

Globalization and Babool Gum: Travels through Rural Gujarat

By

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After we have driven for about four hours since leaving Ahmedabad the highway meanders into a narrower, bumpier road and the landscape is flat and stark, these being the edges of the salt deserts of Kutch. The soil has a parched white texture and the vegetation consists of the ubiquitous *babul*, shrub-like and spreading all the way to the far horizon. The *babul*, I am told, is not natural to this region. It was planted by some government officials to stop the spread of the desert. It has, ever since, been a losing battle to stop the spread of the *babul*. This sturdy plant has an ability to dry up the soil and has contributed to the precariously low water table of the region dropping even lower and beyond the reach of dug and tube wells. On the feeble plus side, the *babul* emits a gum that can be used as binding material, and its branches provide a ready supply of firewood. The gum comes in small quantities and huge amounts of time have to be spent to collect a few rupees worth of gum. 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 instruments in hand. Sairaben tells us that hidden from our view are cumin plantations and these need to be watered at night; so the few villagers we see are heading to a night of hard labor. Saira Balluch, 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. Saira turns out to be an amazing person. Cheerful and indefatigable, she seems to know everyone and everything about the villages in this area and is forever gracious with the village folks. Her husband

also works for SEWA and she has a small child, whom she leaves behind with her mother in Radhanpur on those occasions when she has to travel.

This lifestyle, which seems natural enough now, did not happen easily to someone brought up in a traditional Muslim household. When she was finishing school, she heard of SEWA. She was not badly off and so did not need SEWA's support but wanted to work for the organization, because of her inclination towards social work. Once she started working with the group, she would occasionally return home late and get dropped off by a SEWA car. The neighbours and the leaders of the '*samaj*', worried this would bring dishonour to the community. So they leaned on her parents to stop her from working. But Saira was determined. She worked hard to persuade her parents that SEWA was essentially a sisterhood and so they had nothing to worry about. Her parents were, after a fashion, sympathetic towards her cause, and so to get them on her side was not hard. Saira was lucky that one of her classmates, Mumtaz Balluch, decided around that time to join her in working for SEWA. Some of the SEWA executives also talked directly with the *samaj* leaders and persuaded them that this was honorable, social work that Saira was doing. Eventually, and especially when she married someone understanding and supportive of the SEWA cause, it became smooth-sailing for her.

Traveling with us, also, in the Tata Qualis are Uma Swaminathan and Dohiben. Uma has been working for SEWA for over twenty years and is in charge of organizing our programme and setting up our travel and meeting plans. She does all that but, 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. Saira does not speak English but speaks Urdu and Gujarati equally 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 of driving north would take us to the border of Pakistan. The border here has no formal boundary, but 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 26th, 2001, in the famous Gujarat earthquake. The new Jakotra was built by the government. As a consequence, the homes, made of hollow grey bricks and an 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 men-folk being mostly away working as labourers in other villages. Two coir cots are pulled out for the urban guests 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 Saira if there were snakes in the region, regretting my question as soon as it escaped my lips. She had promptly assured me that on that score there was no dearth. In fact, there were so many that I should be able to see some even on that single day's visit. For the record, I did not; but I, nevertheless, sat on the cot, feet off the ground.

Late into the night we chatter away, Saira being the tireless translator. Religion here is clearly no bar to intimacy and interaction. The people here, including Dohiben, are mostly '*aahirs*'—a cow-herding caste. But among the *aahirs* sit some *harijan* women and all of them seem to adore Saira, who jokes with them and doubles up with laughter when the villagers in turn return her banter. The *aahirs* claim that their ancestors lived in the Mathura region, in Uttar Pradesh, a thousand years ago and, before that, were a part of Krishna's cow herd. Indeed, an anthropological puzzle that must strike even a casual observer is the ornate dress of these poor villagers. They wear skirts, heavily embroidered and with inlaid mirror work, blouses, equally elaborately crafted, 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 (the young having been dissuaded by SEWA from such a decadent and expensive ritual). These are not the attire you expect of the very poor and

suggest an ancestry of greater opulence. The wealth has vanished over the years but the custom of dress has persisted would be my guess. Also, ivory is a strange custom in a region devoid of the pachyderm, suggesting that the *ahirs* must, indeed, have migrated here from elsewhere.

The women, without fail, tell us about how their lives have been transformed by SEWA. SEWA helps them market their embroidery work and to build 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 Aahir and had five children. When the youngest child was five months old, her husband died and that is when her travails began. They were always poor but once the main breadwinner was gone life became a perennial struggle to stave off starvation. She would work long hours, collecting gum from the babul, but the earnings were so small that she feared that they would perish. So she began to travel all over Gujarat and mainly to Saurashtra in search of work, and often 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.

She was literally saved by 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' of SEWA, 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 lakhs in Gujarat. But being a SEWA member meant that she had to, at times, travel to Ahmedabad. This caused eyebrows to be raised. The senior male members of her '*samaj*'-- I later realized she was referring to the leaders of her caste group and noted that the term used was the same as the one Saira had used for the Muslim community—met and decided that such travels could not be condoned and so decided to outcaste her. Dohiben, who, despite her quiet ways, is a strong personality, tells us that she, in turn, was outraged. These men, who did not say or do a thing when she traveled all over in search of work just to survive and feed her children, had the

audacity to outcaste her when she started doing a bit better for herself and interacting with city women.

The senior SEWA officials came and spent long sessions with the men, explaining to them the SEWA philosophy, which at root is Gandhian, and trying to douse the crisis. Gradually the dust settled and especially when more and more women joined SEWA and more money flowed into the village through the better marketing of the products, the *samaj* seniors came around. In Jakotra, where now virtually all women are members of SEWA, the men seem to be a pretty docile bunch, relegated to the background. It was not that way always, I am assured.

As our impromptu meetings disbands, I count there are 38 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 *aahir* homes are small and cramped but strikingly clean. In fact late into the night as I would lie in bed that night, I would hear the clanking of vessels being cleaned and floors swept.

In one room, pots, pans and clothes are pushed to one 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, chhas and gur. Just as I wonder how to tackle rotis as thick as those, 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.

The home that night is over-crowded. Cots are pulled in from the courtyard for Uma, Jeemol and myself, and the rest sleep on the floor or makeshift beds. I insist on mosquito nets (more to keep out snakes than mosquitoes) and the entire village seems to get involved in improvising on how to hang the nets that we have carried with us 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 comfortingly 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 to 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 light and so using it will be a hard balancing act. Where and how will I get water from?

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 spoiled their dadaist sculpture.

Puzzling over these conundrums and misdeeds, I drift into a cozy, 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 *aahir* 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 sets of three progressively smaller pots on their heads.

Much of the day is spent by the women 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. Even before that the only source of water was dug wells. Water, tinged with salt, seeped

into the wells at a slow pace. 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 with the government. In fact, the following day, two of the most articulate artisans, Puriben and Gauriben, from the neighbouring villages of Bakhutra and Vauva, tell us how when some essential supplies fail badly, such as electricity or water, 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 that she had virtually no contact with city folks. And now, with piercing eyes and a ready smile, she is as much at ease in an Ahmedabad seminar room (though oftentimes I find her squatting on the chair on her haunch), as she is among village artisans. She has attended NGO meetings in Washington and Australia—she does not remember in which city, though. She says that she wants to educate herself and become a professional manager in order to market the village products.

We spend a lot of time discussing international trade and globalization. Puriben and Gauriben argue with remarkable lucidity. Their main concern with globalization is that foreign-companies will manufacture the stuff they produce using advanced technology, undercut them and then, when the local production closes down, put the prices back up.

This is, of course, the well-known problem of dumping, where the country with the deeper pocket temporarily lowers price to destroy the other's industry, and once the decimation is complete, raise the price. Much of WTO regulation is devoted to curb such behavior. 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 do not have the wherewithal for that. Hence, the richer countries are the ones that are able to 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.

Globalization is one of the most misunderstood concepts today. First of all, to treat globalization as a matter of choice is a mistake. To say that one is in favour of globalization 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. Globalization is the outcome of individual actions of millions of people. It is doubtful if there is any government, organization or corporation that can stall it. To pit oneself against a phenomenon where one has no chance 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 globalization, 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 globalization has its pitfalls and can potentially marginalize sections of the population, it can also confer huge benefits. The villagers of Jakotra are much better off today than ten years ago (this they all agree), arguably, because of globalization. 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 also would be tiny. It is because they are now using long-distance trade channels (and there is effort afoot to sell their embroidered clothes abroad) that they are able to earn more.

Historically, one of the more important reasons India had remained poor is that our markets were so severely balkanized. Banditry, bad roads and arbitrary taxes en route meant that one was forced to sell the bulk of one's products in one's neighborhood. We may nowadays lament the occasional octroi check-post 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 globalization” (p.5370). In the last decade the share of handicrafts exports in the overall manufacturing exports of India has risen from 2% to 5% and employment in this sector 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 be out-competed by large-scale global producers is probably right. In a small way similar things are already happening. Indian manufacturers have begun producing ‘African-looking’ crafts, which are then sent to Africa for Western and Japanese tourists to buy from the roadsides of 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 globalization 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 was 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 are finding 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

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

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 globalization, 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 goes 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. Globalization has led to increasing rancor between First and Third World labor unions. What I am arguing is that this labour v. labour view of the world is unnecessary and misguided. It is possible and better to go back to the old-fashioned idea of capital v. 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 6000 and India's foreign exchange reserves had breached the \$100 billion dollars mark. And to some people the economy looked even better because these statistics somewhere got addled with Tendulkar's 9000 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 growth rate goes, 2003 is not a record year. Much 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 agriculture played a major role is this year's good performance.

There is another problem with the euphoria. We must not treat the 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, Gandhian founder of SEWA kept reminding us, in her soft, characteristic 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 marginalized, and fails to bring hope to the hopeless.

It is true that in a globalizing 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, alongside 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.

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