

KAUSHIK BASU

GLOBALISATION AND BABOOL GUM

An academic travels through rural Gujarat to see village women overcome all odds and chart their own destinies



Photographs by NEMAI GHOSH

Four hours' drive out of Ahmedabad, the highway meanders into a narrower, bumpier road and the landscape is flat and stark. We are at the edge of the salt deserts of Kutch. The soil has a parched, white texture and the vegetation consists of the ubiquitous *babool* scrub, spreading all the way to the far horizon. The *babool*, I am told, is not native to this region. It was planted by government officials to stop the spread of the desert. Ever since, the losing battle to stop its spread has been in progress. This sturdy plant dries up the soil and has contributed to the precariously low water table of the

region dropping even lower, beyond the reach of wells and tube wells. On the feeble plus side, the *babool* oozes a gum that can be used as binding material, and its branches provide a ready supply of firewood. The gum appears in small quantities and huge amounts of time have to be spent to collect a few rupees' worth. For the poor inhabitants of the region, this has ensured that survival will depend on a life of perennial foraging — for water, firewood and gum.

During the last half hour of our drive to the village of Jakotra in Santalpur Taluk, Patan District, no cars cross our path. We see an occasional villager trudging into the dusk with some watering implements in hand. Ayeshaben tells us that hidden from our view are cumin plantations, which need to be watered at night; so the few villagers we see are heading to a night of hard labour. Ayesha, whom, as is customary in Gujarat, we refer to as 'ben', is a young volunteer of SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association). She is from Radhanpur, a small town an hour or so south of Jakotra. She has been assigned to look after us, that is, Jeemol Unni — an economist from the Gujarat Institute of Development Research — and myself, during our stay in Jakotra. Ayesha turns out to be an amazing person. Cheerful and indefatigable, she is a woman of endless grace; she seems to know everyone and everything about the villages in this area. Her husband also works for SEWA and they have a small child, whom she leaves behind with her mother in Radhanpur when she has to travel overnight.

This lifestyle, which seems natural enough now, did not come easily to someone brought up in a traditional Muslim household. She had heard of SEWA when she was finishing school. She was not badly off and so did not need SEWA's support, but was inclined towards social work and wanted to work for the organisation. When she started working with the group, she would occasionally return home late and be dropped off by a SEWA car. The neighbours and leaders of her community — or the '*samaj*', as Ayesha put it — worried that this would bring dishonour to the community. So they leaned on her parents to prevent her from leading such a dissolute life. But Ayesha was determined. She worked hard to persuade her parents that SEWA was essentially a sisterhood, so they had nothing to worry about. Her parents were sympathetic towards

her cause, but the community leaders remained resolute. Eventually, when one of her classmates, Zainab, decided to join her, and especially when she married someone understanding and supportive of SEWA's work, the community relented.

Travelling with us in the commodious station wagon are Uma Swaminathan and Dohiben. Uma has been working with SEWA for over twenty years and is in charge of organising our programme and setting up our travel and meeting plans. She does all that and, more importantly, sings classical Carnatic songs like a professional, so that the tedium of the journey melts away. Dohiben is a native of Jakotra, an embroidery artisan. It is to her house that we are headed for the night. I cannot talk to her directly, because she speaks only Gujarati and that too with the accents of a village dialect. Ayesha does not speak English but speaks Urdu and Gujarati fluently and is my translator.

Jakotra is a village like none that I have seen before. It is a poor, desolate hamlet marooned on the edge of India — ten minutes' drive north would take us to the Pakistan border. There is no formal boundary, just a stretch of the *rann*, an unfriendly strip of salt desert, which acts as a natural deterrent to cross-border migration, though there are occasional transgressions and, even more rarely, transnational romantic liaisons.

The original village of Jakotra was destroyed almost totally on January 26, 2001, in the terrible Gujarat earthquake. The new Jakotra was built by the government. As a consequence, the homes, made of hollow grey bricks and asbestos-like roofing, look quite sturdy. The five hundred or so homes in the village are arranged along neat perpendicular roads, in the fashion of Manhattan. But the roads are not tarred and the houses and yards are barren, except for the heaps of hay and one or two cows and goats that each household seems to own. That this is a region of extreme poverty is obvious despite the solidity of the houses. And that we are far away from city life became obvious later that evening, when in the middle of our conversation in the courtyard of Dohiben's house the lights went off and a thousand stars lit up in the sky as if on cue.

When we arrive in Dohiben's house, it is already dark. A large number of villagers have gathered to see us. All are women; the menfolk are mostly away

working as labourers in other villages. Two string cots are pulled out for the guests from the city and the villagers squat comfortably on the courtyard floor. I need no persuasion to sit on the cot. On the way in, I had asked Ayesha if there were snakes in the region, regretting my question as soon as it escaped my lips. She had promptly assured me that there was no dearth on that score. In fact, there were so many that I should be able to see some even on this one-day visit. For the record, I did not; but I nevertheless sat on the cot, feet off the ground.

We chatter away late into the night, Ayesha being the tireless translator. Religion here is clearly no bar to intimacy and interaction. The people here, including Dohiben, are mostly Ahirs — a cow-herding caste. But among the Ahirs sit some Harijan women and all of them seem to adore Ayesha, who jokes with them and doubles up with laughter when the villagers return her banter. The Ahirs claim that their ancestors lived in the Mathura region, in Uttar Pradesh, a thousand years ago and, before that, herded cows with Krishna. Indeed, the ornate dress of these poor villagers would probably pose an anthropological puzzle. They wear heavily embroidered skirts inlaid with mirror-work, equally elaborately crafted blouses and head-scarves that fall over the back and shoulders all the way down to the waist. The elderly married women wear thick ivory bangles, given to them at the time of their marriage (the young having been dissuaded by SEWA from such a decadent and expensive ritual). This is not the attire you expect of the very poor and suggest an ancestry of greater opulence. My guess would be that their wealth has vanished over the years but the customs of dress have persisted. Also, wearing ivory is a strange custom in a region devoid of elephants, suggesting that the Ahirs must indeed have immigrated here.

The women, without fail, tell us about how their lives have been transformed by SEWA. The organisation helps them in marketing their embroidery work and building up small savings, gives them low-interest loans and has been instrumental in their

breaking away from the confines of caste rules and male domination in the household.

Dohiben's own story is typical. She was married to Ajai Ahir and had five children. When the youngest child was five months old, her husband died and her travails began. They had always been poor but with the main breadwinner gone, life became a perennial struggle to stave off starvation. She would work long hours collecting gum from the *babool*, but the earnings were so small that she feared that they would perish. So she began to travel all over Gujarat, mainly to Saurashtra, in search of work. Often, she had to be away for several months at a time, leaving the eldest child in charge of the younger ones. Every time she returned after one of those long working trips, she feared she would not see one of the children.

Then she came in contact with Reema Nanavatty, one of the senior members of SEWA and a former General Secretary. Reema, while working in a nearby village, met Dohiben and persuaded her to return to her traditional work as an embroidery artisan and assured her that SEWA would help market her embroidered fabric in Ahmedabad and elsewhere. Soon, Dohiben became a 'member', as the self-employed workers who are part of the SEWA family are called. SEWA now has 7 lakh members all over India, with 5 lakh in Gujarat alone. But being a SEWA member meant that she occasionally had to travel to Ahmedabad. This raised eyebrows. The senior male members of her '*samaj*' (I later realised that she was referring to the leaders of her caste group while Ayesha had used it for the Muslim community) decided that such travels could not be allowed — she was to be an outcaste. Dohiben, despite her quiet ways, has a strong personality, and she was outraged in turn. These men who had done nothing for her when she had travelled all over in search of work just to survive and feed her children had the audacity to turn her out when she was finally doing a bit better for herself and interacting with city women.

Senior SEWA officials tried to defuse the crisis

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by holding long sessions with the men, explaining to them the SEWA philosophy, which is essentially Gandhian. Gradually, the dust settled and the *samaj* seniors came around, especially when more and more women joined SEWA and more money flowed into the village through better marketing of their products. In Jakotra, where now virtually all women are members of SEWA, the men seem to be a pretty docile bunch, relegated to the background. This was not always the case, I am assured.

As our impromptu meeting disbands, I take a headcount. There are thirty-eight women and I am the only man (Dohiben's younger sons would join us much later). I do not think I have been in a more gender-imbalanced meeting before.

The Ahir homes are small and cramped, but strikingly clean. In one room, pots, pans and clothes are pushed to a corner and a part of the floor is swabbed for us to sit down for dinner. The fare is simple — *bajra roti*, *ghee*, a hot potato curry, *chbas* and *gur*. As I wonder how to tackle *rotis* as thick as these, Dohiben admonishes her daughter-in-law for not rolling them thinner. The daughter-in-law, who at all times seems to be holding back a smile, actually smiles at our ineptness. Late into the night, as I lie in bed, I hear the clanking of vessels being cleaned and floors swept.

That night, the home is over-crowded. Cots are pulled in from the courtyard for Uma, Jeemol and myself, and the rest sleep on the floor or on makeshift beds. I insist on mosquito nets (more to keep out snakes than mosquitoes) and the whole village seems to get involved in improvising ways to hang the nets that we have brought from Ahmedabad, since the walls have no hooks and the beds no stands.

Sleep, as poets have written about and Dali depicted so disturbingly, is a precarious indulgence. If the mind is weighed down with intense, personal problems, one cannot sleep. If the mind is totally idle, waiting for sleep, it does not come. It comes easily and comfortably if one has a puzzle in one's head, which is engrossing and at the same time not personally intense. Some of my best slumbers have occurred when I have gone to bed with a research puzzle in economics and I remain convinced that some of my best papers have been written in my sleep.

I am fortunate today — I have a challenging puzzle. Dohiben's house has one latrine in the far

corner of the courtyard and a tiny bathing space attached to it, but there are no taps and this is an area of acute water shortage. The logistics of how one gets through one's bath and the morning essentials constitute a decent intellectual challenge to any city-bred. Should I wake up before everybody else? But that would probably require me to get up while it is still dark and the bathroom, I have checked, has no lights and using it will be a hard balancing act. Where and how will I get water?

These are not matters to be lightly dismissed.

Years ago, visiting an avant-garde commune in a village in Belgium, I wanted to use the bathroom. My host pointed nonchalantly to one of the many open bedrooms. I went in expecting to find a door to the bathroom. There was none, but in one corner of the large bedroom was a commode. Needless to say, I bolted all the bedroom doors before using it. But on the drive back to Brussels the thought struck me, and it still occasionally troubles me, that I may not have looked hard enough and may have spoilt their Dadaist sculpture.

Puzzling over these conundrums and misdeeds, I drift into a cosy, deep slumber.

I wake up early next morning into the most spectacular dawn. As I walk out of Dohiben's house and stroll down a street, a winter mist rolls in and I remember Khosla in my elocution class in Calcutta, reciting with his eyes shut behind thick glasses: "And the first grey of morning fill'd the east/And the fog rose out of the Oxus stream." Cows and goats, still lazy from sleep, stir languorously. But all the Ahir homes along the street are — again Khosla's voice — "hushed/and still the men are plunged in sleep." Only a few womenfolk are out, in their ornate clothes and with sets of three progressively smaller pots balanced on their heads.

The women spend much of the day walking to and from the one tank in the centre of the village. The tank is filled by piped water that comes from many miles away. Piped water is a recent innovation. Earlier, a tanker would bring in water once a week and villagers would rush to fill up buckets, drums and pots, causing accidents in the melee. Before that, the only source of water was dug wells. Water tinged with salt seeped slowly into the wells. Villagers would often sleep next to their wells to guard them and scoop up the little water that would have collected through the night.

Some of these changes, like piped water, are also indirectly the contribution of SEWA. Contact with articulate, urban women has taught the villagers to make their own demands from the government. In fact, Puriben and Gauriben from the neighbouring villages of Bakhutra and Vauva tell us that when essential supplies such as electricity or water fail badly, they lodge complaints with the relevant government office, saying that they are SEWA members, and the response is immediate.

Puriben is quite an incredible woman. She joined SEWA as a member in 1988, before which she had had virtually no contact with city folk. And now, with piercing eyes and a ready smile, she is as much at ease in an Ahmedabad seminar room (though sometimes I find her squatting on the chair on her haunches) as she is among village artisans. She has attended NGO meetings in Washington and Australia. She wants to educate herself and become a professional manager in order to market village products.

We spend a lot of time discussing international trade and globalisation. Puriben and Gauriben argue with remarkable lucidity. Their main concern with globalisation is that foreign companies will mass-produce their goods using advanced technology, undercut them and then, when the local production closes down, hike their prices.

This is, of course, the well-known problem of dumping, where the country with the deeper pocket temporarily lowers prices to destroy the other's industry and once the decimation is complete, raises prices once more. Much of WTO regulation is devoted to curb such behaviour. The trouble is that, first, these international regulations have lots of loopholes still to be plugged and, second, fighting a case in the WTO in Geneva can be frightfully expensive and many poor nations cannot afford that. Hence the richer countries benefit disproportionately from these international trading rules.

However, this must not be construed as an argument for banishing bodies like the WTO. Law courts in most countries are used disproportionately by the rich and the powerful. Nevertheless, it is

arguable that the poor are better off in a nation with a functioning system of courts than one where there is none. Likewise, for the WTO. We need to work to reform it and bring it within the reach of all nations. Not to have a central arbiter of international trade is to ensure that poor nations will not have the little recourse to justice that they are now beginning to have.

Globalisation is one of the most misunderstood concepts today. First of all, to treat it as a matter of choice is a mistake. To say that one is in favour of globalisation or against it is a bit like saying that one is in favour of gravity or against gravity. This may (though, more likely, may not) be a good conversation starter, but is certainly not useful as a starting point for crafting economic policy or grassroots action. Globalisation is the outcome of individual actions of millions of people. It is doubtful if there is any government, organisation or corporation that can stall it. To pit oneself against something, in a situation where one has no chance of success, is to court failure, as Oscar Wilde did, lying ill and penniless in a drab hotel room in Paris on November 30, 1900. Ever the aesthete, he is believed (according to one legend) to have looked around the room and said, "This wallpaper is terrible. One of us will have to go." Those were his last words.

Given the virtual inevitability of globalisation, it is better to try to understand its consequences, good and bad, and to channel our energy to counter the latter. While it is true that globalisation has its pitfalls and can potentially marginalise sections of the population, it can also confer huge benefits. The villagers of Jakotra all agree that they are much better off today than ten years ago. Arguably, this is because of globalisation. If they had to sell their products only in the neighbouring villages, the prices that their produce would fetch would be much less and the demand would be tiny. It is because they are now using long-distance trade channels (and there are efforts afoot to sell their embroidered clothes abroad) that they are able to earn more.

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Historically, one of the more important reasons India had remained poor is that our markets were so severely balkanised. Banditry, bad roads and arbitrary taxes *en route* meant that one was forced to sell the bulk of one's products in one's neighbourhood. We may now lament the occasional octroi checkpost that the inter-city driver has to encounter, but it is sobering to remember that the seventeenth-century French traveller, Jean de Thevenot, recorded encountering sixteen customs points during a sixty-mile journey in India.

A recent macro study of the Indian economy by Maureen Leibl and Tirthankar Roy¹ confirms what one can see at the level of artisans in Gujarat. The economic reforms of 1991, far from hurting handicrafts, have helped this sector. The authors describe the handicrafts sector "as one of the major success stories in India's globalisation" (p.5370). In the last decade, the share of handicrafts exports in the overall manufacturing exports of Indian has risen from 2 per cent to 5 per cent and employment in this sec-

tor has more than doubled. While there is reason to believe that this trend can persist for a while (India's share of the global handicrafts market is still way behind China's), it is foolhardy to suppose that this will never change. The apprehension of the artisans of Jakotra that they will some day lose out to large-scale global producers is probably real. In a small way, similar things are already happening. Indian manufacturers have begun producing 'African-looking' crafts, which are sent to Africa for Western and Japanese tourists to buy from the roadside in Kenya, Tanzania and elsewhere.

What is widely misunderstood in India and in the West, where there is mounting opposition to outsourcing, is that the real problem is not with globalisation but with the inexorable march of technology. Technology has brought enormous benefits to mankind. High-tech, large-scale manufacturing and the computer revolution have brought certain comforts and luxuries within the reach of an average person that were once available only to feudal

lords and kings. At the same time, this has meant that more and more income is accruing to capital rather than to labour. Hence, many of those who rely solely on labour earnings for their livelihood find their incomes shrinking. The unbelievable and embarrassing level of inequality that we see in the world today is a consequence of this phenomenon. We need to do some innovative thinking to counter this tendency, not only because such inequalities will inevitably give rise to political turmoil, terrorism and strife, but because they are morally unacceptable.

This trend is likely to continue and harden. Over time, labour will become less and less important and the earnings that accrue as labour income will shrink, especially in comparison to capital income. The solution to this is not to stop technological change (for one, it is unlikely to be within anybody's power to do so), nor to try to resist globalisation, but to give workers a share in the earnings that accrue to capital. This is different from giving workers a fixed assured income as in the standard welfare state. What is being suggested here is that they be given equity, that is, a share of the profits earned by corporations.

Once such a system is in place, if a company downsizes in the US and comes to India in search of greater profit, workers in the US will have less to complain about, since they will get a share of the additional profit. Globalisation has led to increasing rancour between first and third world labour unions. What I am arguing is that this labour versus labour view of the world is unnecessary and misguided. It is possible and better to go back to the old-fashioned idea of capital versus labor.

The details of a system that gives equity to workers will need plenty of effort and a lot of creative thinking, and this is not the place for me to outline where such effort should begin. But I have no doubt in my mind that this is the direction that we will have to go, either through far-sightedness and our own initiative, or after strife, war and terrorism hit us, perforce.

At the time I set out from Delhi for my Gujarat travels (in early January, 2004), the Indian media was euphoric about India's economic take-off. The Indian government's performance in the year 2003 was being hailed as outstanding. Indian entrepreneurs were buying up companies abroad with alacrity, the Sensex had crossed 6,000 and India's

foreign exchange reserves had breached the \$100 billion dollar mark. And to some people the economy looked even better because these statistics somewhere got addled with Tendulkar's 9,000 runs.

The celebration seems to me to be mistimed. It is true that the Indian economy is doing very well overall and, if we stay the course, it will, along with China and maybe Brazil, become a global force. But nothing special really happened *in 2003* other than some round figures being attained. India's take-off started between 1991 and 1993 and the process, fortunately, is continuing. As far as the growth rate goes, 2003 is not a record year. Higher growth occurred in 1988-89 and each of the three years from 1994 to 1997 saw growth rates close to what the growth for 2003-04 is expected to be. Moreover, the monsoon and consequent bountiful crops played a major role in this year's good performance.

There is another problem with the euphoria. We must not treat GDP growth and the build-up of forex reserves as ends in themselves. They are important, no doubt, but only as instruments to improve the conditions of the poorest people in India. As Ela Bhatt, the charismatic founder of SEWA, kept reminding us in her soft undertone, there is far too much poverty, too much destitution, hunger and unemployment in India for us to celebrate. It is getting at these fundamental deprivations that we have to strive for. A country cannot be considered successful as long as it fails to reach out to the marginalised and fails to bring hope to the hopeless.

It is true that in a globalising world there are severe limits to what a single country can do. We have to be wary that capital can take flight and exchange rate fluctuations can ruin trade. But even with these limitations there is much that India can do — while pushing for a higher growth rate and greater trade — to arrest the growing regional disparities, to bring jobs to the jobless and, in general, to reach out to the dispossessed. **um**

Kaushik Basu is Professor of Economics and Director of the Program on Comparative Economic Development at Cornell University. He lives in Ithaca, USA

NOTE

1. 'Handmade in India: Preliminary Analysis of Crafts Producers and Crafts Production,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 38, December 27, 2003.