

Sept. 2002

Dear friends,

I'm sorry not to be writing to everyone individually. I want to share my experience in India with everyone who either inspired me, helped me, or simply listened to me fantasize and plan for hours on end. The internet cafe has five computers on one dial-up modem, so writing to more than two or three people in one sitting is a trying experience.

I arrived in India three weeks ago, on a fellowship program run by the America Indian Foundation. AIF sends twenty Americans a year to work with different NGOs scattered across India. We spent the first two weeks in Bombay on a training/orientation program, where we were lectured by professors on Indian development issues, and took field visits to various tribal, rural or slum communities.

Last week I finally arrived in Ahmedabad, one of the bigger cities in India in the drought-ridden state of Gujarat which borders Pakistan, where I'll be spending nine months. This city has had a calamitous few years, with a disastrous earthquake in 2001 that was quickly followed by terrible flooding, and most recently by sectarian riots in which Hindu mobs killed perhaps 2000 Muslims. People want to know about New York and September 11th, but I keep telling them that in my opinion their city has suffered as much, if not more, trauma than mine has. But despite all the grimness, I'm new enough here that things like camels pulling carts through the streets still delight me.

I'm working for the organization SEWA--the self-employed Women's Association. Thirty years ago, the organization's founder organized the poorest women in Ahmedabad into trade unions--a union of rag-pickers, of street vendors, of cigarette-rollers, of black-printers. One part of the organization fights the government to secure better working and living conditions for the members of those unions, while another teaches community groups to do for themselves what the government won't do for them. So SEWA members are trained as health workers, teachers, daycare providers, and even given technical skills in things like installing water pumps, so they don't have to wait for the government to bring them water systems. Finally, since SEWA is mostly working with women whose traditional source of employment--farming--was eroded when they moved with their husbands to the slums, SEWA gives them new income-generating skills. The women are trained in traditional crafts like embroidery, pottery or weaving. In and out of the office, the SEWA staff are expected to live in a way that benefits the SEWA members. For example, it is frowned upon to wear anything but village-industry cotton.

Though I am sure I will have many trying times over the next nine months, when the pollution, the traffic conditions, and the lack of toilet paper will drive me insane, right now I feel so lucky to be here. I'm working with a group of women that, according to the accepted wisdom, are among the most downtrodden on earth--the low-caste peasant and slum-dwelling women of India--and I'm encountering radicalism like I've never imagined.

The SEWA members on average earn more than six times their husbands. SEWA has been providing them microcredit and banking services since its inception, and all the

SEWA members save a little bit of money each month--on average, I think, the equivalent of 4 or 5 cents. The SEWA bank is the wildest place I've ever seen, and I try to spend a few minutes each day there, writing in my journal and taking in the scene. It's like a chaotic, all-woman train station or village bazaar. Hundreds of barefoot women in Saris with babies at their breasts push their way to the counters with a few precious rupees clutched in their handkerchiefs. The SEWA bank-tellers must be the most patient people on earth. Nearly all the depositors are illiterate, so identifying them is a painstaking process of taking and matching thumbprints. They are also innumerate, so lots of women never remember how much they have saved, and can argue with a teller for hours as to whether they have 20 or 22 rupees saved. Most of the women are saving so they can get a loan from SEWA rather than from the extortionate moneylenders, mostly for house repair. When the women open up a loan for their daughters' weddings or dowries, the bankers tell them about the mass weddings SEWA has started organizing, that are intended to cut down on the cost of a daughter's wedding, and thus make inroads into female infanticide or sex-selective abortions.

I'm working as a producer for the organization's in-house video production company, which is unlike any video operation I could have ever imagined. Yesterday when I returned from a shoot at midnight (people work pretty hard here) I had to push aside a stray baby goat as I lugged a \$5,000 beta cam into the office. The other producer is a 25-year old woman from Bombay who used to work at Indian music channel, who speaks perfect English. She's the most ideal partner I could imagine, because she understands TV and will encourage me to make suggestions, while helping me avoid something I was very worried about--namely, appearing the bossy American who thinks she knows everything.

The other SEWA video women, however, are the ones who are truly amazing. One of the camerawoman, Leelaben, used to be illiterate and sold vegetables on the street. When the women picked me up at 6am yesterday morning for our shoot in the villages, I groggily told them I wasn't used to waking up at 5:50 in the morning. One woman smiled and told me she'd been up since 4:00 am, doing the washing and preparing breakfast, lunch and dinner for her husband and children. That'll teach me to complain about too much hard work or tiredness.

The staff of six, who've all been trained to shoot and edit, are all SEWA members. The production company is a poor women's cooperative structured along the same lines as the salt-workers cooperative, the gum-collectors cooperative, or the vegetable vendors cooperative. Many of the younger members of Video SEWA are second generation SEWA. Their mothers still work as head-loaders or block-printers, for example, and that their daughters have become film-makers is a testimony to how thoroughly SEWA can transform a family's prospects. One woman, for example, has a son who is a neurologist in Miami. I cannot tell you how honored I feel to work with these women. On our drive back last night, I told them that even though I have worked in five different television stations in New York, on only one occasion have I worked with a female camera person. Darshanaben laughed and looked amazed, and then offered to lead a delegation of the poor self-employed women of Ahmedabad to organize the women television workers of New York!

I want these women to know how inspired I am by them. Many of the people I've met in India have a sense that the only place with opportunity is America. But these women--and many other SEWA members, from the Union leaders, to the women who regularly lobby in Parliament here or speak at international conferences--have bridged a greater divide than I, personally, have ever seen crossed in the US or Europe. Of course they are fully cognizant of how much they've achieved, but if I can make them realize how much I, as a 'liberated' woman from the West, can learn from their example, than I feel more comfortable telling them what little that I know about making documentaries.

I think there's quite a bit I'll be able to contribute over the next nine months. I am going to give shooting lessons, so they start shooting in a more systematic way. I hope to help them write grants to get newer equipment, and will try to forge connections with the local news stations here, to get their support and guidance. My main job, though, is to write and produce films. Next year we will do one about conditions in the refugee camps where many of the Muslims of Ahmedabad have been living since the riots. But first we are doing a forty-five minute documentary for an international water conference, about how access to water is the primary concern of the women of Gujarat. Village women spend up to three or four hours a day collecting water if there is no village tank. If they don't have access to water, they don't have time to work for money, and often their daughters, who must help in the water collection, don't have time to go to school.

That's the project we were shooting yesterday in the villages. What is amazing about SEWA video is that it makes films BY poor women, FOR poor women. Not only do the SEWA video women know their subjects inside out, but they also don't have to worry about issues of condescension or objectification. I've often felt guilty about the way the media manipulates the people we ask for interviews. But the SEWA camerawomen go to the villages in their saris, share the family's food, and are often invited to stay the night. Yesterday, one of the camerawomen shooed away the husband of a woman we wanted to interview. The woman was too timid to talk around her husband, but opened up once she was just with the SEWA women, even with their cameras, because they were just like her. I wonder if a foreign camera crew could have accomplished as much. I also wondered whether I ought to go away too, and hope that by learning some Gujarati I can begin relating to the women as well.

I'm sorry for writing such a long email, and thank anyone who's still reading for plowing through. I don't have many people here to talk to about what I'm seeing, so writing to my friends helps me articulate things to myself. I also miss everyone, and sharing my experience helps me feel closer to home.

Love,

Jessie