

Basrabai's Story

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Basrabai lives in Mohadi, a village 500 kilometers from Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat, on the shores of the Arabian Sea.² She is the first woman to be *sarpanch* of the *panchayat*—chair of the local council—as a result of constitutional amendments that reserve a third of local council seats and a third of headships for women.

Arriving in her village after a long drive, we crossed a small sea inlet on a road impassable at high tide. The first building we saw was a recently built concrete structure—the primary, the worst in living memory, as

the villagers' straw huts were blown away, they took shelter in the only stable structure in the village—the school. When the cyclone relief operation arrived, the villagers asked for more concrete buildings, and the village now has about a dozen of them.

We arrived at Basrabai's one-room concrete house, next to a straw hut. After the usual greetings, talk turned to the school. Since it was a weekday, we wondered if we could sit in on a class. Basrabai informed us that the master (the teacher) was not there and had not been there for a while. In fact, he came only once a month, if that. Protected by the district education officer, he did pretty much what he pleased.

The master came the next day. Word had gotten to him that the village had visitors. He came into Basrabai's house, and we began talking about the school and the children. Believing the educated guests to be kindred spirits, he launched into a litany of his troubles and the difficulties of teaching the children. He referred to them as *jungle*—“from the jungle.”

This was too much for Meeraiben, a member of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), who had arranged our visit. She pointed out that his salary was 6,000 rupees a month (more than six times the Indian poverty line) in a secure job and that his responsibility was at least to show up for work. The parents wanted their children to learn to read and write, even if attending school meant that the boys could not help their fathers with fishing and the girls could not help their mothers fetch water and wood and work in the fields.

Later in the evening Basrabai conducted the village meeting. There were two main topics. The first was compensation for the cyclone: despite the great fanfare with which relief schemes had been announced in the state capital, local delivery left much to be desired and local officials were unresponsive. SEWA organizers took down the names of those who had not yet received the compensation to which they were entitled, and it was agreed that they and Basrabai would meet with local officials the following week.

The second issue was a fishing ban that the government had imposed on coastal waters to protect fish stocks. It was the big trawlers that were responsible for the overfishing, but the small fishers seemed to be paying the price. The big trawlers could continue to fish as long as they paid the right officials.

In the middle of the meeting a commotion occurred at the side. Basrabai's brother had been gored in the face while trying to separate two fighting cows. Without immediate treatment the wound was bound to become infected. But it was late at night, and the nearest doctor was in the next big settlement, 10 kilometers away. Normally, this would have made immediate treatment impossible. As it happened, however, our Jeep was there and could take Basrabai's brother to the doctor.

During our stay we also saw the craft work that the village women have been doing for generations. Demand for their traditional embroidered and tie-dyed products is high, thanks to the international love affair with things Indian and the rediscovery by the growing Indian middle class of its roots. But the traders get away with offering very low prices because of the women's isolation.

The national and state governments have countless schemes to support traditional crafts, none very effective. So SEWA is stepping in to organize the home-based craft workers and to provide direct access to international markets. One piece of embroidery we looked at would fetch 150 rupees in the international market, 60 rupees in government outlets, and 20 rupees from traders.

On the last day of our stay we went to Basrabai's field, an hour's walk from her house. The risks of agriculture were plainly visible. The lack of rain had left the ground hard and dry. If it didn't rain in the next few days, her millet crop would be lost, and with it her outlay to a hired tractor driver to till her field, an investment made possible by the sale of her crafts. When we met her in Ahmedabad days later, it still had not rained.

The interactions with Basrabai and the many thousands of poor people consulted in preparing this report bring to the fore recurrent—and familiar—themes. Poor people mention the lack of income-earning opportunities, the poor links with markets, and the failure of state institutions to respond to their needs. They mention insecurity, such as health risks, the risk of being out of work, and the agricultural risks that make any gains always fragile. Everywhere—from the villages in India to the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, the shantytowns outside Johannesburg, and the farms in Uzbekistan—the stories bring forward similar issues.

But talking to Basrabai and other poor people also reveals what is possible. Although local officials and state structures are still not accountable to Basrabai and her village, an explicit affirmative action policy allowed Basrabai's election as *sarpanch*, showing what can be done through state action. And SEWA shows how poor people can make a difference if they organize themselves to defend their rights, take advantage of market opportunities, and protect themselves from risks.

