

Ramesh and the community work at Lalgadh

Ramesh Chaudhuri, pictured here with self-help group facilitator Ram Karan, has worked for NLT since 1998. He was originally recruited to run the Self Care Training Centre and is now manager of the Community Programme at Lalgadh Leprosy Hospital & Services Centre. He is married with 3 children, and based at Lalgadh, although his wife and children now live most of the time in Kathmandu for the children's education.



The early Self Care Training Centre work taught patients impaired by leprosy how to live with their impairments and disabilities. As the stigma and challenges of leprosy became better understood, it was clear that NLT's work needed to reach deep into the communities around Lalgadh to make them more sympathetic to people affected by leprosy. This led to a growing community programme involving self-help groups, Village Alive projects and, more recently, Momentum Clubs. After 20 years there are now 115 self-help groups, nearly 20 villages transformed, and three Momentum Clubs operating in the four districts that NLT has worked in. The community staff has been at the centre of this exciting work: founding, training, supporting and monitoring the groups, as well as providing support, education and counselling to the most vulnerable families affected by leprosy. We are now attempting to expand this work into all eight districts of Madhesh Province, as funds become available.

During my recent visit to Lalgadh I wondered why Ramesh continues to work at Lalgadh, when his family lives eight hours' drive away. I am sure it is a busy and, at times, frustrating job. To me, the burden of leprosy did not feel much different to when I worked at Lalgadh 25 years ago. The self-help groups have been amazingly successful, but there are still lots of villages and communities where there is stigma towards people affected by leprosy.

Ramesh took us on a field trip to visit a group of women who had formed a Momentum Club. We heard stories from many of them about what life was like before their club was established. They lived in poverty: their husbands spent 90% of their income on alcohol and gave only 10% for food, clothes and to send their children to school. When drunk, the husbands would often beat their wives who had no power to resist the mistreatment. They felt helpless and down-trodden.

Through the Momentum Club, the women have access to microcredit loans which they have used to generate their own income. Many have invested in buying livestock. They can make money to spend on their children, pay back their loan; and other group members can then borrow from the club. Sometimes the loan is used to improve their houses or build a new home. Their children attend school and have uniforms to wear. One club paid for a new concrete road to be built in their village, and another had a water pump installed. These are all impressive results and are things that can be counted, photographed and reported to the club supporters.

The women also told us how their attitudes have changed. Since they have come together they are stronger and more optimistic; they smile more and show their faces. They are aware of the importance of hygiene and caring for their own health and that of their children. Education is valued, so they make sure their children go to school. Before, they used to ignore it when some women were being abused by their husbands. Now, they stand up for each other and don't tolerate mistreatment by the men. They even stand up for their rights when facing local government officials!

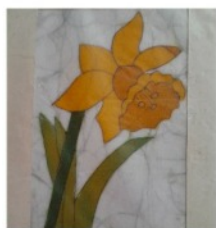


During one of these visits, Ramesh turned to me with a joyful smile on his face. "You asked me why I do this job. This is why I do this job. It's not because the group members make money and repay the loans. It's because people's attitudes change and their lives are turned around. I may not be able to give my own family everything I would like to, but I can enjoy the smiles coming on the faces of those who were stigmatized and excluded".

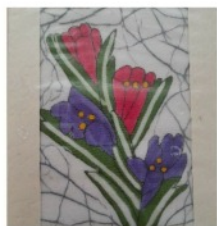
That is what this work is all about.

Dr Liz Jordan (NLT UK Trustee)

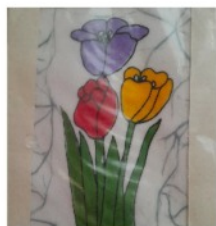
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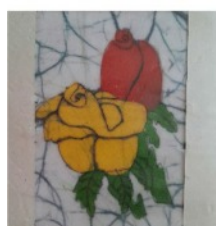
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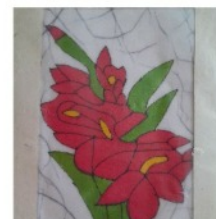
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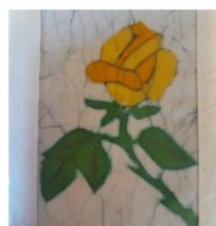
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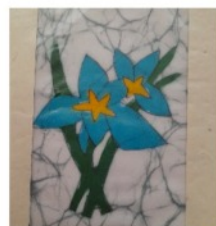
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