

11

Reflections by participants on the interaction with their hosts

by IZZY BIRCH with contributions from KATY OSWALD, ARJAN DE HAAN, EDWARD BRESNYAN, and RAVI KANBUR

The mutual benefits experienced by both hosts and visitors are evident in some of the earlier testimonies. But despite the appreciation expressed by the hosts, it is highly likely that the guests gain most. Apart from the practical pressures placed on poor families looking after visitors from unfamiliar cultures, it is the guests who sought out the encounter, who experience novelty and stimulation, and who leave with new ideas and perspectives that will enhance their personal and professional lives.

Katy Oswald's reflections

Katy Oswald, a Social Development Advisor with DfID (UK Department for International Development) in China, describes how her stay in a rural village increased her confidence to talk about rural poverty and renewed her sense of mission and purpose:

Project monitoring missions are always so rushed and formal. You rarely get to see daily life in villages or spend a lot of time talking with people. The immersion gave me an opportunity to do both.

I spent three nights living with a family in Qi Zhi village. The experience confirmed much of what I've read about

rural China. For example, whilst I knew that gender inequality in China still existed, living in Beijing it is easy to make the false assumption that things are improving. Another observation that confirmed a growing body of research was that internal migration has had a huge impact on rural China. Most residents of Qi Zhi village between the ages of 17 and 40 are migrant workers outside the village. This accounts for almost half the population. This 'missing' generation means that the burden of agricultural work falls on the young and old, and it really made me consider the consequences of a whole generation being brought up by their grandparents. Again, despite knowing the statistics that tell this story, I hadn't fully appreciated the implications for rural China, in particular on the older generation left behind.

Living in Beijing, I lead a pretty pampered life, and the immersion was certainly a reminder of why I wanted to work in DfID in the first place, to alleviate poverty and all the hardships associated with it. In terms of contributing to my daily work here in DfID China, I think it has given me the confidence to talk about poverty in rural China with some personal authority. You often come up against people who are ignorant of the level of poverty that still exists in rural China and now, as well as

referring to the statistics, I can refer to my own personal experience.

Arjan de Haan's reflections

While most immersion participants experience similar benefits, their accounts also explore the dilemmas and delicacies in the relationship between guest and host. Arjan de Haan, a DfID staff member and visiting professor at the University of Guelph, who took part in a SEWA EDP organised in Gujarat in 2005, comments on how instructive yet small is the glimpse offered into another's life. He says that grand claims for immersions helping outsiders understand 'the reality' of other people's lives should be treated with caution:

I believe that it is important to continue to emphasise how small the glimpse – no doubt biased by the nature of our visit – is that one observes through such a visit, and would observe even if it was 2 or 3 days longer... the visitor's view of reality is determined by particular circumstances, and chance. I also found one of the comments by SEWA participants during the feedback session very instructive: they found the visitors' repeated questions regarding the 'key event' in the history of the organisation and the lessons learnt from that very difficult to answer, suggesting that the complexity and diversity of experiences cannot easily be captured in a short space of time. Therefore, it may be important to keep the programme of dialogue and exposure as flexible and informal as possible: while it is good – and extremely helpful for us – to organise the visit well, for me the key value lies in the opportunity to spend an extended amount of time with a few people that we do not associate with on a daily basis, not to understand 'the reality' of 'poor people', but to hear some life stories, in a way in which they prefer to narrate them to outsiders like us.

Edward Bresnayan's reflections

Edward Bresnayan, a World Bank participant in the same EDP, expresses discomfort with the process through which private conversations with his host become public, suggesting that the mutual understanding generated through cross-cultural contact is value and justification enough:

... I think one issue must first be discussed, that being the conflict I sense between i) the intimacy of the conversations we had with her, and ii) their public disclosure after-the-fact as part of the overall EDP.

This I find to be one of the particularly uncomfortable aspects of the EDP, since it seems to predispose us (i.e. the visitors) to share publicly what was learnt privately, in the home of our host and her family. To put it bluntly, this seems to vulgarise – in the true sense of the word – the potentially intensely personal nature of the sharing that occurs when individuals make the choice to get to know each other – despite language, social, cultural, and economic barriers thrown in their midst. This I see as a central paradox of the EDP (at least as it is now designed), in that while one is making new friends, forging relationships, and asking probing and intimate questions about someone's (i.e. guest's) personal struggle to survive and prosper, there also exists an onus to 'report back' and otherwise assess the experience for the rest of the EDP participants.

It seems we need to keep in mind that, while we are indeed taking part in this cross-cultural exchange, the instrument of our own learning is in fact the life of another human being, who has offered herself as an instrument of instruction. In short, that which is gained through private conversation should remain as such. There is obviously a limit to the intimacy of such conversation when it takes place among one host, two EDP participants, and their two facilitators/translators. Yet perhaps when we open up to each other, letting our cultural guards down and allowing ourselves to truly get a glimpse of the other's life, the mutual understanding that this creates among us is actually the best payoff, and something that, if truly to be valued, should be kept among us alone.

I don't think I want to go to that temple any more

Finally, **Ravi Kanbur** describes an instance in which he misunderstood his hosts' reluctance to accede to a particular request. The power of the story lies in two things. First, the author's willingness to lay bare his own misreading of the situation and the grace with which he reacted once he understood. Second, the way in which an apparently small encounter – a brief glimpse into lives lived in parallel by others – can affirm what we know, rooting that knowledge in a particular place and time, and associating it long after in our memories with a particular face and name.

I of course consider myself to be an old hand at all this. EDP, I've done it before. Our host lady Ramilaben lives in Ganeshpura. I've been there before. We are being exposed to her role as a member of the Executive Committee of the Vanlaxmi Cooperative in Ganeshpura. I've visited them before. Three times, I think. On two of the past visits I have

tried to get into an inviting looking temple at the entrance to Ganeshpura, but always found the iron gates locked.

Ramilaben's house is just along from the temple, it turns out, in a clutch of houses belonging to the Senma community. Joe Devine (my EDP companion) and I arrive and sit down for the customary greetings and talk at Ramilaben's house. We are accompanied by two formidable SEWA workers: Labuben and Indhiraben, and a SEWA trainee, Manjriben (SEWA uses these EDPs to give exposure to its new recruits).

As the pleasantries get going I ask about the temple and whether I could visit it (last time I came it was with my wife, I say, and it would be nice to tell her that I managed to visit the temple we both saw from the outside). Ramilaben and her husband look at each other. He says we can try and go to it later. But later never comes. The programme is busy.

The next day I ask again about the temple. Later. But later never comes. The programme is busy, and enjoyable. As we finish dinner with the family, this time I ask Ramilaben's husband, as he is leading me out to the toilet facilities. He says 'yes, the temple is open now.' Oh good, I think, we can go there on the way back. But he is still talking and what he

says stops my heart. So obvious, so stupid of me not to realise: me, with all my exposures, and all my dialogues and all my reading. And my three visits to Ganeshpura. The temple is not open to him, to Ramilaben, the Senmas or any of the lower castes. But, he says, I am sure you can go there, no problem. I'll speak to them if you like. They'll let you in, but I can't go in. That's OK, I say, we'll do it another time, lets get back to Labuben, Indhiraben, and the others in the house.

SEWA itself is an oasis where caste is seen as an obstacle to be overcome actively and purposively. The Gandhian prayers with which each SEWA meeting starts assert this. On previous exposures I have seen the effects in Hindu-Moslem cooperation within SEWA. But SEWA lives in the real village world. The realities of caste are seared into my mind this time. That is also what exposure does. Through small incidents and large, these small and seemingly superficial visits affix the knowledge that we all acquire through books and reports, affix it firmly by putting a face and a place to it.

I tell my wife about the temple we both saw at the entrance to Ganeshpura. I say to her, 'I don't think I want to go to that temple any more.'

CONTACT DETAILS

Izzy Birch
10 Pearce Drive
Chipping Norton
Oxon
OX7 5HY
Email: izzybirch@yahoo.com

Ravi Kanbur
TH Lee Professor of World Affairs,
International Professor of Applied Economics
and Management, Professor of Economics,
Cornell University
309 Warren Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca
NY 14853-7801
USA
Tel: + 607 255 7966
Email: sk145@cornell.edu

Katy Oswald
Social Development Advisor
Dfid China
1 Palace Street
London
SW1E 5HE, UK
Tel: + 44 20 7023 0000
Email: K-Oswald@dfid.gov.uk

NOTE

Ravi Kanbur's is an extract from a longer report, written after an EDP with SEWA in January 2005. The full version is available from the author