



India

Ingrid Sehrbrock, German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB)

„Decent Work for All – Core Labour Standards and Freedom of Organisation in the Informal Economy“ – Indien, 2005

I could have known that a city which is listed on every large-sized map of India, must be very big. 6 Mio. People live in Ahmedabad, and yet it was Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay I had saved in my memory. Ahmedabad -never heard of it.

It is the contrasts that catch one's eye in India: the chaos on the streets crammed with motor scooters, pushcarts, buses, bicycles, cars and many people in between. Modern high-rises with Western standards, little shops strung together in the Old Town, the oldest dating back to the 14th century, restored buildings from the Colonial time, apartment houses recently built, which however resemble ruins, because they are hardly being maintained. Empty window frames alternate between reconstructed oriels.

The quarter we are brought to by the SEWA driver is a slum without a doubt. We get out of the car stepping on mire, immediately surrounded by children and adults, who barely ever get to see such a car. Further through narrow lanes, as broad that two people-or- as I find out later- a cow in calf can scrape through. On the streets there are young and old people sitting on their beds strung with straps, partly emaciated, apathetic faces. The bleating of goats and this intense smell come from the housing spaces. People carrying water pots are approaching us. We greet them in a friendly manner, are noticed by them in a surprised way and often receive friendly greetings in return.

Life here is lived in public. We can observe the people in and in front of the houses doing all sorts of daily life activities. We are going to stay in these surroundings for three days. Mentally, we are definitely prepared, but who knows how it feels to eat, sleep, to live there,-not only to meet the tenants of the slum with understanding, and then to friendly say goodbye and head for the clean three or four star hotel?

Our host lady's daughter-in-law-approximately 17 years old - must have spent her whole afternoon preparing food: nan bread, rice, various oddly spiced vegetables, there is tea and water. The little room we are sitting in used to be a kitchen in the past. Nowadays, it is the bedroom of the son and the daughter-in-law. This is a strictly female round: the two German women, the Indian facilitator, the interpreter, our host lady. We eat. When and where do the



others eat? The husband, the second son, the daughter-in-law, the granddaughter and the grandson?

The house is permanently abuzz with neighbours and friends, sticking their heads into the house, in order to see the strangers.

Around 10.30 p.m. we start walking through the quarter. It is dark and many have set up their beds outdoors. We come to a corner of a house. There are chairs and bed frames being brought as a sitting facility. In very short time, between 40 and 50 women-members of the trade union SEWA (Self Employed Women Association) are on the spot. If it hadn't been for a religious holiday, we are told, 500 women would have turned up.

Most of them haven't heard about Germany, but about Europe, however what kind of foreigners would lose their way in such quarter? One has to see them. We are looking into open, friendly faces of astute and interested women, who have by now-that is 10 p.m.- finished their daily tasks. At this time of day, women of SEWA usually meet and now the political work can begin.

Our sleeping accommodation is on the first floor which is accessible by a chicken ladder. In the back room where the stinking kerosene cask stands-kerosene is used for cooking and heating-the grandfather and the two grandchildren sleep.

Through a little door, one steps into the front room, rather a kind of veranda, with very low built side walls, a corrugated sheet roof, through which the monsoon rain percolates in several places and with side shields made of plastic sacks. A street lamp glares directly on our beds-in addition to our double bed there are three others. The rain is dripping on our feet.

The working day of our host lady, a construction worker, starts around 6 a. m. with the housework, preparing breakfast, fetching water, making tea, washing herself in a separate dark water supply site, where one washes the dishes and alike.

Around seven o'clock she has to be at the building site and the work starts at 8 a.m. Women as construction workers? Yes, because they are "cheaper" than men. A lot of spouses are being unemployed for over 20 years, as the textile factories had to shut down. A lot of women are the family's only breadwinners. The colourful saris in which they work must not distract from the back-breaking work that has to be done: Carrying stones, mixing mortar and transporting it, grouting walls, hauling sand-everything under harsh conditions and without any safety at work. Work safety is standard in Germany. Helmets, safety glasses, safety shoes - relatively unknown. The safeguard of the construction site consists of sending a devout ejaculation to the heavens: Oh, Lord don't bring the badly supported ceiling down today!



But what happens if something happens? Our host lady Jeviben had an accident at work a couple of years ago: a complicated knee fracture. There is no accident insurance, no state health insurance, no continuation of payments in case of illness.

The trade union SEWA offers all of this on the lowest level at lowest rates. However, it is not enough. A disease means misery for a family. Without income, one has to pay the doctor, the medicine, the hospital stays. The person unable to take out a loan, is dependent on the family and neighbours. But even with a loan the problem remains. The incomes are so low, that the pay back is only possible in smallest instalments, if at all.

90 % of the Indian working population finds itself in the informal sector-that is, is precariously employed: as small street tradesmen, as farm labourer, as day labourers at construction sites, as bidi worker, as vendors of their agricultural products. One tries to make profit out of literally everything. Empty oil cans are collected, washed and sold again, women try to support their families with embroidery work that is being badly paid.

A state-run system with a Western imprint is, if at all, available to people working for the government.

Jeviben and her colleagues from work, place their hope in a law that wants to commit the building companies to give 1% of their size of the orders for the building projects to the state, in order to finance a basic backup for the employees in the informal economy. The law has been passed 10 years ago, but it has to be agreed on by the single states again. Merely Kerala has implemented the law so far, Gujarat, the state with the greatest economic boom, wants/will follow. However, it remains highly debatable if all of this can be truly realized after all these long years of waiting.

Jeviben belongs to the SEWA activists who recruits new members in her living quarter. Although illiterate, she is apparently able to convince others to become a member of a trade union. SEWA does not only offer a modest social back up but also qualifies its members professionally. Construction workers get one to two trainings lasting a couple of months and learn how to lay bricks, to plaster walls, to lay flagstones and to tile walls. Equipped with a certificate and a group picture, the recruitment of other women begins. It may be hard to imagine but illiterate women can get themselves qualified through pictures, the same happening in the SEWA academy, where all new members are invited. By means of self painted pictures the women explain their lives, their professional experience, their problems and their longings. With pie charts, SEWA makes the women aware of their contribution to the economic power of their state and how truly little they profit from the allowance. The women learn to appreciate their work and their abilities and develop a new self-esteem for their work,

but also in the family. A taped interview training helps them to develop a realistic image of themselves.

Many men are at first sceptical about SEWA's work, but finally support their women as they profit from the commitment and the insurance of their wives.

In Jevibens family, the daughter-in-law died young from typhus, her youngest child being four months old. Jeviben stopped working as a construction worker and took care of the child. Dharmishda-today 5 years old-has a very close relationship with her grandmother. The son has remarried, his wife has barely outgrown infancy. At the age of 17 he hasn't established a relationship to his 8 year old son, and so the grandparents present once again an important element.

In any case, both sons have a job, the oldest can read and write, the grandson goes to school.

The disease and the sudden death of the daughter-in-law and the following unemployment of Jeviben, have torn a financial hole into the family's budget. SEWA is supporting the family with a loan.

Three days spent with a completely unknown family-what are the results?

Experiencing great hospitality, cordiality, fun, a lot of opportunities to laugh about things despite many problems; experiencing a great cooperativeness between the families, developing an emotional closeness to unknown people; a lot of depressing life stories, with fears, but also hope for the grandchildren; tears when leaving.

Finding out more about a trade union which works with all castes and religions according to Ghandi's philosophy, that accompanies its meetings and sessions with meditation songs and religious texts and professionally takes care about the weakest, activates, supports and educates them.

Thankfulness of the Indian women for placing **their** lives, **their** achievements and **their** work in the centre, through words and actions. Gratefulness for our interest for them and their personality and for the impulses to think different about things they thought would never change.

At last, the larger perspective on the increase of precarious employment world wide, also in the developed countries like Germany. The insight, that it is not merely a transition phenomenon in economically challenging times. One reason more for the trade unions to grant priority to the life securing income on their agendas. Now.