

Oct. 2002

Hello again,

It's been six weeks since I got to Ahmedabad and began work at the Self-Employed Women's Association. My daily routine is pretty much settled now. The things that initially struck me so forcefully--like the amazing toughness of the SEWA members themselves--have begun to sink in. I've reached that stage when one notices more subtle differences, and I'm now discovering that things and people I found familiar--such as my SEWA colleagues--are in fact very different.

Though I'm living an existence that seems both upside-down and inside-out from life in New York, I'm finally establishing a rhythm. In New York days end late; here I wake up at 5:30--the heat and the pollution are both less intense at that hour. In New York there's little I'd rather do than be with friends; in my non-working hours here I do yoga, meditate (or try to!) and read a lot. It was a lucky surprise to realize that India, with its numerous spiritual traditions, is the perfect place to end up if your work must take you somewhere where you know no one. If I was in some fun place like Brazil, for example, and had no friends, I'd be a lot lonelier. In India, though, ashrams take the place of night clubs, and they are helping me to enjoy my own company.

Religion, as I said, is everywhere, even in our office. Our day begins at ten o'clock, when we all sit down for prayer. We say a Hindu prayer, a Muslim prayer, SEWA's own prayer, and, rather bizarrely, a prayer from a popular Hindi movie. (stranger still is that apparently a creature invented in a Bollywood movie has entered the Hindu pantheon and has his own shrines.)

1 pm is lunchtime and everyone grabs her 'tiffin'--a metal lunch box with three compartments, one for Chapati, one for rice and dahl, and one for a vegetable, which we all bring from home. Even though there is a perfectly good conference room table with chairs, all twenty of us crowd onto the tiny kitchen floor and pick and choose from each other's home-cooked food. Often, though, the kitchen floor isn't that crowded. At any given time, half the office seems to be fasting. Some fast because they are Jains, who have dietary restrictions on just about everything but water and rice. Last week, one woman was fasting because it was her birthday! When I heard that, I made a mental note to find a good recipe for birthday cake and went looking for small candles. Still others fast at the insistence of their parents, because they think it will help them find a good husband.

The most unusual facet of Indian life which I've encountered here is arranged marriages. At least 90% of them are arranged. Most of the matches are made thanks to the marriage page in the newspaper ("caste no barrier; fair complexion a must" are some of the particularly Indian requirements of these personals.) Sometimes I joke that there are plenty of women in New York who'd like a little extra help finding a husband. This might even work as an episode of "Sex and the City:" Charlotte makes an Indian friend and decides she likes how they do things in Bombay, where "normal" men take out personals and you don't have to be ashamed of replying. In reality, though, I don't think

the Indian system is all that funny.

A girl in the office has recently succumbed to parental pressure and went with her parents to meet a potential husband and his family. Usually, if the boy and the girl and their two families like each other, they will probably become engaged after the third date. Well, they're not really dates--I think the Indian term is "bride viewings." And even though educated girls like the ones at SEWA have veto power, these are not "husband viewings" at all. The man is allowed to meet numerous potential brides, but the woman can only see one at a time. Maybe this is vaguely comparable to men in the West "making the first move," but the imbalance is far more significant here, because my friend now finds herself seriously considering marrying the first man she's met, while he's apparently interviewed a whole bunch of girls.

When she met him the first time I was very impressed by her resolve. She went with all sorts of mandates--like, "I won't change my name; I hate to cook and clean; my career is as important as yours"--which I thought were very gutsy. (And sometimes, in fact, this scenario does seem to work well for independent women. I pity the fiancé of another woman I know, who told me she only agreed to marry the man once he understood clearly that "he'd never be as important to her as her work.") But in my friend's case, I've since seen her cave in considerably. The man lives in St. Louis, and even though she's only met him once and she's never been out of India, she's considering moving to St. Louis with him next year. I asked her if he's helping her look into job opportunities there; she says no. I told her he at least ought to pay for her to come visit St. Louis before the wedding. At that point, she told me that both sets of parents would be shocked at such a request, and that I didn't understand a thing about India. The thing is, I may not understand India, but I do understand America, and I understand women. I know that if she went to graduate school in America (her original plan, abandoned since the St. Louis architect made his appearance,) she'd meet a hundred interesting men, and she wouldn't need her parents' or a newspaper's help to do it. I also know that if she were unhappily married in a foreign country and had to demand a divorce, she'd shock a lot more people back home. But the real reason I feel so strongly about this, is that she is a beautiful, talented girl and I would like to see her in love. Her main misgiving, however, is familiar where I come from too. If I let this one go, will I ever meet anyone else?

The society here is already so patriarchal, to the extent that it's even inshrined in language. In traditional Gujarati families, the wife addresses her husband with the respectful "tamay" while he uses the informal "tu" when talking to her. If my friend marries this man, she'll have to make so many sacrifices--not just of her career, but even of her loyalty to and identification with her own parents. It's so much of a cultural given that a woman comes to "belong" exclusively to her husband's family that you see it reflected on TV. A popular Hindi soap looks like your standard "steel magnolias" story about three generations of women in one family. But instead of it showing the relationship between mother, daughter and grandma, it's about a woman, her new daughter-in-law, and her own mother-in-law. And of course, since the woman views her husband's new wife not as flesh-and-blood, but as an intruder, the show is mostly about infighting for the male attention in the family.

Now that I see better what women of the middle class are up against, and how many

cultural forces diminish their independence and deflect their focus from their careers, I'm even more amazed by the leadership the SEWA members assert in their communities. Last week, in order to meet women and find stories for a documentary we are doing on SEWA's work with riot victims, I toured slums and rural villages with SEWA's microcredit team.

SEWA's savings and microcredit schemes are administered at the grassroots level by a woman called a "bank sati." The most active SEWA member in the community (as long as she is literate) is chosen for this role. Every day, she must visit each woman in her community with a bank account, collecting savings and interest payments, and offering financial advice.

Put simply, these women have become the financial center of their community. Whatever wealth the community has amassed is thanks to their work, because if they didn't come see each woman every day for her few rupees of spare change, that money would surely disappear on some wasteful expenditure or other, like candy for her kids. As I walked through the streets with the bank satis, different women would come forward with ten or twenty rupees (forty or sixty cents) to deposit in her account. Even though only a miniscule number of men actually save, those who want to can only do it through their wives' accounts at SEWA, since no other bank will take their money. So the Bank Sati woman has become a person of consequence for the men too, a few of whom were approaching her with money as well. It says something about the importance and potential of savings and microcredit programs, that I will have to go back and interview some of these bank Satis for a documentary about something totally unrelated--communal violence. The city's main marketplace--where huge numbers of SEWA members work as street vendors--was closed for more than three months during the riots. It's clear that the bank satis became their lifeline, by providing access to their savings or a loan, or advice about how to manage their finances during the crisis. But more significantly, SEWA's lending groups succeed because they create economic interdependence amongst the members, and I find myself wondering if that ever discouraged participation in the violence. The bank satis probably know as much about this as anyone, and I want to start talking to them about this, on and off camera--after I come back from a vacation in Rajasthan next week.

One thing that amazed me is the diversity of communities and employment opportunities that can exist in one square mile of an Ahmedabad slum. One bank sati oversees a community of banana-chip makers--all running their production from their homes, and all living side by side. Another community does nothing but produce a type of street food called Paani Puri. (Though I'd avoided street food, I couldn't resist it when I could actually see it in production, and duly got sick for the first time here.) If I walk through yet another area, in front of each and every house will be a woman rolling bidi (cigarettes,) or sewing rags into blankets the poor use to keep warm in winter. Before coming here, I thought that slums were areas full of people who were unemployed because their countries couldn't compete on the world market. In fact, the slums of Ahmedabad are a patchwork quilt of dozens of different economic activities, keeping millions of people fed, in a country where the government and major industry is doing zero for them.

One nice outcome of having met some of the street vendors, is that I'm now almost able to enjoy being out on the streets. I don't just race home at night--I linger and have a look. Now that I've seen a method to the madness, I'm finding the 'Paani Puris' harder to resist. More importantly, though, having been to the slums and having seen that people plying one particular trade usually live together in India, I can now understand what made SEWA succeed in its fight to create unions for these home-based workers. To the average tourist--and, I presume, to the average Indian citizen or government official--a busy Indian street with its hundreds of vendors appears a mass of incomprehensible and chaotic activity. But all it took was for SEWA activists to take the time to visit these vendors in their homes, and to ask questions and understand their means of production, for that chaos to be made sense of, and a plan of action devised. I bet that if governments also took the time to ask questions of actual residents, they'd get a lot closer to understanding and resolving the really big problems in these communities, like pollution or clean water.

Though I could go on and on, I've probably written more than most people feel like wading through in one sitting. Thanks for reading!

Love,

--Jessie