Loktantrashala.

### **Discrimination Workshop (Dec. 11-14)**

This workshop got together dalit activists from Rajasthan and beyond to discuss discrimination. All viewpoints on discrimination, from personal accounts to an academic perspective, were explored. Since Loktantrashala isn't tied to outside funding the workshop lead threadbare aspects that wouldn't dare bare their head in a formal workshop. As one participant put it, "funding has taken the natural rage that Dalits feel about generations of social discrimination and tamed it into workshops and conferences, instead of action." The quality of discussion was high and perspectives on discrimination - from those faced at the village to those faced by educated Dalits in well-heeled urban jobs – came to light.

**Community Radioworkshop (January):**Loktantrashala hosted a 4 day workshop of the Western region community radio stations. Conducted by Delhi-based Ideosynch media, the workshop saw stations from Rajasthan and Maharashtra discuss issues related to community radio: policy, practice, content etc.

### **Briefing and debriefing on peoples' concerns**

Loktantrashala also participated in public programmes on issues related to policies and legislation and their implementation in Delhi, Jaipur and Beawar in this period. SFD provided support in analysis and in compilation of information to facilitate understanding of the issues. The information collected is matter for a brief paper for our own understanding. The massive convergence meeting and the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the RTI in Beawar were important occasions.