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## The salt of the earth

by PRAFUL PATEL

**This account was also written after an EDP with SEWA. It is a powerful testimony by the World Bank's Vice-President in South Asia of the lessons he has learnt from his regular visits to a family of salt workers who live on the edge of the desert in Gujarat. The author writes of his profound respect for the family, and for the way in which his relationship with them has renewed his passion for his profession.**

For the past 4 years, Bhavnaben has been my touchstone of progress in India's booming economy. Since the time I first met this young mother and her family of salt workers on the edge of the desert in Gujarat, I have returned regularly to visit them. I go to experience first-hand the life of India's poorest citizens, to learn about their hopes and dreams, and to better understand the challenges that confront them in their struggle to climb out of poverty.

The welfare of poor people is the chief reason I do what I do for a living. But, for us to deliver on our promises to help them, we need to clearly understand the bewildering complexities of their situation. No single analysis or study can take the place of first-hand experience. And no fleeting visits from air-conditioned cars or the safe havens of first-world

hotels can substitute for living their lives by staying and working beside them.

The area around the Little Rann of Kutch in Gujarat is not covered under any World Bank programme. Instead, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which is working actively with the women of the region, organised our grass-roots immersion. SEWA has conducted some 20 immersion programmes over the past several years, and this was their first collaboration with the World Bank. It was a curious coincidence that, in the draw of lots, I drew India for immersion, and this particular part of the country. My forefathers had migrated from Gujarat in the 1920s and I spoke the language fluently. The ease of communication that this afforded helped me to build a special rapport with my hosts. Later, in an aside, the programme coordinators told me that when they heard that the Vice-President of the South Asia region was coming for an immersion, they made it a special point to allot the most difficult part of their region for the purpose – in this case, the salt pans of the Little Rann.

Clearly, life in the desert can never be easy. Temperatures vary from the scorching heat of the day to the intense cold of night. The blinding whiteness of vast expanses of salt causes many diseases of the eye, including night blindness, and the constant exposure to chemicals and salts leads to

**Bhavnaben's shelter at the saltpan in the desert (Little Rann of Kutch), Gujarat.**



Photos: Caroline Vagneron

sores and lesions. The story is often told that the feet of salt workers never burn completely on a funeral pyre because of the high levels of salt that have been absorbed into their systems over the years.

The rules of the immersion programme were strict. We were to do everything – absolutely everything – that our hosts did. For me, this meant following Bhavnaben as she went about her daily routine – waking before dawn (at 4.00am sharp, without the help of an alarm clock in her case), collecting firewood, carrying water home, cooking for the family, washing up with the barest minimum of water (only two glassfuls), walking 10 kilometres across the sun-baked plain to the salt pans, putting in backbreaking labour under a scorching sun, and winding up the long, hard day with a frugal meal of flat millet bread and a vegetable – often the same as was had for breakfast and lunch.

Bhavnaben and her family were hospitable hosts and reluctant to let us do anything at all. We had to insist that we would do everything she did – however ham-handedly. We spilled precious water while carrying it home on our heads, rolled thick and lumpy *rotlas* for lunch, and suffered aching arms and legs as we tried to beat down the dykes that surround the salt pans. Robert Chambers, who accompanied me in the programme, learnt the hard way. Robertbhai – or ‘brother Robert’ as he was renamed for the duration of our stay – did not hesitate to take off his sandals and step into the deceptively cool brine to assist Bhavnaben. In doing

so, the brine splashed all over his clothes and body, and once dried, gave Robertbhai a particularly hard time for the next few days.

We also had our share of heart-wrenching moments. On our last dinner with the family, Bhavnaben insisted that she cook us a special meal, including sweet *halwa* – one of the rarest treats for the family. She used the allowance she was given for our stay to buy the ingredients. I can never forget the sight of Bhavnaben carefully counting out twenty small raisins at a local grocery shop for cooking the special dish, for though they were the ultimate luxury in her eyes, she insisted that the dish would not be complete without them. I cannot now pass a grocery store without thinking about all those who don't even know the taste of food that many – whether in India or the West – regard as commonplace.

My visits brought into stark relief the uphill battle faced by those who are left out of the economic mainstream. I witnessed the poor people's vulnerability to exploitation from those who wield power over them. Whether it was the sole seller of water to needy desert families, or the moneyed supplier of credit to those in need, the dependence of the poor on unscrupulous service providers left them open to all manner of extortion. I saw how easy it was for them to slip back into deprivation despite their best efforts to escape the poverty that has entrapped their families for generations. An illness meant the loss of precious work days, and a big setback in income. Medical care was not easy to come by, local

**Bhavnaben at the saltpan.**



**Mr Patel conversing with his host lady, Bhavnaben, and her daughter during one of his regular visits.**



doctors were not particularly well qualified, and it was both expensive and time-consuming to go to the bigger towns for attention.

The need for additional hands to work meant taking the children out of school. Bhavnaben's eldest daughter was required to look after the household, and the oldest boy was needed to man their shop on the saltpans. Although the three younger children were in school, the quality of their learning left much to be desired. All parents dream of giving their children a better future. But poor families' inability to cope without their children's additional labour invariably compromises the one thing that can make a real difference – education. The question continues to nag me: will Bhavnaben's children ever be able to avail of the new opportunities provided by India's booming economy?

What, then, can their future hold? When I tried to talk to Mangabhai, Bhavnaben's husband, about his financial planning for the time he can work no longer, he looked at me with glazed eyes. He had absolutely no idea. 'The poor don't have the luxury of looking into the future,' Bhavnaben said to me.

But ensuring a better future for the poor is the World Bank's mission and that of many other development agencies. On its part, SEWA has been exploring alternative livelihoods for the 40,000 families engaged in the salt industry in the area. Though it is unrealistic to expect suitable alternatives for such a large number of workers whose entire lives – for generations – have revolved around the cycle of salt farming, they are taking the first few steps in this direction. SEWA has helped the salt workers to negotiate a better price for their salt by bypassing exploitative middlemen, and is now

**Mr Patel with some of his World Bank colleagues and SEWA organisers observing Bhavnaben's husband reinforcing the dykes of the saltpan.**



encouraging them to produce the more lucrative magnesium. Salt-making families are being helped to tide over the lean period through credit lines, and the women are being empowered by organising them into self-help groups. In fact, with much less gender inequality among the salt workers, the men-folk of the community face a much harder life. Unlike the women, they cannot get any other work, and they do not have a SEWA to help them.

Standing next to Bhavnaben I feel small. Despite having experienced hardships all her life, she was always smiling, cheerful, and optimistic. I saw her remarkable ability to cope under the most extreme circumstances. Many of us with far more resources and privileges would not be able to survive

the way she does – shouldering equal responsibility with her husband on the salt farm and still managing to look after every little need of the family with good cheer. There is also an enormous dignity, both within the family and in the larger community. They display great respect for each other and share what little they have with disarming openness.

My exposure to the harsh realities of the lives of the poor has given me a fresh perspective on their condition and a new respect for them. Bhavnaben and her family are, for me, much more than a case study – they have helped me develop a deep understanding of the intricate web of challenges that confront them, and in the process have renewed my passion for my profession.

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