



# ***Sambhali Trust Setrawa Project Progress Report 2007/ 08***

***In October 2007, the Sambhali Trust established a free learning centre for girls in Setrawa.***

By Griselda Murray Brown and Helen Wagner

## Introduction

Setrawa is a village of around 3,000 inhabitants, situated 110 km from Jodhpur, in the Thar Desert of Western Rajasthan. It is the ancestral village of *Sambhali's* founder, Mr. Govind Singh Rathore. There are three schools (two private and one government-run) and several communities in the village. The *Sarpanch*, an elderly woman of the *meghwal* Dalit community, is the official head of the village *Panchayat* (the governing body).

*“When my cousin uncle first requested me to start up a project like Jodhpur project in Setrawa (my ancestral village) for helping my own community people, I was little worried how would this all happen and how will people react to the change? One day surprisingly he invited me to a village meeting where he introduced me as an important role playing person in the community, I was very proud of the honor and for being accepted in the village by my extended cousins and people from the community who I didn't even know . One other day Ms. Amanda (volunteer at Jodhpur Project) and I went to Setrawa village, just to share my idea on “Setrawa project” with the local villagers to witness and experience on ground reactions, we didn't dream it will all happen so fast that during this visit in the village and meeting with people, we hired a building for the workshop and a local teacher and Ms. Amanda was requested to be the first volunteer at the Setrawa project within a week. The Setrawa project is a blessing by my ancestral Guardian angels.”*

- Govind Singh Rathore

*“I will stand by the Sambhali Trust whenever it is required.”*

- the *Sarpanch* of Setrawa



- The integration of the *Sambhali* Centre into the village was of primary importance if the Trust's 'Setrawa Project' was to succeed. Problems encountered and how they were resolved:

Some villagers at first believed the Trust's founder and volunteers to be missionaries.

- The *Sambhali* Centre made clear it was part of a rich, Indian tradition, with a sung prayer before the daily English class, and village-wide events such as the 5-day 'Art of Living' yoga workshop, in an attempt to alter this misperception.

Local people were anxious that the new centre, and presumed 'Western' values of its volunteers, would threaten local culture and caste.

- As girls from *Brahmins* to *Dalits* signed up, it became clearer to locals that the *Sambhali* Centre was about caste integration, shared learning, and confidence building. They came to understand that *Sambhali's* aim was to improve the daily lives and future prospects of its participants, while respecting, and celebrating, the values of the village.



*"While we hope to share our culture, we would never want to influence their regard for their own culture. Rather, we would like them to teach us about it."*

- **Karine Tchakerian and Elisa Warner**, volunteer January – February 2008

## Where are we now?

### 1) Integration into the village

- **Volunteers are frequently invited to the girls' houses for *chai*, and have formed relationships with their families. They have come to know the village shopkeepers, and the shopkeepers to know their shopping habits! One year on, the locals seem more used to interacting with and seeing Westerners in Setrawa.**
- **Volunteers buy fabric from local shops and pay *Sambhali* girls to make *salwar suits* from it; wearing traditional clothing is a visual statement of the Trust's respect for local culture.**

*"We are relating more and more to the people in the village. We get to know the "doctor" and the pharmacist, the cloth seller and the tailor, who made a "lehnga" or "ghaghra" for me."*

– Ms. Edwina Alva, volunteer December 2007 – January 2008



## 2) A different kind of school...

*“The Setrawa project has so much potential because there are so many girls who want to be educated.”*

– **Charlotte Madden**, volunteer March 2008

### English learning

- The level of English was very basic when the *Sambhali Centre* opened its doors in October 2007.
- One year on, many girls feel able to converse, read and write with a confidence afforded by regular contact with native/fluent English speakers. While local schools teach formal, written English, the *Sambhali Centre* focuses on lively, spoken exchange. We believe that if English is made fun, it is made memorable.

*“The girls are active and shout answers loudly in a choir. I wish we had that enthusiasm in our schools.”*

- **Karelia Wilenius**, from Finland, volunteer February – May 2008



- Volunteers teach two English lessons per day: an afternoon session for girls who do not receive any formal education, and an evening session for those who do. As much as possible, teaching is tailored to the needs of the individual.

On **Guddi**, an 8-year-old *Dalit* girl with no formal education:

*“In her fourth week of attending the Sambhali Centre she could recognize colors, count and write numbers up to ten, say and write the alphabet, name most major body parts, many animals, and all of the nouns on our alphabet board.”*

- **Karine Tchakerian and Elisa Warner**



- **Regular attendance is often a problem. The many Hindu festivals, weddings and domestic duties all take the girls away from school.**

*“We made an attendance chart, on which each girl receives a sparkly star sticker for every day she attends, in the hope of increasing class numbers. The chart is displayed in the class room for all girls to see. They now gather around the chart at the beginning of every class to count their stars. They have become rather competitive about it!”*

- **Griselda Murray Brown**, volunteer August- December 2008, and **Helen Wagner**, volunteer August 2008-April 2009

## **The expansion of knowledge**

- The *Sambhali* Centre has no set curriculum.
- Lessons may focus on *grammatical issues* (e.g. the basic structural differences between English and Hindi), on *pronunciation*, on *transcribing spoken English*, or on a specific educational project.

- The special project for October 2008 was 'The World':

*"The girls split into five teams; each team was instructed to design a poster displaying information and pictures of a different continent. Bemused at first, it was exciting to see them begin to share out the tasks, and voice their opinions on the layout of their poster. On seeing pictures of the New York skyline, one girl exclaimed, "A very big village!"*

**- Griselda Murray Brown**

## **Sewing, Arts and Crafts**

- The *Sambhali* Centre Setrawa provides six sewing machines and local and foreign fabrics, as well as a range of Art and Craft materials, for participants' use.
- At 11am every weekday morning, women and girls gather together to practice traditional sewing patterns and to learn new ones, under the guidance of an experienced local teacher, Miss Rekha Sharma. Here they share ideas, stories, gossip and worries. Here they are given the space to be creative.

*"In these two hours the women can escape the rigidity of their domestic duties to pursue something totally unrelated to their chores."*

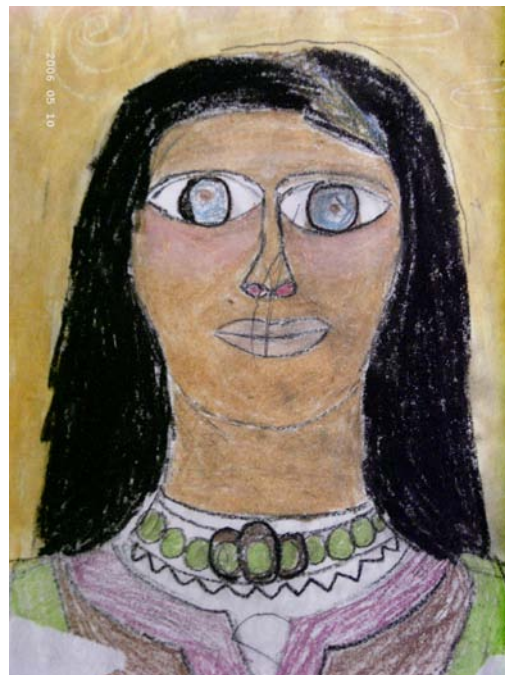
**- Karine Tchakerian and Elisa Warner**



- On any given morning, some girls may be making beaded jewelry, and others hand-stitching individual patchwork pieces (eventually to be joined together in a colorful quilt); some may practice traditional *Mehandi* (Henna) designs on one another, while others paint a still life composition, under the guidance of the volunteers.

*“...a lot of woman leave their families at quite a young age for an arranged marriage and become a prisoner in their new home, in a strange new village far away from home. Creating social networking groups and encouraging friendships and support for each other is so important.”*

– Amanda Humphries, volunteer October 2007 – January 2008



### 3) Sambhali beyond the classroom

- **Volunteers can provide *medical assistance* .**

*“We are trained in CPR and first aid. We told the girls that if they have a health problem that their family is unable to care for they must come to us and we will help them receive proper treatment. We feel that it is important that our students know that Sambhali is not just a centre for learning but also a refuge or place they can come for help.”*

- Karine Tchakerian and Elisa Warner

*“Helen and I have had a lot of contact with one particular 'untouchable' family whose girls and their cousins come to the Sambhali Centre. They have 10 children, most it seems under the age of 10, and live in two small rooms; the father is an alcoholic and doesn't work. When Maya, their 8-year-old, didn't come to school for a couple of days in a row, we were worried. On the third day, her cousin Guddi explained that Maya had a fever. We went to the house and found her drowsy, hot and largely ignored, so we took her to the local hospital. She had a blood test, and it came back indicating she had malaria. Helen and I paid for her treatment and she is now recovering. We fear she would not have received this treatment had we not been able to cover it.”*

- Griselda Murray Brown

- **Volunteers have a *pastoral* as well as an *educational* role.**

*“You become intertwined with the dramas and happenings of their day to day life. You are invited into their wonderful worlds and their sadder worlds.”*

– Amanda Humphries

*“For Rekha's birthday, Gris, the girls and I surprised her with a party. In Jodhpur we bought two cakes (you can't buy them in Setrawa), decorations, party hats and balloons. We prepared everything and hid. When Rekha arrived for English class we jumped out and started singing “Happy Birthday”! She was happy because it was the first birthday party she'd ever had. The girls enjoyed eating the cake, the fruit salad and dancing to Hindi music. Rekha's sister Usha won the dancing competition. Wearing their party hats the girls burst the balloons and sang songs together. It was a great day.”*

- Helen Wagner



## The experience of volunteering in Setrawa

- **In Setrawa, volunteers have had to get used to living with less personal space than they are used to.**

*“Always a crowd of people watching us, like we are animals in the zoo (we are the first Westerners to ever live here, possibly the first that many have ever seen.). The attention and lack of personal space was all way too much at first, but its calmer now I have been here a while.”*

- Amanda Humphries, first volunteer in Setrawa

- **Volunteers have found living with fewer material possessions both challenging and liberating.**

*“You learn quite quickly to adjust to the limited choice in supplies (cooking with a choice of 5 or 6 vegetables). It only encourages creativity really. You learn to love the simplicity, and you feel you could almost survive anywhere.”*

- Amanda Humphries

*“The underlying purpose of Sambhali is to empower women, but we the volunteers are also being empowered.”*

- Karine Tchakerian and Elisa Warner

- **Volunteers become involved in the girls’ lives, families, and the village community.**

*“I showed them pictures of my family and told them about my 11 year old brother, and they have now started writing letters to him, describing themselves and their families”*

- Elisa Warner

*“We feel that these girls, both in Setrawa and in Jodhpur, are our family - our mothers, our sisters, our daughters. We had no idea how difficult it would be to leave. We had no idea how special these women and children are. We are so lucky to have had this time with them.”*

- Karine Tchakerian and Elisa Warner

*“What I liked most about Setrawa, was the tight-knit community, and lack of hesitation anyone had in helping anyone else.”*

- Charlotte Madden

*“I am staying in Setrawa for eight months. I think it’s important for the girls to have a long-term volunteer to give them stability. After three months I become used to the teaching, the girls and the village which makes me feel very comfortable.”*

**- Helen Wagner**

## **Where are we going?**

The Sambhali Setrawa Project has seen tremendous progress in its one year. We hope it can continue its essential work with the help of future volunteers and well-wishers of the Trust.

*“From this small seed we hope that a great tree will grow.”*

**-Ms. Edwina Alva**

