

Life Story of Suraj Ben

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My name is Suraj Ben Shanker Bhai Rathwa and I am 35 years old. My friends call me Suraj Ben, because we consider ourselves sisters (*ben*) and brothers (*bhai*) within our SEWA community. Recently, I have experienced something which was completely new to me. For three days, I hosted two female Europeans. The one of them said, she was from the Netherlands, the other lady was from Germany. I have no idea where these countries are, as I have never gone to school and cannot read nor write. I had to ask my children, and on a map of the world in their Atlas, they showed me where we live and where the two ladies come from. Now I know that the two ladies had to travel a long way to come to see us.

I am the mother of three children. My son Narwat is 17 years old and is a school student. My daughter Bhawna is 15 years old and she helps me a lot, but she also goes to school. My youngest daughter is Shilpa, she is 13 years old, is also a school student, but she does her best to make herself useful in the household. Our family would not be complete without my husband Shankar Bhai Rathwa, of course. I have been married to him for more than 20 years. We live under one roof with our cow and her calf and with our buffalo. Just next door lives one of my husband's cousins with his family and his animals and his neighbour is my husband's uncle (my father-in-law's brother) with his wife and animals.

This is how we live under one roof:

porch functioning as barn and cowshed			
storage room	○ ○ living space Suraj Ben and family	living space cousin and family	living space uncle and aunt
calf shed	○ kitchen with fireplace	kitchen with fireplace	kitchen with fireplace



(The circles mark Suraj Ben's large storage containers made of clay and covered with lids to protect the food from damage done by mice and rats. Access to the house is from the kitchen, which is separated from the living space by a wall. The porch functions as cowshed and is covered by a roof. There are steep stairs from the porch to the communal loft where the crop is stored.)

The two ladies asked a lot of questions, which gave me cause for extensive reflection. They helped to look at my life from their perspective and to take a completely different view of the various stages of my life. Most of the time it wasn't easy, and as far as I remember I have had to work hard for everything. There were times, when I did not have enough food and my family hardly survived. ○

I am the youngest child in my family. I have four brothers and one sister. My parents were very poor. Our house was located on the banks of a river, and every year our house and fields were flooded in the monsoon season. Although my parents worked hard, we often did not have enough food. My parents were farmers. They grew cotton and onions which they sold and they grew grain for our personal needs. But there was never enough for all of us. That is why my brothers had to leave the house at a very young age to look for jobs somewhere else. They supported my parents, my sister and me with the money they earned. At the place where they worked, my brothers found a husband for me and so I got married to Shankar Bhai Rathwa at the age of 15. Unlike me, he was literate, because his parents could afford to send him to school. My wedding was paid from the money, my brothers had earned. I did not meet my husband until our wedding day, but I had every confidence in my brothers and my parents that they had chosen the right person for me.

I could see in the two ladies' eyes that this was something completely unusual for them. I wonder if they were so much older than me when they got married and if they had so much more worldly wisdom to be able to choose the right husband without their parents' help. They asked me how I could love someone who I did not meet before and whether I had learned to love him in the course of our marriage. I thought about it and I realized that I did not worry about it when I was a young girl. I was rather convinced that my parents and my older brothers had made the right decision. As the two ladies would see it, I was lucky to have him as a husband.

After my wedding, I was supposed to stay with my parents for a while. But only after seven days, my parents-in-law came to pick me up and I was to live with them and their son, my husband, until my husband and I had our own place to live. My parents-in-law owned some farmland which just fed the family. As their young daughter-in-law, I had to be smart. I had to be careful not to annoy anyone. I did my best to please my husband and his family, did nothing but help in the household for one year and look after the family. Then I also worked in the fields together with the other family members. I did not become pregnant in the first years. We

shared the house with my sister-in-law, the wife of Shankar Bhai's brother. I did not get along with her because she always talked negatively about me in front of my parents-in-law.

Nevertheless we all lived under one roof.

When the government planned to build a dam near our house, we had to move away from the area. I still remember that my mother-in-law started to cry when the government officials came to see us and said that our home and fields would soon be flooded with water and that we would have to move to another place. It was little consolation for my parents-in-law to hear that all in all 45 villages in the area were affected by the construction of the dam. In Jetapur, our new village, we were given the same amount of acres as we had owned before. Six other villages received extensive support from the government – ours didn't.

At first, all resettlers had to clear their own land and prepare it for farming. We had to drill wells. The first year was very hard for all of us. As a consequence of the dam project, the ground-water level was lowered. And when there was not enough rainfall in the monsoon season, the new wells dried up. For three years, the government sent tank trucks to supply our village with water every morning. Those women who got up early in the morning, managed to get hold of some water, the others ended up with nothing. In the time after our resettlement, many of us had a temperature and diarrhoea. From clearing the land to the first real yield, it took us five years to develop the farmland, and we were completely exhausted.

At this time, we were approached by the people of SEWA who came to our district and looked after the resettlers' interests. This was our first contact with SEWA. The SEWA people had come from the city to help us with the development of the village. They saw our water supply problems, conceived an efficient water supply programme and got the Gujarat government to finance the project. The World Bank, financed the construction of the dam, but did not support the people concerned. The SEWA members went to see all the women in the new villages and offered their assistance. They organized training courses in the town, which is 7 km away from our place, although none of us was able to read or write. In this way, they enabled us to tackle new tasks. Many of the women had difficulties in convincing their husbands and families that not only the women themselves but everyone else would profit from these training courses.

When the two ladies asked me why the men did not allow their wives to attend the courses, I realized that women in their countries enjoy much more freedom than women in India. I remember very well that, at the beginning, many women did not offer any resistance to their husbands when they did not allow them to attend SEWA's programmes. I was lucky and grateful to my parents for having chosen such an understanding husband for me. My husband soon understood that the SEWA programme will be of benefit to our entire family. In the training courses, we learned to say our names in the public, to be self-confident and to voice our opinions freely. I still remember the first time when I had to introduce myself to others and how I felt at that moment. At first, I spoke in a very low and tremulous voice. We also learned how to cultivate the soil more efficiently and how to generate regular income with farming. SEWA also helped us to convince our husbands. Some examples of success in our villages



made it easier for them to accept our activities. SEWA helped us to secure electricity and water supply and to find work outside farming.

We invested our modest profits with SEWA Bank which offered our village a savings and credit programme. We used our savings to buy seeds and to meet the basic needs of our families. This was the first time that I was offered the opportunity to dispose of some money which I had earned myself.

My husband and I used the chance to split up with our sister-in-law and my parents-in-law and we moved into one house with my husband's uncle and his wife and the family of their son.

In the year when our households were split up, there was no rain. We were short of money and it was hard for us to feed our meanwhile three children. As a consequence, I had to earn some extra money and found employment in a government project where I helped to build a water reservoir. The job was extremely hard and poorly paid. I had to give it up and our family faced the same problems as before. In this situation, my husband decided in consultation with his father to take out a short-term loan. But then we were unable to pay it off. But fortunately, my husband's uncle supported us and we were safe for the moment.

Fortunately, the government of Gujarat state initiated a new tree nursery programme in support of poor farmers. With the help of SEWA, I started to grow gooseberry shoots, which I sell when they are 35 cm long. SEWA showed me how to produce a nutrient rich fertilizer that ensured good yields. I sell up to 10,000 shoots at 1 rupee each to the state and at 3 rupees to private buyers. In this way, I managed to pay back the money we owed our uncle and we were soon free of debt. Now I earn around 1,000 rupees a month with my tree nursery, whereas my family earns only 800 rupees per month with the cultivation of cotton. SEWA Bank is very important for us because they help us to secure our income even in periods of low yield.

The successful development of our region was important for the growth of SEWA. Ever more women were persuaded and joined the project. After three years or so, we were able to set up the first neighbourhood groups comprising 200 members each, all of whom had invested their savings with SEWA. Despite my illiteracy, I was appointed leader of my group, the members of which were growing trees like me. I am responsible for my group. I purchase the seeds for all of them and collect the money. I get some extra money for this work. A SEWA nameplate above my kitchen door tells everyone what my job is.

Each member pays a contribution of one rupee per month. It is my job to collect the money and take it to Ahmedabad, when I go there to attend a meeting. I am very proud of myself because the women of my group place so much confidence in me. As a person that did not dare to talk at all, I learned, with the help of SEWA, to speak up for others. When the government once refused to pay the agreed rate for our shoots, I called together the members of my group and we protested against it in front of the district forestry office, and we were successful.

The fact that the two Europeans have come to stay with me is also due to SEWA. All the villagers came to see my guests and talked with them. On one evening, they all met in our



shed and the two women talked about their countries. They gave us a book with many pictures which I can look at whenever I want. All the neighbours wanted to look at it. It was my first book ever. Even my children had nothing but their schoolbooks. I think that I can be proud of owning a book although I am illiterate as everyone else!

I very much enjoyed talking with my guests. They treated me as an equal and that did me good. The two ladies took their time to listen to my story. Their questions showed me that they listened attentively. My husband was involved in our last conversation when we talked about our future. When we were asked about our ideas of the future and what can be done to improve the living conditions for our children, I realized that my husband and I had never talked about this before. At first, we remained silent for a while, but then I started to talk just as I had learned from SEWA. My husband accepted this and did not talk until he was directly asked by my guests. We then agreed on our statements about our future:

Looking back at our personal lives, with all the memories of the hard times we had to cope with, we wish our children a better future. I particularly hope that my daughters will receive a better education than I did and that they do not have to experience what I did. I work in order to enable them to attend a secondary school as our son does. The money I earn with my tree nursery will be used for the education of my children. My husband and I agree about this. I hope that my daughters have learned that my contacts with SEWA are of great importance to the entire family and that SEWA made our life easier. I hope that they join SEWA soon.

I also hope that at some time I do not have to work as hard as I have had to, that my husband and I will have a good and caring daughter-in-law and that my daughters will be independent, self-assured women, when they get married.

All our neighbours and also my guests could see how independent I had become when I went to Ahmedabad with my guests for two days. I managed to leave home although I normally would have had many things to do: cutting grass for the cattle, weeding the cotton field and doing the household.

I was free to go!

I, Christa Fölting, had the opportunity to spend three days with Suraj Ben and her family, staying in their house and working with them. I have tried to write this report from her point of view using the word-for-word notes I have taken during our conversions.