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Basrabai, Meeraiben, and the master of Mohadi

by RAVI KANBUR

'One of the most educational and moving experiences of my life.' This was how Ravi Kanbur described the time he spent in a village in Gujarat in 1999. His visit was organised by SEWA, a membership organisation of nearly one million women who work in India's informal economy. His host, Basrabai, is a member of SEWA. SEWA's experience of hosting what they call Exposure and Dialogue Programmes (EDPs) is discussed in Section 1 (Nanavaty *et al.*) and Section 4 (Shroff). The EDP in which Professor Kanbur participated was designed as part of the process for developing the World Bank's 2000/01 *World Development Report: Attacking Poverty*, which he was leading. This description of his experience in Mohadi village has become a seminal account in the history of immersions.

As we arrived in Mohadi village, Kutch district, after a long drive, the first building we saw was the primary school. We were told by Meeraiben, our chief SEWA facilitator, that the school had served an important function. In last year's cyclone, the worst in living memory, as their straw huts were blown away the villagers took shelter in the only stable structure in the village – the concrete-built school.

My host lady was called Basrabai. We arrived at her house, a one-room concrete structure next to a straw hut which was there before. After the usual greetings, almost the

first topic of conversation was the school. Since it was a week day, we wondered if it would be possible to go and sit in on a class. Basrabai then informed us that the master (the teacher) was not there, had not been there for a while, and in fact came once a month, if that. He seemed to be protected by the district-level education officer, and could do pretty much what he wanted.

In fact, the master came the next day, because word had got to him that the village had visitors. Thinking the educated guests to be kindred spirits, he launched into a litany of the difficulties of teaching the village children. He referred to them as 'junglee' (from the jungle), a put-down instantly recognisable in India. This was too much for Meeraiben, who pointed out that his job was at least to show up. Parents were anxious for their children to learn to read and write, even if school attendance meant that the boys could not help their fathers with fishing and the girls could not help their mothers fetch water and wood and work in the fields. The 'master of Mohadi' incident encapsulated for me the gap between macro-level strategies and ground-level realities in the poverty reduction discourse, a gap which was revealed again and again in the next few days.

In the evening, right in the middle of a meeting, there was a commotion at the side. While trying to separate two

fighting cows, Basrabai's brother had been seriously gored in the face. It was late at night, and the nearest doctor was in the next big settlement, 10 kilometres away. Without immediate treatment, the wound was bound to get infected. As it happened, our jeep was there and the brother was taken to the doctor and brought back. The fragility and vulnerability of rural life was brought home to me in this incident. As Basrabai later recounted, if it had not been for our presence, and with luck the wound just missed the eye, she would have had to have been responsible for him for the rest of her life.

On our last day we went to Basrabai's field, an hour's walk from her house, where she was trying to grow millet. The riskiness of agriculture was there for us to see. The lack of rain had left the ground hard and dry. If it didn't rain in the next few days, Basrabai informed us as she collected grass for her cattle, the crop would be lost, and with it the outlay she had made in having the field tilled by a hired tractor driver.

Back in Ahmedabad, all the participants tried to make sense of what they had experienced. Alongside the emotion of the experience (the quiet dignity of our host ladies, and the utter commitment of our SEWA facilitators, moved most of us to tears as we told our stories) we tried to analyse what we had seen and to relate it to the more conventional discourse on poverty reduction strategies. For my part, I tried to relate what I had seen to our proposed *World Development Report* themes of Empowerment, Security, and Opportunity. These themes have considerable resonance in Basrabai's life, but what also came out was the interrelationship between them and how one fed into another. One without the other does not make sense; one before the other does not make sense.

In fact, Basrabai, Meeraiben, and the master of Mohadi

crystallised for me a line of argument which goes as follows. The focus of the Bank and other agencies might be characterised as tracing out the 'Production Possibility Frontier' of pro-poor policies and interventions. We look across countries, regions within countries, communities within regions, and households within communities, to identify the determinants of poverty reduction. This is of course a very valuable exercise. But what it cannot do is to even begin to tell us how and why certain policies were chosen in one place and not in others. In other words, the demand side of pro-poor policies and interventions is largely missing from our analysis. This is particularly true of very local-level outcomes, which have a dynamic all of their own.

It is a tautology, but nevertheless a useful tautology, that in societies where the poor have access to and influence over decisions which affect their lives, at the macro level and at the very micro level, pro-poor policies and interventions are more likely to be adopted and implemented. Surely, then, it must logically be part of an anti-poverty strategy to help develop structures and institutions which do indeed give poor people such access and influence. What stands out for me from the Mohadi and SEWA experience (and actually from a sheaf of more formal political economy papers) is the crucial role of Organisations of the Poor – i.e. membership-based organisations who articulate the demands of their members, who defend their rights, who monitor interventions, and who hold the polity accountable to the poor. Such organisations do not just appear out of thin air. It has taken SEWA a quarter of a century to arrive at its current stage of influence over local and national policies and interventions. But international agencies could do worse than ask themselves how their own actions and interventions could support and help the development of Organisations of the Poor.

NOTES

This is an extract from a longer report, written after an Exposure and Dialogue Programme (EDP) with SEWA in July 1999. The full version is available from the author.

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