THE SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION:

IDEOLOGY IN ACTION

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of Anthropology)
and Sociology

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
April 1996
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Date April 25, 1996

ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents an anthropological examination of the efforts of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, to effect social change. The study is based on fieldwork carried out in 1993 and 1994.

SEWA attempts to improve the situation of economically marginal women in urban and rural Gujarat, by altering the conditions in which they labour. SEWA works from a reformist position, which allows it to (i) criticise existing development practices, (ii) influence government policies concerning the very poor and (iii) assist in the implementation of those government programmes intended to benefit the very poor. I put forth the argument that SEWA's most useful contribution to social change may lie in its efforts to reconceptualise existing relations between labour, gender and poverty. SEWA has attempted to create different, and more "positive", perceptions of the economically-marginal women, and to bring the issues which concern them to wider public awareness. The dissertation describes SEWA's ideological and practical struggles to effect these changes. The bases of the ideology are the organisation's efforts to define its members and its purpose in the terms *it* finds appropriate and its insistence that development which is to benefit women must be focussed exclusively on them.

The organisation's strategies include the establishment of a powerful organisation which is now linked with national and international agencies committed to improving the economic conditions of the poor. Other strategies include mounting legal challenges to unfair practices, creating employment, regularising relations between employers and employees and working to establish bonds between women of different communities and sub-castes, through its efforts to alter women's perceptions of themselves.

A number of internal struggles between highly educated middle class activists with global worldviews and the women SEWA designates as self-employed are examined. Two of the organisation's efforts to put ideology into action, and the social factors which

impeded those efforts, are described. Some of those impediments are internal to the organisation, such as conflicts between members and organisers about the purpose of the organisation, and their different roles in it. Others are external, and are situated in the domestic domains of the members' lives and in the social and economic context of the city of Ahmedabad.

The fact that only women can belong to SEWA is a crucial element in the organisation's construction of a development alternative, but that fact has the paradoxical effect of isolating women conceptually from the social and familial networks in which they live and work. In the future, SEWA may have to decide whether to retain its alternative, women-focussed approach or to integrate its development activities into the wider context of economically marginal women and men.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to a number of people and institutions, without whose help and support the work that led to this dissertation would not have been possible. A doctoral research grant from the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute in 1993 and the Canadian Anthropology Association's Richard F. Salisbury Award for Applied Anthropology, in 1992, funded the research.

My stay in Ahmedabad was made a positive experience, thanks to the help of the Anthonyswami family and the kind assistance of Hasmukh and Manda Patel. At SEWA, numerous people gave me their time and aided my inquiries, principally Lalita Krishnaswamy, Ranjan Desai and Pratibha Pandya. I was fortunate in finding friends amongst my informants at SEWA. I am pleased to count Laxmi, Gomat, Ugarben, Menaben, Ambaben, the Rathod family in Ahmedabad and Chansol, and Jyotsna Sagara amongst those friends.

Dr. Narendra Bokhare and his wife Sheela incorporated me into their circle of friends and family in Pune and provided hospitality and practical help which made it possible for me to recoup my strength and spirits, on two occasions. I am pleased to record my gratitude to them, here.

It was Dr. Carole Farber, at the University of Western Ontario, who made it possible for me to think that I could go to India at all. The members of my advisory committee at UBC have patiently guided and informed my thinking in fruitful ways, understanding the issues I have struggled with in writing this dissertation and encouraging me to continue. I am grateful to Professors Michael Ames, John Wood, Elvi Whittaker and Martin Silverman for giving me the benefits of their expertise and insight. Helga Jacobson and Mary Des Chene were helpful on earlier incarnations of that committee. Michael Ames and John Wood, especially, have provided encouragement, support and usefully critical readings of earlier drafts. I hope that the result does justice to their efforts, although I am aware of its shortcomings.

A number of friends and colleagues at the University of British Columbia have been helpful in the time I have spent there. The Anthropology Graduate Secretary, Margaret Baskette, steadied me and provided guidance, for which I am most grateful. Nick and Patricia Lee, Julie Cruikshank, Erica Thomson, Dori Bixler, Catherine Friedlaender-Fenn, Jane Shumka and Lindy-Lou Flynn have been cheerful office-mates, warm friends, and stimulating intellectual companions, in the time in which our lives and our careers as students, have intersected with each other.My son Andrew has always encouraged me in this endeavour, even though it has taken me away from him. I thank him for his support and ecouragement.

CHAPTER ONE: SITE OF THE RESEARCH

What is usually referred to as development is one of the most recent iterations of a set of issues which have long occupied the attention of social scientists. That issue is how changes in social systems come about, the forms that social change takes at particular historical moments, and the reasons for social change occurring at specific times amongst specific actors.[1] Since India became independent, a great deal of the effort to effect social change has been cast within the framework of "development". The term has usually been taken to mean changes in the economic system, but the term has itself developed over the decades since independence, as I discuss below.

This dissertation examines a particular kind of directed effort to bring about a number of changes in India's social system. It describes the ways in which one of India's largest and best-known non-governmental organisations, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA),[2] conceptualises and acts upon a set of issues which it defines as social problems and as requiring intervention. Those social problems are based in the economic conditions of the women who labour in the informal sector of the economy. Those problems extend from the economic concerns of a number of poor women in Ahmedabad to ways of re-thinking the wider social contèxt in which women might conceptualise themselves, their contributions to domestic economies, their relationships with other women and their places in society. If changes are effected in any or all of these domains, then the results can indeed be considered a change in the social system.

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[1]Shah notes that in the 1950s many anthropological and sociological analyses of social change in India focused on the relationships between modernity and tradition (Shah 1990:13). Singer's *When A Great Tradition Modernizes*, which builds on Redfield's examinations of the relationships between textual and 'folk' traditions, provides one example of an examination of changes in cultural systems. Changes in the caste system have also occupied the attention of anthropologists and sociologists, as have studies of the religious movements which have played such an important part in the history of India (*ibid.*). Shah notes that many studies of social movements by Indian social scientists have centred on Srinivas's concept of sanskritisation, based in the idea that people in the lower castes emulated the practices and customs of those in the higher castes, as a means of 'moving up' in the social system.

[2]SEWA is the English-language acronym. In Gujarati and in some other north Indian languages the word *seva* means service. This linguistic distinction points to the fact that the organisation has multiple referents. When the Gujarati-speaking members of SEWA refer to their organisation they may be referring to the purpose of the organisation, which is service to the poor, or to the organisation itself. When SEWA is referred to in English it is most likely the organisation which is being referred to.

Based in Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat, SEWA was formed 23 years ago, in 1972, for the purposes of (1) enabling its members, all of whom are women and most of whom are extremely poor, to earn a better living, and (2) to establish a forum through which they might lay claim to the economic and social rights and benefits to which they are legally entitled. In the course of just over two decades, SEWA has come to be a high-profile representative of one kind of alternative approach to creating new possibilities in the struggles of some of India's poor to improve their economic situations. That alternative is situated outside the large-scale "mainstream" development schemes which prevailed from the 1950s to the 1980s and is part of what Dhanagare identifies as "the most important development in India since the 1960s" (Dhanagare 1988:14). That development is "The emergence of a large number of action groups who have been trying to educate, conscientise and mobilise different marginalised sections, particularly the oppressed poor" (*ibid.*).

Since there are a multitude of potential sites in which to examine this particular form of social change, I will first account for how I came to decide on SEWA as the focus of this study. I first heard about the Self-Employed Women's Association when I saw a video about the organisation which had been produced for the Aga Khan Foundation. That video showed women earning their living in a variety of occupations. Some of them were trading kitchen utensils for old clothes, others were selling vegetables in the markets, transporting enormous loads of goods on their heads and collecting waste paper from the streets for resale. Other women were working in their homes, where they were sewing garments by machine, rolling tobacco into cigarettes and making food items. A number of claims were made in that video about the women themselves and about the conditions of their economic and domestic lives. One claim was that the women had no resources other than their physical capacities with which to earn a living. Another was that they worked extremely hard for very little economic return and that their labours were not considered to be work, or to have any economic value beyond perhaps making a contribution to a

household's income. The trades and occupations were related to each other by the fact that the work was done in the informal sector of the economy, which meant that the women had little or no economic security. Other claims concerned SEWA's efforts to transform the economic and working conditions of those women. It was asserted that the right to even such minimal income as they earned was tenuous and that the women had little idea of the market value of their labour or the items they produced, and no control over the wages they earned. Nor did they have any apparent means of altering the conditions of their labouring.

It was also asserted that the women were at the mercy of numerous social forces which operated to deny them any improvement in their situation. These forces included moneylenders who would demand high rates of interest when lending them the funds they required to earn a living each day; families which were reluctant to allow women to work outside the home or to acknowledge that the women's labour could be categorised as work; middlemen repeatedly cheating them of the money they should have earned, and city policemen demanding bribes which consumed a portion of their meagre earnings. When men were referred to in that video, it was as usurious moneylenders, or as husbands and fathers who restrained the women's movements and restricted their potential.

While those women were portrayed as having very little power in the economic and social order, the claim was made in that video that membership in the Self-Employed Women's Association was the transforming factor in altering their conditions of economic dependency and in engendering what SEWA calls self-reliance in its members. However a number of things were not discussed in that video. One of these was the process of "transformation" from an individual earning a meagre living in difficult circumstances to being self-reliant, whatever that might mean. Another was the terms on which the critiques of the social system were constructed. The claims remained, then, at the level of assertion. I found other intriguing claims about the organisation in published essays (Bhatt 1989, Jain 1980). One such claim was that SEWA challenges prevailing conceptualisations of

poor women, labour and development. It was asserted that SEWA accomplished these transformations and mounted these challenges on its own terms, some of them based on the revitalisation of ideas from an earlier historical period, and others based on responses to contemporary ideas. The former were primarily Gandhian ideas and the latter were drawn from the women's movement in India and abroad and from the trade union movement.

My reasons for wanting to know more about the Self-Employed Women's Association have both academic and personal resonances. To begin with the academic: this study was informed by the desire to learn about, and to critically examine, the means of engendering new ways of thinking about and acting upon the situations of the very poor, who are often the focus of that aspect of modernity which is termed development. In abbreviated form: SEWA's version of an alternative approach to development is most often described as utilising Gandhian methods and principles, and as working with the grassroots to engender self-reliance for self-employed women. Such a statement constitutes a worldview in a sentence. The particular ways in which these terms are utilised by SEWA are discussed in Chapter Three.

The study was also informed with a desire to learn how some of the people perceived to be requiring or deserving of development understand, respond to and react to their own situations, and what *they* think about the efforts of those who say they are working on their behalf. The relationship between organisers and organised, both of which are *continua*, rather than discrete categories, was of interest to me for a number of reasons. One is that it would seem that the well-educated organisers hold the power to represent the organisation in the terms of their own choosing, to the wider public in India and abroad. They are in a position to make claims about the efforts of the organisation. They are the people who attend international conferences, write essays and reports, and discuss issues and policies with government officials. They are also the people who have access to the ideas and ideologies of, for instance, the women's movement in India, which

is primarily a middle-class movement (Krishnaraj 1990), international trade unions and national and international development agencies. Dhanagare makes the valuable point that the phenomenon of middle-class activists joining and sometimes leading what he calls "activist groups" (which may or may not be social movements) is worthy of attention. He says that "[T]he role of middle-class professionals and intellectuals in verbalising grievances and issues of the marginalised and the oppressed is of crucial importance in any study of activist groups" (Dhanagare 1988:23 *ff.*) and suggests that it is the ability of middle-class intellectuals to "transcend their class outlook and to develop a theory ... to depersonalise struggles and crystallise ideas into ideologies which propels the process of mobilisation of people's movements" (*ibid.*). He adds that middle-class intellectuals are also capable of "linking the micro-level struggles with macro-level processes of transformation" (*ibid.*:25).

It would seem that the self-employed members of the organisation might well have their own perceptions of the value and efficacy of the organisation, and their own reasons for belonging, which may or may not coincide with those of the organisers.

For all of these reasons, it seemed to me that SEWA represented an excellent place in which to examine some of the issues involved in constructing alternative approaches to development, alternatives which were focussed on women and were generated *in* India, rather than abroad. I discuss the reasons for wanting to learn about alternatives generated in India later in this chapter.

I had the opportunity to visit SEWA briefly in 1991, at which time I was able to learn more about the organisation, meet some of the high-ranked organisers, see some of SEWA's projects in action and collect some of SEWA's own English language documentation. While there, I requested and was given agreement in principle to return to do a long term study. This exposure, in tandem with extensive reading in the literatures on development, made it possible to formulate a research proposal. I returned to Ahmedabad in April of 1993, having received the necessary academic clearance.

I went to Ahmedabad, then, hoping to achieve a better understanding of the kinds of changes which the organisation is able to make in the social and economic situations of its members. I also wanted to learn the details of SEWA's approach to development, by which I mean its apprehension of issues, its explanatory constructs (*i.e.*, the situating of its understandings of the problems it is trying to resolve), its organising principles and its methods of gathering data and implementing development practices, and how the organisation worked to bring about social change.

I also wanted to achieve a better understanding of the experience of membership in SEWA for the women whom SEWA characterised as self-employed. How had they come to join the organisation; what did they take to be the benefits and the drawbacks of their membership in the organisation and in the various schemes in which they participated? I wanted to know their perceptions of the claims made by SEWA on their behalf; whether, for instance, SEWA's claim to be constructing a Gandhian approach to development was significant to them. I was interested in learning their assessments of the organisation, and whether their membership enabled them to earn a better living, however they might define a better living. I wanted to learn how the members of SEWA conceived of, defined and expressed the self-reliance that SEWA claimed to be engendering on their behalf. Did the members have any greater degree of economic decision-making in the household, as a result of their membership in SEWA? What kind of opposition, if any, did they face from family members? And how did those being "organised" resist attempted impositions of ideas they found unacceptable?[3] Jain identifies some of these potentially problematic issues when she says that SEWA "aims at introducing the members to values of honesty, dignity and simplicity of life-goals reflecting the Gandhian ideals to which TLA and SEWA leaders subscribe" (1980:27). This formulation of purpose implies that the prospective members do not currently subscribe to these values, and perhaps that these

[3]Abu-Lughod (1990:324), adapting Foucault's insight about "resistance as a diagnostic of power", argues that forms of power can be traced through resistance to power.

values can only be held by Gandhians. I do not suggest that this is the only way that the organisers conceptualise the members. Rather, it was what was available in the literature.

I had originally intended to focus on the relationships between SEWA's ideology and its development practices, first gaining an overview of the organisation and then looking at one of the co-operatives which SEWA operates. However, like any well-laid plan, this one was altered by the realities and exigencies of the fieldwork situation, as I relate in Chapter Two. In that chapter, I have employed a personal and reflexive approach to a discussion of the fieldwork.

As to the personal reasons for doing this study and my sympathy for the issues I wanted to examine at SEWA,[4] they begin with my own experience of the construction of alternatives as these relate to class and gender in a highly class-stratified society (the U.K.). Anthropologists surely are often drawn to particular fields of investigation through a sympathy for issues which resonate with the facts of their own lives. As someone who has had the opportunity to live in more than one socio-economic environment and in two cultures (England and Anglophone Canada) I wanted to know how people in another culture were affected by issues of gender, position in the social hierarchy, community, occupation and education and how these various cultural factors might affect their interaction with potential development alternatives. I wanted to know what counted as a possibility for the self-employed members of SEWA, how they took advantage of those possibilities and what caused those opportunities to succeed or to fail for them.

My wish to complement the view from above (that of the well-educated organisers) with that from below (the self-employed women) comes from having heard many eloquent and hard-edged discussions about the working conditions of the poor and undereducated in Britain, by people who had experienced those conditions firsthand. As a result of those conversations, and my reading of social science and other literatures, I have

[4]I include these personal details as a necessary aspect of a reflexive approach to ethnography. Anthropologists can no longer study 'others' without seeing themselves seeing others. Nor can interest, academic or otherwise, any longer be seen as a neutral term.

always resisted the idea that members of any class or social group were somehow intrinsically different from the members of another. Nor has it ever seemed to me that particular kinds of characteristics, whether valourising or pejorative, could be attributed to economic status. From those conversations, I took the message that theorising and abstraction, critique and proposed solutions, are not the exclusive privilege of the educated and the expert, and that people in all social *strata* respond critically and creatively to the conditions in which they find themselves. Although women and men are born into families, occupations and places - into histories and cultures - and although some kinds of behaviour are thought appropriate to them and deference demanded from, or granted to, them by virtue of such factors as gender and social standing, they participate in those structures in thoughtful and responsive ways, as decision-making agents, approving of some things, disliking others and working to change them, coming to terms with hard facts, concentrating on some issues and leaving others aside. I find persuasive Appadurai's idea that "more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before" (1991:197), while acknowledging that those possibilities are, on the one hand, often a kind of privilege reserved for those who can afford them, and on the other, can be an enforced exposure to the problems of urban modernity for others. I suggest in Chapter Three that SEWA opens up many more of those possibilities for many its members than would otherwise be conceivable.

I argue in this dissertation that SEWA's most useful contributions to a reformist development alternative are the organisation's efforts to establish new ways of thinking about and acting upon the connections between gender, labour and poverty, and its efforts to resist those aspects of Indian society which, whether actively or passively, victimise women, the poor and the lower castes. SEWA's reformist position is comprised of (i) its efforts to mount a critique of the assumptions and practices which it considers harmful to women, in particular those which prevent women from participating in the economy as fully as they are capable of doing and (ii) the organisation's efforts to influence

government policies concerning women, to assist in the implementation of those government programmes which are intended to benefit women, and to make those programmes available to its members. SEWA utilises both ideological and practical strategies in its efforts. It wages "ideological struggles" (Hall 1990:10) in its efforts to conceptualise the problems of very poor women in ways that acknowledge their capabilities and their rights. It works to redefine the very poor in terms that are usually applied to the middle class. SEWA also attempts to establish bonds between women of different communities and sub-castes, as part of its efforts to alter women's perceptions of themselves and each other in particular directions. It carries out all of these efforts in terms of its own assessment of issues and its own particular combinations of thought and action. (These ideological struggles are the subject of Chapter Three.) SEWA creates an institutional framework through which its members can avail themselves of the resources that SEWA has established: these include the union, the bank, membership in co-operatives and training sessions. The organisation maintains links with other NGOs and participates in the wider social movements which work to bring about change in India. It challenges what it considers to be unfair practices, and works to create employment for its members and to regularise and improve relations between employers and employees.

None of these things comes about without internal and external struggle. As I relate in Chapter Five, there are struggles between the organisers' and the members' concepts of the purpose of the organisation, and there are differing opinions about the direction the organisation has taken and should be taking. Organisers and members struggle over the right to define and represent themselves and their efforts. Some members struggle with the efforts of family members to control them and their membership in SEWA.

In the following sections of this chapter, I set out some of the reasons for the existence of organisations such as SEWA and the context in which they have emerged.

Some Critiques of Mainstream Development

In order to substantiate the assertion that SEWA is in the mainstream of alternative approaches to development it is first of all necessary to know what is meant by the term mainstream development. There are two predominating forces in the history of mainstream development as it applies in India. One of those forces is the history of British colonialism there and resistance to it. The other is the efforts made by the governments of independent India to improve conditions for its citizens and to ensure that India could meet the needs of its own people.

Development has been a compelling force in the second half of the 20th century, whether it has made beneficiaries out of the recipients of development or has made them its victims (Sheth 1984). The kind of development which is usually thought of when the term mainstream is used originated in 19th century Europe, during a cultural turning point which saw evolutionary theory, the industrial revolution and colonialism assume dominant positions in European conceptualisations of the world. That same period saw scientific and rational modernity take on particular meanings. Science and technology were thought to be the antitheses of *and* the successors to religious thought, and to provide secular versions of perfectibility. New knowledge of the physical world, new explanatory constructs, new forms of political power, new solutions to ancient terrors such as famine and disease: it was thought that all of these would transform the relationship between men and the world. The relationship of Europeans with the natural world was altered, as subjective and non-rational apprehensions of the world were replaced by objective scientific knowledge, in which the knower was distanced from the known and a space opened up between them. It was thought that everything *could* be known, if enough information could be collected. By the same token, rational solutions could be constructed for self-evident problems if enough information were gathered. Modernity, then, constructed as scientific and rational and detached from the struggle for power, flourished.

Some of the history of development in post-colonial India has been a history of attempts to impose those Western models of modernisation, construed as the route to a progressive future, on existing economic, political and social systems. Critics argue that those models, some of them based on Orientalist readings of traditional Indian systems,[5] have misread social realities, failed to address the socio-economic situations of the economically marginal, and have contributed to the continued existence of an increasingly large economic underclass (Banuri 1990, Dallmayr 1992).

The relationship of European humanity with its own past altered as progress became the dominant trope. Evolutionary concepts came to be the dominant paradigm, the constructed mirror through which the cultures of the world could be scientifically understood and evaluated. Evolutionary theories, applied to cultures, led to the notion of a single human past having existed in successive stages (Dallmayr 1992). The situating of the cultures of the world, by Europeans, on that evolutionary continuum, with the European present constructed as the apex of human endeavour, provided the justification for colonialism (Wolf 1982). And empires flourished.

Classification and evaluation are usually two sides of the same coin (Said 1978, Wolf 1982, Inden 1986, Pinney 1990). These factors led many European colonial administrators to consider that non-European cultures were in their very "essence" (Inden 1986) different from and inferior to those of Europe. Read positively, the essence of India was a timeless spirituality and the source of Indo-European cultures and languages (Inden 1986,1990; Appadurai 1988). Read negatively, India's essential timelessness derived from her isolation from the modernising effects of history and her supposed incapacity to forge an enduring nation state in the European model (Fox 1990). Wolf has traced the implications of those essentialist European ideas in the histories of North and South America, Africa, Australia and every part of Asia (Wolf 1982). He points out that

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[5]Stoler (1989), Fuller (1977) and Srinivasan (1984) provide examples of such misreadings and efforts to reform existing traditions and systems.

considering societies in isolation from one another, and ignoring the processual linkages which connect them historically, made it possible to map essences onto cultures and societies. In such a *schema*, levels of material and technological wealth, the sophistication of legal, political and economic systems, and the rationality of human institutions such as the family, were judged to be indicators of "cultural development" (Dallmayr 1992:421). The standard against which they were compared and evaluated was, of course, "the west" which was re-inscribing itself at the same time it was inscribing those parts of the world which constituted its colonies, and which would later come to be termed the "Third World" (Pletsch 1981, Wolf 1982).[6]

India provided, to some colonial administrators, a case of a past that was indeed glorious, but had not stood the test of time, and had degenerated to the point where outsiders could and should take it over. Dallmayr (1992:421) observes that "From its inception, modern Western thought carried a teleological imprint marked by a dialectical twist: the opposition between advancement and regression, between development and non- or underdevelopment". This opposition was often put in terms of the rational, secular, masculine modern world, and the religious (or superstitious) poor, overpopulated, feminine (Inden 1986) traditional world. Given such a dichotomous mindset, cultures and worlds could only be arrayed in opposition to each other, since logic (also assumed to be universal) requires that something cannot be both one thing and its opposite. A traditional culture, then, must expunge its traditional ways of thought and practice if it is to become modern. There is a presumed inevitability built into this way of viewing the world. It was taken for granted that the process of economic development which the West had experienced was analogous to modernisation; that modernisation was inevitable, and that the lineaments of modernisation were evident through economic measurement (Todaro

[6]The term 'third world' was originally coined to identify those countries which were outside the sphere of influence of either the US or the USSR *i.e.*, the non-aligned nations.

1985). The term development is inevitably evolutionary, implying that some people have accomplished it while others require it.

Dallmayr points out that "claims to superiority on the part of Western modernity appear in a particularly wistful light when seen against the backdrop of one of the oldest living civilizations, whose culture has radiated powerfully throughout much of Asia and the Orient" (1992:422). If these ways of thinking about the world supported and justified colonial expansion, they were equally dominant in the middle of the 20th. century, when empires were being dismantled and replaced by first, second and third worlds. What is now referred to as development began, in the period following World War II, as part of the reconstruction of those economies destroyed by the war, and the economies of those countries which were then being granted political independence. The engine of reconstruction was the economic strength of the victorious nations, principally the United States, and its allies and the USSR - the first and second worlds. From the point of view of one of those worlds, economic improvement would make political revolution less attractive and serve the same purpose, with economic empire-building replacing explicitly political involvement by the forces of empire.

The theories which impelled those early stages of development were modelled on the evolutionary and evaluative worldviews which had been developed in the 19th century. Liberal 'stages of economic growth' models were superseded by neoclassical structural change models, to be succeeded in turn, by Marxist-oriented dependency models (Todaro 1985:62). Each of these models conceptualised relations between the first and third worlds in different ways, but the conceptualisation of the third world as a place requiring development, *i.e.*, the transformation of economic, subsistence, industrial and technological structures, remained similar (Wolf 1982). It was thought that the transformation of social structures would follow more or less automatically as people came to realise the supposed irrationality of existing social structures: extended families would give way to nuclear families; impersonal relations would supersede personal ones

(Banuri 1990) while GNP rose and development took its inevitable direction. All of this would take place without acknowledging that existing social systems had been affected by centuries of colonial intervention or that those systems had internal logic which had been created to suit local conditions.

Mainstream economic and social development in post-independence India has produced some impressive and useful results (Sen 1989). These include self-sufficiency in food production, higher rates of life expectancy, literacy and education with every five-year plan, and high-technology software development and nuclear capability. It also includes higher GNP, greater rates of savings and increased agricultural and industrial production. India now exports grains, for instance, and has a rapidly growing middle-class. Despite these gains, it is nowadays widely acknowledged that a state of crisis informs mainstream development. Much of the state of crisis concerns the realisation that the modernist agenda, based on uninhibited capitalist expansion, has led to environmental degradation, chaotic urban expansion, increasing social and economic disparities and the failure of nation states to retain control of their own economic systems. Speaking of India, Parajuli asserts that "[c]onventional assumptions about development have reached an impasse" (1991:173). Banuri (1990:73) refers to "the widespread feeling of a crisis in development theory". In his discussion of development theory as it applies to India, Sheth has argued (1987:155) that theories have bloomed and proliferated in direct obverse proportion to the practicality of on-the-ground improvements and that those theories have lost their power to convince: "In the course of the last two decades the reality of underdevelopment has moved ahead of the theory of development" (*ibid.*) and the idea of "improvement for all" has been revealed as "empty rhetoric" according to Sheth.

There is no lack of criticism, then, and no dearth of eloquent critics concerning what is usually termed mainstream development, at least insofar as the effects of mainstream development on the poorest of the poor are concerned. The detrimental effects of this kind of development in India, as in other parts of the world, are widespread:

environmental degradation as a result of unchecked and unregulated industrialisation (Sarangi and Cohen, 1995), increased dependence on chemicals for food production, loss of potable water resources and the unchecked growth of cities. Mainstream development has reduced some sectors of the population such as the poorest villagers and those dispossessed and ousted by mega-projects, to a new place in an ancient social system. Sheth refers to these people as "the untouchables of development" (Sheth 1984:259): they are the poorest, the illiterate, the landless and the unemployed whose skills have been rendered obsolete by industrialisation.

One reason for the failure of mainstream development is that theories and practices of development conceived in one set of historical, cultural and political contexts and applied in another, not only fail to generate structural transformations which benefit economic underclasses, but combine to further entrench them in a cycle of poverty and dependency (Alavi 1989, Escobar 1990, Kalpagam 1986, Todaro 1985, Sheth 1984). This is so whether the theories originate in the first world and are applied in the third, or whether elites practice internal colonialism on sectors of the population they consider to require or deserve development. An alternative to the mainstream approach, then, might offer a way of re-conceptualising worldviews, power relations and the local knowledge of the people directly affected by problems and proposed solutions.

Parajuli makes the valuable point that the first and the third worlds criticise development from different points of view: "While in the First World the critique of development is focused on maldevelopment and over-overdevelopment, in the Third World, it is the crisis of survival and identity which informs the growing discontent with development" (1991:173). It is a depressing truth that, despite decades of development, more and more people in India now live below the official poverty line (Cf. Eswaran and Kotwal 1994, A. Sen 1989, Beck 1994). Millions of people are unemployed or underemployed, have barely enough to eat and are illiterate or under-educated. In part, this is because there are more and more people, as a burgeoning population absorbs the

available material improvements more quickly than those improvements can be created. Rising population figures, however, are only one factor in the tapestry of reasons for the crisis. Long-standing hierarchical structures continue to reserve the most opportunities for some sectors of the population, while consigning others to subservience and economic insecurity. These problems have led many people to endorse religious and political fundamentalisms which subvert democracy and to foment antagonisms which are construed by politicians as communal, in their effort to retain their place in the scheme of things, and not lose ground.

An argument which threads through all of the issues raised here is based on the perception that women constitute a particular case in development theory and practice because of their sex. It has been suggested by those theorists who participate in the voluminous literature on 'women and development', that mainstream development, for most of the period since World War II, has failed to incorporate women into development planning and programmes, and has failed, in the wider sense of failure, because it has excluded women. The argument is that women, and their labour, their contributions to agricultural, industrial and domestic economies have been rendered invisible, their labour not acknowledged as work (Anker 1983), and their needs for the basic tools of development, such as education, health care, access to technological materials, not met. Some theorists argue that the ways in which women have been considered with respect to mainstream development are analogous to first world assumptions about the third world, and are one reason mainstream development has failed (Mies 1988, Sen and Grown 1987). In the terms of this discourse, it has been assumed that the acquisition of agricultural, industrial, technological and political skills is an exclusively masculine prerogative and women have been conceptualized as a derived and dependent category, and thus not the agents of their own development (McFarland 1988, Jain 1980, Sen and Grown 1987, Government of India 1974, 1988; Krishnaraj 1980, Mukhopadhyay 1984).

Development and the State in India

Relationships between groups attempting to construct development alternatives and the various branches of the state are an important issue in light of the argument made by some theorists that organisations which would remain independent must keep governments at arms' length. There are conflicting opinions about the relationship between the state and the state of development in India. One point of view, as espoused by people such as Nandy, argues that the Indian government is increasingly willing to exert force on its own citizens in the name of progress. In one manifestation of this argument that is relevant to mainstream development in Gujarat, many thousands of people have been displaced, or "ousted" to use the term used in Gujarat, from their lands and homes by massive irrigation projects connected with the Narmada river.[7] The projects have been funded by the World Bank and by the government of Gujarat. Although these projects are intended to supply water for irrigation and for manufacturing purposes, both of which are a necessary element of the economic and social development of Gujarat, it is also the case that the project has displaced thousands of people from their lands. The effect of the Narmada dam and canal projects on rural people is the subject of another thesis, although it is relevant to a discussion of SEWA because SEWA has become involved in the last few years in working with some of the people who have been displaced, the "oustees". That involvement takes the form of SEWA applying its experience in organising self-employed urban women to the operation of government-initiated social forestry schemes. SEWA gives further depth to these programmes by incorporating its own health care programmes and credit and savings plans into the rural programmes.

Nandy argues that development in India has come to mean the development <u>of</u> the state, a state which is increasingly unresponsive to the needs of the people. He argues that

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[7]I visited one of these villages at the *Sukhi* dam site with some of the SEWA women who were working on a government-run social forestry programme. The relocated villagers had been granted five acres of land per extended-family household, but the soil was very poor and the land strewn with rocks. The nearest potable water was some two kilometers away. The cattle were extremely thin and fodder had to be purchased and carried to the village. This was a village whose members had been 'relocated' some ten years earlier.

"Not only does the state hegemonize all social resources; it eats up an increasing proportion of the resources ... It primarily develops itself. Even when the state invests in conventional development, say in primary health care in rural areas, the lion's share of investment goes to the various wings of the state" (1989:9). Robinson tempers this position somewhat by pointing out that:

> "[T]he Indian government has two central development objectives, as summarised in the Seventh Five Year Plan ... One is to provide a framework of economic growth, principally through large public sector investments in power, heavy industry and communications, combined with policies designed to promote private enterprise development. Growth is considered to be a vital pre-requisite for economic development through increased food supplies and expanded employment opportunities, although the limitations of the trickle-down approach are widely recognised. Nevertheless, sustained growth has provided the financial basis for a series of targeted programmes aimed at directly alleviating poverty, which constitutes the second major objective of government development policy (Robinson 1991:10).

Parajuli's argument is related to that of Nandy, when he says that: "New social movements challenge, to borrow Octavio Paz's phrase, 'the philanthropic ogre' of the modern nation state which aspires to be a dominating force with totalitarian ambitions and at the same time claims to be the guardian of its citizens. It tries to regulate both 'accumulation' and 'legitimation', 'capitalism' and 'democracy'. Although couched in a vocabulary of protection and development, the development discourse of the Indian state subordinates women, *dalits*, tribals and minority populations" (Parajuli 1991:175). "Under the guise of a welfare state, national elites have transformed caste, gender and ethnicity from relations of difference to relations of domination" (*ibid.*). Parajuli also argues that the state in India has co-opted the efforts and the initiatives of the social movements. He says: "In the cause of development, the state generates one programme after another in order to co-opt people's initiatives. ... After a decade of grassroots struggles by women, indigenous people and the rural poor, the recent strategy of the Indian state has been to co-opt their issues as if the

problem of ecological deterioration and subordination of women could be solved within the dominant development paradigm" (Parajuli 1991:176).

Less dramatically, but no less insidiously, the uneducated, whether urban or rural, are often denied a voice in elections, and are excluded from the political decision-making which affects their daily lives. Kothari (1989) is one of a multitude of critics who argue that the state has failed to look after the interests of its citizens. In essence, his argument is that the state has failed to intervene on behalf of those people who are powerless, and that it has rendered many of them powerless through its policies.

Another perspective on the problem of the causes of such deep-seated poverty is found in the argument put forth by Kamath (1994) which is that the Government of India's own internal economic and political strategies in the post-colonial period have *created* the problems of poverty. Kamath argues that India's economic problems can be directly traced to four and a half decades of centralised economic planning, in which the price of every commodity, every resource, has been determined by the central government in its Five-Year Plans. Kamath argues that Nehru's version of socialism, which he calls (p.123) the "onerous and nihilistic Nehruvian planning system", has led to the stifling of economic initiative, leading to "a growth rate of only around 1.7% over the 1950-85 period" (*ibid.*). Kamath argues that the planning process, in the form it has taken in India, is an impossible task, because no agency is capable of gathering all the information on which to base rational economic planning. He argues that the kind of planning undertaken by the Indian government has inevitably led to inefficient, top-heavy, corrupt bureaucracies, minimal industrial growth rates and the creation of a pervasive underground economy, which draws income away from government treasuries. He argues that the failure of development planning in India to meet the basic needs of the population - one-sixth of humanity, as he points out - has "produced an economic and social debacle of much larger proportions than was witnessed by the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union". From this point of view, liberalisation and privatisation are the best routes to economic

development, and economic development is the answer to the social problems of India. Kamath also argues (*ibid.*:131) that development planning "prevents entrepreneurial discovery and dynamic competition, thus stifling the process of economic growth and development". He refers to India as having "one of the largest and most thriving underground economies in the world, with around 50 per cent of the economic activity estimated to be generated in this sector" (1994:116). He further argues that nearly five decades of attention to "the weaker sections", as it has been carried out in India, has, rather than improving the lot of those sections, "been the source of considerable social strife, communal and caste unrest, and political protests and violence" (1994:106).

India is presently embarked on economic liberalisation which involves the decentralisation of economic decision-making and the privatisation of many corporations that are presently state-operated. The trajectory of that economic development is uncertain at present. For those already fairly well-to-do, the future holds great promise, much of it characterised, as it is in North America, in terms of the freedom to purchase and consume goods and services. The long term, and the likelihood of improvements, are hard for anyone to envision, but this uncertainty is especially emphatic for those who are extremely poor. In the short term, economic liberalisation seems likely to create even greater disparities and more hardships for the poor than presently exist. The middle classes may face many struggles as lifetime job security is swept away by economic reforms, but the members of the middle class are in a better position to acquire the necessary education and job skills which will probably equip them for the changed economic environment. The majority of the poor do not have the time to wait for those uncertain improvements, especially if they depend on job-creation and trickle-down economics. The poor who have only their physical strength and their wits with which to earn a living are likely to find it even harder to fit into a restructured economic situation where employment is concerned. The women and men whose skills could at one time be adapted to industrialisation now

risk finding that there is no place for them in the technologically-sophisticated factories of Ahmedabad.

There are a host of theories and explanations to account for the parlous state of the very poor in India. I have discussed them here in general terms so as to establish the context of the problems which the Self-Employed Women's Association faces and to set out the conditions out of which many Indian NGOs, academic institutions and social movements have attempted to construct development alternatives. The next sections deal more specifically with some of those efforts.

Development Alternatives: NGOs and Social Movements in India

SEWA is one of a multitude of sites in which the need for reformist alternatives to social problems has been articulated in independent India. These sites include NGO's, academic institutions, political parties, action groups and numerous social movements (Dhanagare 1988, Parajuli 1991, Shah 1990). In this section I will situate SEWA in the wider context of Indian organisations and movements with similar purposes, *i.e.*, efforts to effect changes in the situation of the very poor and efforts to change prevailing conceptualisations of women. This will also situate SEWA within a context of contemporary ideas about social change.

According to one estimate there some 15-20,000 NGOs in India engaged in rural development and many others with development-related purposes such as income generation (Robinson 1991:25). Many of these are national-level organisations which work in one or more states, while others are small and localised. Robinson notes (1991:25 *ff.*) that NGOs are distributed unevenly in India, with some states having densely-connected networks of NGOs and others having only a few discrete organisations.[8] SEWA is a state-level NGO which operates in every district of Gujarat, since it has become involved in rural development. There are also SEWA branches in

[8]Robinson's report discusses national-level or international NGOs.

Indore, Bhopal, Lucknow and Delhi. Many of the NGOs in India are linked with each other through the issues they deal with. Some of those networks form social movements.

Many of India's social movements are directly concerned with development efforts intended to improve the situation of those sectors of society which the Government of India calls 'the weaker sections'.[9] They differ from each other, of course, in their conceptualisations of issues, and proposed solutions to problems, in their constituencies and in their relationships to the state. It is also the case that within those broad categories of interest there are distinct histories of ideas as well as cultural and political affiliations.[10] Dhanagare notes, for instance, that the affiliations of social movements can range from "Gandhian liberal reformism to the militant radicalisms of the Left" (Dhanagare 1988:16). SEWA belongs to the former category, as it is concerned with reforming those aspects of the social system which oppress the poor and the marginal, rather than with overthrowing political structures. Sheth discusses several kinds of reformist alternative approaches and the 'implications for political action' (his term) of each of them. He says that "the mainstream model explicitly recognizes the state as the only relevant agent of reform"

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[9]The category 'weaker sections' includes the very poor as well as the castes and sub-castes, classes and tribes designated by the government of India as 'backward'. 'Backward' has many meanings. Those meanings can be summarised as lacking in the skills and resources required to take one's place in modern Indian society. The term has come to have explicitly political connotations in recent years as various kinds of benefits have been assigned to the backward castes and classes.

[10] Many of the social movements which have arisen in India began as internal critiques of existing practices or as responses to changing environmental factors (Gombrich 1988). Many of India's social movements have had an effect on wider social and political systems. The Buddhist and Sikh religions are two examples of social movements which were framed in religious terms. The *Arya Samaj* and the *Brahmo Samaj* in Bengal are examples of smaller-scale religious reform movements. This overview of the state of social movements in India is limited to secular social movements, which only narrows the subject somewhat. I also limit this discussion to social movements which are not engaged in efforts to take political power. such as the *Naxalbaris* in Bengal, the *Shiv Sena* in Maharashtra and the *Khalistan* movement in Punjab. Nor do I touch on the tribal secessionist movements noted by Shah (1990:85ff.). These latter movements involve efforts to regain ownership and control of ancestral lands and to assert the right to peoples' own languages, religions and customs. They also focus on issues of "land alienation, usury, forced labour, minimum wages [and] land grabbing" (*ibid.*:92). Shah notes that incursions into tribal areas and efforts to resist those incursions began during the British Raj and continue today. Some of these tribal movements are political and revolutionary, such as the secessionist movements in Nagaland and other parts of north-eastern India. The Nationalist movement was perhaps the most important secular socio-political movement in the history of India. Social movements are a worldwide phenomenon. They have been documented in France (Duyvendak 1995), in Iran (Hazeh'ee 1991), in the Middle East (Denoeux 1993), in Africa, South and Central America and Palestine (Wignaraja 1993) in urban centres in the United States (Hall 1995) and in Australia (Burgman (1993) to name only the barest few. Around the world, social movements focus on similar issues, including the environment, civil rights (Eyerman and Jamison 1991), poverty and the right of access to social benefits by disadvantaged groups.

(1987:158) so must try to bring the state to bear on the formulation of solutions. What he calls 'structuralist alternatives' are concerned with "delinking from systems of domination" (*ibid.*:159). 'Alternative normative' (*ibid.*:160) approaches emphasise practice over theory, and the well-being of those in need of development over economistic goals. This latter kind of approach is value-based rather than growth based, but, says Sheth, it tends to be more capable of foreseeing the destruction of the existing system, than it is of constructing political alternatives. An alternative-normative approach is "not the stuff on which the activists of the grassroots movements can base their struggles" (1987:161) because it does not *theorize* political action. Sheth's primary argument is that the assumption of a universal post-industrial or post-modern society informs and determines both mainstream and alternative models of development (1987:162-3). He then argues that it is local and regional solutions which should form the basis of efforts to construct alternatives.

SEWA is one of the many contemporary Indian social movements which attempt to persuade the government to acknowledge and to meet the needs of the majority of people who comprise the economic underclass (Kohli 1987, Everett 1978, Rao 1979, Guha 1985, Berreman 1989, Parajuli 1991). Many of these social movements are characterised by concern with the increasing impoverishment of urban and rural populations (Sen 1982, Dhanagare 1988, Kothari 1987, Parajuli 1991) and with demands for the restructuring of polities and economies so that access to numerous categories of social, economic and material resources is more equitably distributed (Sen and Grown 1987, Berreman 1989). SEWA is, to the best of my knowledge, somewhat unusual in being an urban-based social movement.

There are difficulties in establishing a definition applicable to all of the social movements in India (Shah 1990:18). Shah points out that "studies on social movements in India have not yet made a systematic effort to define the concept in the Indian context" (1990:17). One implication of this lack of definition of Indian social movements is that definitions and analyses of them are derived from other-cultural/historical and political

contexts, which are not necessarily those which pertain in India. Nevertheless, Shah quotes Wilkinson's definition of a social movement as:

> "a deliberate collective endeavour to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdrawal into 'utopian' community. ... A social movement must evince a minimal degree of organization, though this may range from a loose, informal or partial level organization to the highly institutionalized and bureaucratized movement and the corporate group. ... A social movement's commitment to change and the *raison d'etre* of its organization are founded upon the conscious volition, normative commitment to the movement's aims or beliefs, and active participation on the part of the followers or the members (Wilkinson 1971:27 quoted in Shah 1990:17).

Although conceding that there are some difficulties with this definition, such as the inclusion of violent action and the looseness of the concept of 'degree of organization,' Shah nevertheless finds the definition to have heuristic value. He also notes that "Objectives, ideology, programmes, leadership and organisation are important components of social movements" (Shah 1990:18). The criterion for inclusion in Shah's review of the literature on social movements in India is "non-institutionalised collective political action which strive[s] for social and political change" (*ibid.*:18). Shah excludes "collective social actions which follow the path of acquiescence for social mobility and political change" (*ibid.*).

Shah suggests the following categorisation of social movements in India, based on the characteristics of their participants: peasant, tribal, *dalit*, backward caste/class, women's, students', middle-class and industrial working class (Shah 1990:27). As he notes, if social movements are categorised according to issues, such typologies as "civil rights, anti-untouchability, linguistic and nationalist" become evident (*ibid.*). One could also include environmental movements, as some of these have risen to prominence in recent years. Shah observes that any effort to categorise social movements is necessarily arbitrary, since the categories overlap in numerous places. The students' and the women's'

movements, for instance, overlap with each other and with middle-class movements. Similarly, tribal and environmental movements are often two sides of the same coin.

Shah notes that social movements can arise spontaneously as what he calls "non-institutionalised" reactions to situations (1990:19). He includes "protest, agitation, strike, *satyagraha, hartal* (general strike), *gherao*[11] and riot" as the potential origins of social movements, noting that the construction of ideologies and the formation of organisational structures can follow from such spontaneous actions, even if they are not present in their origins.

What is important for Shah, in his categorisation of social movements, is the nature of the movement's activities with respect to legal and governmental means of effecting change. He sees social movements as contesting the legally-sanctioned means of effecting change and thus as being outside the mainstream of ordinary political structures. SEWA participates in a number of the categories suggested by Shah, since it is part of the women's movement, the labour movement, and the co-operative movement which flourishes in Gujarat. However, SEWA's desire to effect change from within the existing political structure would probably mean that it would fall outside the boundaries of a social movement, for Shah.

Eyerman and Jamison (1991) move beyond the desire to categorise social movements to an effort to theorise them. They say that "It is precisely in the creation, articulation and formulation of new thoughts and ideas - new knowledge - that a social movement defines itself in society. A social movement is not one organization or one particular special interest group. It is more like a cognitive territory, a new conceptual space that is filled by a dynamic interaction between different groups and organizations" (*ibid.*:55). They add that "[N]o social movement emerges until there is a political opportunity available, a context of social problem as well as a context of communication,

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[11] *Gherao* is a form of non-violent protest in which someone such as a government official is surrounded by protesters and kept from going about his or her ordinary business.

opening up the potential for problem articulation and knowledge dissemination" (*ibid.*:56). Furthermore "A movement conceptualizes fundamental contradictions or tensions in society" (*ibid.*) and cannot come into existence "until individuals are ready to take part in it, willing to transform what C. Wright Mills called private troubles into public problems, as well as to enter into a process of collective identity formation" (*ibid.*).

Eyerman and Jamison note that modern social movements arose in Europe in the 19th. century, and that previous sociological efforts to analyse social movements have been concerned with the reasons for their origins, with their relationships to political systems, and with their utilisation of social and political resources to further their ends. Eyerman and Jamison propose to take the analysis of social movements in new directions, using the concept of "cognitive praxis" as an analytical construct which enables a means of theorising social movements. Although the social contexts in which the social movements described by Eyerman and Jamison are those of North America and northern Europe, this concept of cognitive praxis allows a useful way of thinking about some aspects of social movements in India. By using the term 'cognitive praxis' they mean to make possible "a form of analysis that seeks to study social movements on their own terms" (1991:2). They approach social movements as "processes in formation ... [as] forms of activity by which individuals create new kinds of social identities" (*ibid.*). The 'cognitive' aspect of the term concerns "relations to knowledge that characterise particular social movements, the concepts, ideas and intellectual activities that give them their cognitive identity" (*ibid.*:3). By knowledge, they mean "both the worldview assumptions, the ideas about the world that are shared by participants in social movements, as well as the specific topics or issues that movements are created around" (*ibid.*:3). They argue that social movements are "bearers of new ideas ... as well as new political and social identities"(*ibid.*). These authors also suggest that the most successful social movements are the ones which arise when the time is right, as it were. They cite the flourishing ecological movement which presently informs so much of North American and European

cultures as an example of the successful confluence of ideas and practices, noting (1991:67) that the strength and influence of the ecological movements are built on "cosmological, technological and organizational" types of knowledge interest (*ibid.*). They identify the cosmological knowledge interest of the ecological movement as "systems-ecology", the technological as "alternative techniques" in resource management, and the organizational as "anti-elitism ... an ambition to deprofessionalize expertise and develop new, more democratic forms of knowledge production" (*ibid.:65*). Clearly, there are similar confluences in many of the social movements which exist in India, as some of the authors cited earlier (*e.g.,* Parajuli, Kothari, Dhanagare) attest. Of these, it is the organisational anti-elitism which is most relevant to SEWA's "knowledge interests". Both attention to the grassroots and the formation of co-operatives are efforts in the direction of anti-elitism. Similarly, efforts to establish connections between the economically-marginal women of Ahmedabad and such middle-class institutions as banks and trade unions, are also a move towards anti-elitism. And, as in other parts of the world, efforts to transform relations between women and men require all three of these.

Eyerman and Jamison also argue that "Movements create for a time a space for social activity, a public space for interest articulation ... a public space that did not previously exist. And although movements usually involve the creation of organizations or the renovation of institutions, it is important not to mistake one for the other" (*ibid.*:60). As they point out "[T]he meaning, or core identity, is rather the cognitive space that the movement creates, a space for new kinds of ideas and relationships to develop" (*ibid.*:60).

Inventions of Development Alternatives: Some Issues and Problems

The establishment of development alternatives is a challenge to reconceptualise the social and physical aspects of the world, and to re-examine premises about the social order. It requires those who would participate in such re-conceptualisations to

acknowledge the situatedness of ideas and practices with respect to their own power and in relation to the power of the state, as has been discussed earlier. A philosophical issue in the effort to construct alternatives is whether and how alternatives are possible at all. The question is whether it is possible to construct ways of thinking about and defining 'development' in ways which are based in different paradigms, alternative 'constructions' of problems, and solutions which do less damage, and are based in different distributions of power from those which have created the existing system. This is a difficult matter which a thoughtful examination of any claim to be establishing an 'alternative' must address. The problem is analogous to that which feminisms must address, when discussing worldviews deemed to be androcentric (Rooney 1994) which is: on what bases can alternative points of view be constructed, when the frames are set, the ground established and the power to effect change or to retard it is held by the position being criticised? To put this in a way that is relevant to a discussion of development alternatives: how does an organisation such as SEWA get outside existing development paradigms? Where can alternative paradigms be situated? How can radically different constructs and practices be created and maintained, and out of what materials? Proposed solutions and alternative visions of development will depend in part on how the problem is perceived. If the problem is that "development" is inherently flawed, then ravaged ecosystems might be a necessary outcome of development and the price to pay for a wider social good might be the continued existence of an economic underclass. If the problem is that development is neutral in its conceptualisation but has been applied inequitably, then the solution to development problems is to alter the ways in which development is delivered to those who require it. Either way, alternatives cannot simply be rejections of existing systems or they become romances, utopian retreats from realities which may benefit a few people but remain isolated from the mainstream.

There is a large body of literature on efforts in India to construct development alternatives on different power relations than those which ordinarily prevail. Some of these

are descriptions of failed attempts. To cite a small number of small-scale efforts which have run aground: Antia (1985) discusses a health-care project in a Bombay slum which failed because local elites and experts positioned themselves between the suppliers and the intended receivers of the resources of the project. Beals (1955) provides an ironic discussion of his efforts to remain detached from the politics of an irrigation project in a village, and his inevitable and unsatisfying incorporation into the struggles between local elites for control of the resources of the project.

Another issue is what Ahmed describes as "the rhetoric of participation" (1994:3). In her assessment of a water purification scheme in Varanasi, she argues that the claim that "the people" (*i.e.,* the people who used the river to bathe and earn a living and dispose of their dead) were "participants" in the process of decision-making about improving the quality of the Ganga was not valid. She found this claim to be unsubstantiated and found that in fact some of the people who depended on the water supply to earn their living were disadvantaged by the scheme.

A related problem is that social movements can be the site of ideological struggle by those who would interpret them, as Aryal's discussion of the Chipko Andolan (1994) points out. Perhaps the best known of the contemporary social movements in India, "Chipko Andolan" was an effort by villagers in Kurmaon and Garhwal (in the state of Uttar Pradesh) to stop logging in the forests on which they depended for a living. The name Chipko comes from a particular kind of action on one occasion by some women who were trying to stop the cutting of trees. Those women clung to the trees, putting themselves between the trees and the axes of the loggers. The trees were saved and a new kind of action was initiated. Chipko provides one example of the ways in which a social movement has been taken to signify different things to different people and its meaning and significance contested by groups with different motivations. Aryal notes (1994:9) that some feminists focussed on the fact that it was women who stopped the loggers on that occasion, so identified Chipko as a women's movement. She notes that the left took the

action of those women (which came to be the essentialised symbol of the entire movement) as an example of "idealistic little-folk fighting rapacious capital" (1994:9) and that Gandhians took it to symbolise the success of "non-violent and self-sufficient" (*ibid.*) action. That action was also focussed on by foreign journalists, for whom a story about the strength and courage of village women in the Himalayas was an irresistibly romantic event.

Anthropologist Gerald Berreman is one of the people for whom Chipko Andolan exemplifies a Gandhian movement. The utopian cast of Berreman's understanding of a Gandhian and grassroots movement is eloquently, and it would seem according to Aryal's reading, erroneously, described in his representation of Chipko Andolan as:

> "one of the few viable manifestations in India of the Gandhian vision - of a grass-roots, people oriented movement consistent with the small-scale developmental, appropriate technological, labor intensive, environmentally conservationist, co-operative, socialist, anti-colonial, egalitarian, secular, locally self-sufficient and self-determinant, internationally unaligned kind of society with which the origin of the Indian Republic is identified - and which has largely been abandoned in the years since independence" (1989:257).

Aryal contends that the interpretations of Chipko by journalists and activists in India and abroad have for the most part failed to recognize that the actions of those women who clung to the trees, courageous though they were, were neither the origin nor the entirety of the Chipko movement. Certainly, women did participate in the efforts to stop the forestry companies from cutting down the trees, but the journalistic isolation of women activists from the social context of households and villages was artificial and potentially damaging. The contestation over forest resources goes back to the British colonial period and continues today, although the fascination of foreign journalists has moved on to other things.[12] Aryal also notes that while Chipko has served as a "catalyst"

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[12]Ramachandra Guha's *The Unquiet Woods* (1989) discusses the history of contestation over the forest resources in the Uttar Khand region of Uttar Pradesh. For an abbreviated discussion, see R. Guha 1985.

(*ibid.*:9) for movements with similar ecological concerns, such as efforts to stop the Narmada Dam in Gujarat, it has not had any effect on other Himalayan regions.

Aryal comments on a number of the problems which can arise when a social movement gains national and international prominence. One of these problems is that publicity can have a damaging effect on both participants and the actions of the movement. Histories and motivations can become the site of struggle by outsiders who would claim the movement for their own purposes. In the case of Chipko Aryal notes that several men have become competitors for the title of originator of the efforts against the forest companies, and for the status of leader and hero of the movement. She refers to these as the "pantheon" of Chipko, noting that only some people are allowed entry into it and that the members of the pantheon are sometimes in conflict with each other. One result of that conflict is that alliances are established within a movement and the maintenance of those alliances can become more important than the movement itself. Aryal notes that a particular problem in the struggle to interpret Chipko has been that the western press has been unwilling to acknowledge the role played by political activists from the left, and has preferred to focus on the men who are self-styled Gandhians and the presumably non-political and earth-bound women (*ibid.*: 17).

I do not intend this discussion of the potential and actual problems faced by organisations in establishing alternatives to suggest that nothing useful is possible, through those efforts. On the contrary, as I said earlier, the Self-Employed Women's Association is a fruitful site of reformist development possibilities.

Summary In this chapter I have discussed some of the issues and problems concerning development as a kind of social change, as they have been thought and practiced in contemporary India. I return to these issues in Chapter Three, where I relate them specifically to SEWA. I have established the motivations for the study, which are to understand (1) how the Self-Employed Women's Association struggles to bring about

improvements in the economic situations of its members (2) the terms on which SEWA constructs its critique of the social system as it applies to very poor women (3) SEWA's means of engendering new ways of thinking about and acting upon what it defines as a social problem and (4) the relations and interactions which pertain between the organisers and the members of SEWA.

My purpose in going to Ahmedabad was not to contest SEWA's claims, or to suggest that SEWA is or is not meeting some abstract standards. Rather, my purpose was to try to understand what I could of how SEWA conceptualised the practical and theoretical issues involved in its approach to development. That is, I wanted to understand the terms on which SEWA's approach to issues such as women's poverty, income-generation and self-reliance were constructed. I also wanted to try to understand the relationships and articulations between the organisation's ideas and the ways it operationalised its ideas. I hoped to learn more about a non-Western model of planned social change grounded in social and ideational systems different from those in which mainstream development projects typically originate, and to attempt an understanding of how the organisation's approach coalesced into an alternative model of development. That is, what combinations of social issues, proposed solutions, marshalling of human and political resources, what kinds of influence and strategic approaches to problem-solving, did SEWA bring to bear on the problems of women's poverty? I wanted to learn whether SEWA's approach could usefully be said to provide a workable and sustainable alternative to the kinds of mainstream development which has so often ignored those at the margins, or has further impoverished them.

I went to SEWA equipped with an academic understanding of some of the issues pertaining to the conditions in which many economically marginal women labour. I had no experience in the operation of development projects but did have a strong desire to learn more about ideas and practices that seemed to offer alternatives to the practices that have

increasingly marginalised some sectors of the population. The fact that I was not equipped with a mandate to account for donated monies spent on projects, nor a representative of a union or another NGO, or a government body,[13] and the fact that this was an academic, rather than applied study, had some effect on its progress, as I relate in the text. This text is also an account of my understanding of the relationships between SEWA's ideals and some manifestations of its practices. It is a first-hand account of my exposure to the lived realities, that is, the strengths and weaknesses, the economic strategies and abilities to command resources, of some of the working poor who are the members of the SEWA. It is an account of my observations and understanding of their interactions with an NGO that operates on their behalf. This work, then, charts a meeting and an interlacing of experiences: my experience with 'fieldwork', the experiences of some SEWA members with the organisation and my experiences with those members.

[13]Sebstad (1982) provides an excellent example of a study of SEWA which was premised on an evaluation by an external agency (the United States Agency for International Aid) for the purpose of deciding whether or not to advance funds in support of SEWA.

"Moving among the world's peoples, one sees that personalities here may resemble personalities there, underneath and despite the culture differences. So one comes home, again and again, to friends and kinsmen. ... What counts in the field and after is that one glimpses, over and over, humanity creating" (Landes 1970:138).

"Finding somewhere to stand in a text that is supposed to be at one and the same time an intimate view and a cool assessment is almost as much of a challenge as gaining the view and making the assessment in the first place" (Geertz 1988:10).

CHAPTER TWO: BEING/OTHER

A Brief History of Ahmedabad

SEWA is based in Ahmedabad, the largest city in the state of Gujarat. The organisation is now as well-known in Ahmedabad and other parts of India as the textile mills which at one time led the city to be designated the Manchester of India. SEWA is also as prominent as some other institutions in the city, such as the Indian Institute of Management and the National Institute of Design, although it is as different as it is possible to be from these latter elite government operated organisations.

In the following brief overview of the history of Ahmedabad I have drawn from Gillion's (1968) and Patel's (1987) accounts an outline some of the factors which have influenced the city since it was established. In particular, it is important to note that the textile industry has had an influence on the city for most of its history. That influence continues today, although now it is not the wealth of the textile industry but its failing health, which is of concern. The loss of the textile industry is the cause of much of the unemployment which afflicts the city and has an immediate impact on the lives of the women who now belong to SEWA. They are affected when their husbands and male kin lose their jobs, and when the closure of the mills reduces the amount of informal-sector[1] work which is available to them and increases the pressures in the informal sector.

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[1]The informal sector is discussed in Chapter 3.

Another reason to note these historical details is SEWA's contention that there are historical precedents for many of the organisation's activities on behalf of its self-employed members. In particular, these include the organisation of artisans into trade groups, efforts by those trade groups to negotiate wages and, more centrally, the formation of a trade union. In some cases, SEWA does not explicate its purpose in terms of these historical precedents, preferring to draw upon the 'women and development' discourse and adverting to Gandhian traditions of self-reliance and co-operation. SEWA organisers do, however, argue that the organisation is helping to revive various traditions and institutions, crafts and skills, while acknowledging that these have been altered by aspects of modernity such as industrialisation and increasing intervention by the state.

Founded in 1411 C.E. by Sultan Ahmed Shah (Gillion 1968:13), the city lies on the banks of the Sabarmati River.[2] With the arrival of the Mughals in 1572, Ahmedabad became part of the Mughal Empire, and then from 1738 to 1753 was ruled alternately by the Mughals and the Marathas, the latter as an extension of Shivaji's empire. In 1757 the city passed completely into Maratha hands and in 1817 was annexed by the East India Company. The city expanded and flourished under the Mughals. A great deal of Ahmedabad's wealth in that period came from supplying goods to the Mughal emperors in their capitals in Agra or Delhi. The Marathas, however, neglected the city, for whom it was a distant outpost of their empire. Gillion argues that the Marathas were neither interested in, nor capable of, administering a commercial city, and that the city was "a source of profit to successive Maratha governors" who "squeezed the city dry for profit." Gillion argues that a particular set of qualities identifies the people of Ahmedabad: in his perception "Gujaratis are perhaps the least other-worldly of all the Indian peoples and the Ahmedabadi is the Gujarati of the Gujaratis" (1986:4). Gillion describes a city and a

[2]Current efforts by the BJP to change the name 'back' to Karnavati echo similar efforts to change Bombay to Mumbai and stem from the claim that a Hindu settlement called Karnavati existed on the site before Ahmed Shah's time.

people characterised by caution, thrift and pragmatism, and preferring the relative certainty of small profits to the risk of great loss.[3]

Ahmedabad is, according to Gillion, a city with a history quite different from what he calls the "traditional" cities of India. He means that Ahmedabad did not conform to European notions of Indian cities as "disunited, often ephemeral conglomerations of subjects, dependent on the court and the military-official elite and prevented from free association by caste rivalries and other religious constraints" (*ibid.*:4). Nor was the city a site of pilgrimage. Rather, Ahmedabad was a place which prospered through manufacturing, trade and commerce. Gillion adds that Ahmedabad's wealth did not come originally from "parasitic exploitation of the countryside," in the pre-industrial period.

To a great extent it was the textile industry which fuelled Ahmedabad's wealth. That wealth was said to hang on three threads: gold, silk and cotton (Gillion 1968:27). Patel notes that "the population of Ahmedabad between 1572 and 1758, was reported to be 800,000 and the city yielded a revenue of Rs 600,000, 12 per cent of the total revenue of Gujarat" (*ibid.*:12).

Although he does not use the term, Gillion is always concerned to stress the agency of the people and the socio-economic institutions of Ahmedabad, in responding to these various colonial presences. He states that Ahmedabad was "a city with a corporate tradition and spirit, an hereditary bourgeois elite and a history of indigenous financial, commercial and industrial activity" (1968:4), and argues that these characteristics defined the city and its inhabitants. While this seems a theoretically incomplete and essentialist argument by contemporary standards, it is evident to any observer that commerce plays an important role in contemporary Ahmedabad.

As Gillion tells it, the Hindu, Jain, Muslim and Parsi *elites* of Ahmedabad have adapted to the demands and rewards of successive political and commercial empires for

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[3] Gillion wrote, of course, when it was unexceptional to speak of 'Gujaratis' and 'Ahmedabadis' as if these were unitary and all-encompassing categories, and when an androcentric perspective was the norm.

half a millennium. They have done this in their own ways, on their own terms, and at their own speed. Gillion calls this "a slow and selective adaptation" (*ibid.*:6) by people who are "cautious" (*ibid.*:137). The people of Ahmedabad, for instance "never aped the English or hurried to buy their products in preference to their own" (*ibid.*: 49). "Ahmedabad had experienced and prestigious financiers and merchants and a skilled work force in her weavers and artisans" (Gillion 1968:75).

Patel (1987:11) notes that, in its heyday, Ahmedabad, produced "for the rich ... silks, *kinkhab* (brocade), satin, chintz and embroidered quilts; for the poor, handloom cloth in block prints with embroidery." This distinction between fine and coarse materials was reflected in the export market for these goods: Patel notes (*ibid.*) that the fine textiles were in demand in other parts of India, the Middle East and Europe, while the coarse and brightly coloured block-prints were exported to East Africa and South East Asia. The wealth of the city is also revealed in the presence of other goods: Patel records the export of "indigo, opium and wheat" and the importing of "copper, quicksilver, and rose water from Aden, horses from Arabia, gold, ivory, amber and wax from the east Coast of Africa; areca, coconuts and pepper from Malabar and Ceylon, sugar and muslins from Bengal, jewels and musk from Java; and spices from Malacca and China" (*ibid.*).

Three factors have been proposed to account for the decline of Ahmedabad in the 17th century. The loss of the port at Cambay and its replacement by the port at Surat was an important factor in the loss of Ahmedabad's commercial strength (Gillion 1968:29). Three years of famine, beginning in 1630 (Patel 1987:12), caused many deaths and the flight of large numbers of people, many of them artisans, south to Surat (*ibid.*:12). When Aurangzeb moved his court to the Deccan, the city lost the richest market for its goods. Since the Marathas had no taste for the finery of the artisans, those who produced the finest textiles also moved south to Surat (*ibid.*).

With the loss of Mughal protection, the city became prey to marauders[4] who extorted 'protection money,' and by 1818 the population had fallen to 80,000 (*ibid.*:16). This period of desolation lasted 150 years (Patel 1987:16) and did not begin to alter until the British arrived in 1818. British efforts to rebuild the economic infrastructure of the city took the form of lowering taxes and allowing the opium trade to flourish (*ibid.*:17) and allowing economic resources to be invested in the textile industry. The British built roads which connected the city with northern and central India (Gillion 1967:53). This helped to provide a market for Ahmedabad's goods and protected Ahmedabad from some of the effects of the industrial revolution, in particular the importation of textile goods from Britain. Patel points out, however, that when Ahmedabad was connected to the railroad in 1864, these efforts to revive and protect the textile industry were abandoned, and Ahmedabad became a market for imported, foreign-made textiles. With the rise of European textile factories in Surat, Ahmedabad suffered further economic losses. However, the market for homespun cloth, principally in the rural areas, remained strong for a long time, according to Gillion. It is such cloth that SEWA co-operatives produce and market today. The relationship between SEWA's economic well-being and the co-operatives who produce these textiles is discussed further in Chapter Five.

Some of the mercantile and productive institutions which were established long before industrialisation fostered the growth of the manufacturing industry. The existence in the mediaeval period of powerful trade guilds[5] (Patel 1987:13) called *mahajans* and artisan guilds called *panch*es were two of these. Patel says (*ibid.*:14) that the guilds "regulated production activities by fixing trade holidays, collecting subscriptions and distributing funds for religious activities. It is around the guild that the economic, social

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[4] These marauders were Marathas from the south and the Bhils and the Garasias from the east, according to Patel (1987:12).

[5] Patel (1987, Fn. 13, p.13) quotes Hopkins' *India Old and New*, (1902:171) which has this to say about guilds in mediaeval Gujarat: "... the term guild was used with reference to an occupation located in a village or a town which was headed by a *sheth* where a *mahajan* (a merchant's guild) or a *patel* where a *panch* (an artisan's guild) existed. In villages or small towns, guilds were coterminous with a caste, while in large towns guilds had individuals from different castes as members."

and religious life of its members was expressed" (*ibid.*). She notes that the guilds used to call strikes and goes on to say that "the organization of the trade unions on the basis of craft and the use of arbitration machinery to solve conflicts between capital and labour had their roots in these institutions" (*ibid.*:16).

In the initial stages of the industrialisation of the textile industry, the artisans who still operated in Ahmedabad and the surrounding areas were able to find employment in the textile mills, and to earn good wages for their labours. In time, however, the guilds were swept aside and the relationship between city and countryside and between owners and labour, changed. Gillion cites (p.100) "Ahmedabad's increased demand for raw cotton, foodstuffs and a work force tied the surrounding areas even more closely to the economy of the city" as the reasons for this. He notes that:

> "Almost all of the women in the towns and villages used to spin cotton thread ... The mills of Ahmedabad ruined their market and contributed to the impoverishment of this part of India. Poverty, in turn, stimulated migration from the villages and helped to provide a labour force for the new mills."

Caste relations had an effect on the ability of some of the newcomers to earn a living in the mills (Gillion 1968:101) as the low caste *Vankars* (a weavers' caste), for instance, were considered untouchable and were forced to work in the spinning departments rather than in weaving (*ibid.*). Both occupations were dependent on the mills having strong markets for their goods, but in the hierarchy of labour, spinning was much lower than weaving.

Gillion seems to apply one standard to his characterisation of the elites of Ahmedabad (as described above) and another to those of the labouring classes, whom he says did not suffer the horrors of industrialisation which occurred in the textile towns of England. He suggests that the poor, rural and uneducated workers were always in debt because of their habits of drinking heavily and spending too freely on celebrations and ceremonies (*ibid.*:103). The fact that they were often paid in arrears is noted, but seems not to be relevant to Gillion.

The city has numerous associations with M. K. Gandhi. To cite those relevant to this dissertation: he was instrumental in resolving a textile workers' strike there in 1917 (Gillion 1968, Patel 1987), by participating in negotiations between mill workers and the mill owners who had reneged on their promise to pay a plague bonus to workers, so as to keep their mills operating[6]. Gandhi was one of the founders of the Textile Labourers' Association (the TLA), the union formed in 1920 as a result of those negotiations.

Gandhi and his followers began the salt march, an exercise in non-violent civil disobedience intended to expose the immorality of British laws in India, from his Sabarmati Ashram situated on the outskirts of the city on the banks of the Sabarmati river. The university founded by Gandhi in Ahmedabad, called the *Gujarat Vidyapeeth*, is a place where Gandhi's ideals are still perpetuated, in the tradition of beginning every day with an hour's spinning and the wearing of *khadi* (handspun cloth) by the faculty and staff. It is most appropriate, then that SEWA would be based in Ahmedabad as it is an organisation which functions as a trade union, works to revive traditional labours and claims affiliation with Gandhi.

Contemporary Ahmedabad

Some of my knowledge of the ethos and social geography of contemporary Ahmedabad (1993-94) was gained from travelling around the city on foot, and by bus and rickshaw. I listened to Ahmedabadis describe the various areas of their city to me and to each other and travelled all over the city with SEWA organisers and members. I read the Ahmedabad edition of the English language *Times of India* every day, so as to get a sense of events in the city. By these means, I learned about the strikes, religious holidays, epidemics, *hartals* (general strikes) and the political goings-on which affected daily life in the city. Here, I briefly describe what I learned of the social geography and the ethos of

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[6]Gandhi began a fast when the mill owners did not honour the financial terms of the agreement which had been established. Not wishing to be responsible for his death, the owners gave in.

the city in 1993-94, so as to convey some idea of the social and political contexts in which SEWA operates, and in which its members live and work. I take my cue in part from Geertz, who calls this a " 'to know a city is to know its streets' approach to things" (1973:167).

It is tempting for the outsider to describe Ahmedabad only in terms which identify it as a problem-ridden metropolis, as some 40% or so of its residents live below the poverty line and do so in conditions which make daily life a struggle and pose an active danger to their well-being. Selliah notes that, according to 1976 figures "half the state's population lived in slums and squatter settlements. Almost 30% of the slum dwellers had an income of less than 200 rupees a month and over half earned between 200 and 400 rupees a month" (Selliah 1989:1)[7]. Ahmedabad suffers from extremes in climate which make drought *and* flooding potential problems. These problems have particularly detrimental effects on the very poor, who have little or no resources with which to rebuild their homes after a flood or whose stock of materials for earning a living is ruined in the monsoon.

It *is* difficult to breathe in the heart of the city where the traffic never ceases and the air is blue with petrol and kerosene exhaust. It seems unlikely that the street-dwellers who are exposed to the exhaust from the buses and trucks day after day could survive to old age, or without emphysema, and many probably do not. Yet for the street vendors whose business is located on the streets, and for the euphemistically-termed pavement dwellers whose homes consist of a few sheets of plastic, the quality of the air is only a single item in the repertoire of problems which render them the problematic poor[8]. The air in the suburbs is somewhat better, but traffic moves there, too, and factories which were once on the edge of the city now blow thick black smoke into the housing estates and

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[7]Selliah's report refers to the state, but this seems to be an error and should be a reference to the city of Ahmedabad, since the study was commissioned by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation.

[8]Singh and de Souza (1980) provide factual data on the conditions of slum dwellers and pavement dwellers in Delhi, Bombay and Ahmedabad.

businesses which surround them. Much of the city's manufacturing is still carried out in the old city. The addresses of many of SEWA's members refer to a textile mill, so that one searches for potential interviews with women who live 'near the Calico Mill', 'behind the Nagri Mill' and 'opposite the Aravind Mills'.[9]

Some of the problems of contemporary Ahmedabad are the problems which were identified in the 19th. century, but not attended to, such as water pollution and lack of sanitation facilities. Some of the problems of contemporary Ahmedabad have been exacerbated by population pressures[10] and by what seems to be a lack of political will to find long-term solutions. The epidemics which sweep the city periodically are an inevitable result of these problems. Malaria, typhoid, cholera, hepatitis, polio and TB are common problems. While I was in Ahmedabad, an outbreak of hepatitis 'A' killed some 300 people. It was widely recognised, according to newspaper reports and common knowledge, that the official death toll bore little relation to the actual toll, and that the promises of the political parties to prevent further outbreaks bore little hope of being actualised, because there seemed to be little or no political will to initiate long-term solutions. All the authorities could do to stem the epidemic was to hand out free chlorine tablets to purify the water, which was dispensed in corroding pipes through thousands of illegal connections, from a contaminated source. The municipal authorities did mount an information campaign, telling people to boil their drinking water for at least 15 minutes and to store it in sterile containers. Neither of these precautions was attainable for the majority of the poor, since few people could afford the fuel or find the kindling required to boil the water for so long, and the possibility of keeping a vessel sterile is so remote as to be unattainable. SEWA's health unit was involved in this public health campaign, with organisers distributing tablets, holding meetings at the Reception Centre to warn its

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[9] The mills are not the only reference points for addresses of course, as *masjids* (mosques) *mandirs* (Hindu temples) and cinemas also function as important references.

[10] Ahmedabad District, which includes the city of Ahmedabad, had a population of 4,788,820 in 1991, a 23% increase since 1981.

members, and sending organisers out into the city to inform people of the risks and precautions. It is not that the poor do not understand the perils of unsafe water: the uneducated may not be conversant with the science of germ theory but they know that a relationship exists between the impure water they drink and the fevers and illnesses they are prey to. Many families I met had lost a member to sudden and dangerous fevers.

Like all cities, Ahmedabad functions as a magnet, drawing people into it from surrounding areas, in search of economic and educational opportunities, and escape from the strictures of rural life such as caste restrictions. As they have always done, the poor crowd into ever narrower *galis* and *chawls* in the old city. They set up homes on the edges of the city and in any empty or uncrowded space on which it is possible to set up a shelter. They come to glean their share of the benefits of an economic boom, to get a temporary job on a building site for instance, but many only gain a temporary foothold.

Ahmedabad is no exception to the overcrowding that is the bane of almost all Indian cities. It is difficult to walk anywhere without the incessant traffic overloading the senses to the point of strangulation. On my first trip to a bazaar close to SEWA, I could get no further than a few yards onto the covered pathway clotted with the overflow from the shops, the stalls which occupied the micro-terrain between the road and the middle of the footpath, and more pedestrians than I had ever seen, before being overwhelmed by claustrophobia. Even a week later, I was able to move about with some dexterity and less psychological stress, and some months later, as I was shopping for a wedding present with some friends from SEWA, I realised that I had grown accustomed to the sensory overload.

The textile mills have been the primary source of Ahmedabad's economic prosperity in the twentieth century. Selliah notes that there were 60 textile mills in Ahmedabad in 1989 (1989:1). The loss of that prosperity in the last few years has contributed to the rising number of the self-employed and unemployed. The implication of this, for SEWA, is that the majority of its urban members are women whose husbands are

unemployed. A few of SEWA's original members had belonged to the Textile Labourers Association (TLA) and had worked in the mills themselves. Many more, however, had worked in the informal sector, in a variety of auxiliary trades connected with the operation of the mills. These would have included such occupations as spinning, carding and transporting raw materials and finished products. Many of those women had grown up in villages and come to Ahmedabad as brides, or had come when their fathers and/or husbands had come to take up jobs in the textile mills. Many of them have husbands or sons who have lost their jobs because the mills have closed. The mills have become uneconomical because the technology they employ has become outdated, and it would cost more money to replace outdated machinery than mill-owners are willing to spend. Now, the people whose traditional skills were originally superseded by the mills, such as the weavers and block printers, have been rendered surplus and unemployed again. Those who had learned new industrial skills such as repairing and operating machinery are able to find employment or to set up small commercial enterprises. For many people, however, economic marginality in the informal sector has become the only future.

In addition to overcrowding, industrial pollution, poverty, poor sanitation and increasing unemployment, the city of Ahmedabad has been wracked by extreme violence in recent years (Wood 1987, Tully 1992). It is a striking aspect of travelling around in the city to see depots where contingents of armed police (referred to as a police *chowki*) are situated at many of the intersections in the city. It was my impression that there were more of them in the old city than in the newer suburbs and that most of them are situated close to *masjids* and other Muslim holy sites. Some of this violence has been described as 'communal' violence, which is to say that it is characterised by Hindus and Muslims destroying each others' shops and homes and killing members of each other's communities. The riots which erupted all over India following the destruction of the *Babri Masjid* in 1992 are usually referred to as communal riots.

Another issue is the violent response to the issue of what is termed 'Reservations'. This is the allocation (*i.e.*, the reservation) of jobs in government departments and positions in educational facilities to the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and the Backward Castes. This Reservation policy has long been part of the platform of the Congress Party (Wood 1987:408). In 1985 the Congress Party raised the allotment of reserved positions from 10% to 28% (*ibid.*). The resulting violence left 275 people dead and cost the state economy some Rs 2,200 crores in damage[11]. This history and potentially constant violence has a number of implications for the economy of Ahmedabad and particularly for the poor. The fact that curfews are usually imposed as part of riot-control is one of those implications. Curfews prevent people from engaging in murder, rape, looting and arson, but they also prevent people from earning a living[12]. The very poor inevitably live from one day's earnings to the next and are particularly badly-hit by the economic effects of a curfew. Inter-community relations are also inevitably damaged, as people from each community come to perceive each other as violent and as a virulent kind of 'other'.

Beginnings

When I arrived in Ahmedabad, I learned that my carefully constructed requests to return to SEWA had never been opened, since the woman responsible for passing on correspondence to the people who would have been able to make a decision had been on maternity leave. While, or perhaps because, SEWA has a history of being studied, the organisation retains the right to turn down requests. In fact, I was told by one of the highly-placed organisers that SEWA had been exploited in the past by researchers, and was now being extremely careful in its assessments of requests. She went on to say that

[11]One crore is $1.25 million (Wood 1987). Wood (1987) analyses the implications of, and the responses to, the reservation policies of the Congress Party, in Gujarat and India.

[12]I was surprised to hear some middle-class people I got to know describe the curfews as "boring". The people who referred to the curfews in this way were not affected by the riots, as they lived in the new parts of the city and were able to conduct some of their business by telephone and computer links.

some of those researchers had utilised SEWA's human and other resources, without either doing studies which SEWA would find useful, or giving anything back to the organisation. Hence the formality of the process of making the request. I was asked to provide a *precis* of my research proposal, which would then be submitted for approval to the Executive Committee, the apex body of organisers and members. Had they turned down my request as it was framed, I was prepared to revise it to meet their requirements. Had they turned down my request altogether, I would have tried to find another organisation in Ahmedabad, or gone to Bombay or Delhi in hopes of finding another organisation. While I awaited the approval of the Executive Committee, I learned my way around the city, and read about its history in the nearby public library.

When my request to do the research was approved two weeks later, I began to visit SEWA's operations in the city, and to go to the SEWA Reception Centre every day, becoming familiar with the layout of buildings, offices, "cabins" and services, and learning to associate faces with places.

Some Dilemmas of Fieldwork

An endeavour such as this, an ethnographic study of a non-governmental organisation working with economically marginal women (alias 'the poor') in the 'third world' by someone from the 'first world', is necessarily an immersion in many of the ethical, practical and intellectual dilemmas of fieldwork. I raise these issues, not as apology, but to introduce the concerns and issues which were my companions on the journey which led to this dissertation, and as a way of discussing recent critiques of anthropology. These issues have always existed but it seems they must be re-visited anew with every project, as the relationship between the discipline, its subject matter and its critics is continually renewed.

I will use a scene from a film called *Bombay Our City* (Parwardhan 1985) as the means of focussing on what I mean by dilemmas. In that film, a woman whose home in a

'slum' is being levelled by a bulldozer indignantly challenges the film-maker for whom she and the ruins of her home make a powerful image, to justify his presence and to account for his intentions for the film he is making. She demands an ethic of involvement from the film maker, rather than the distance engendered by technology and by the disparities in their positions. The woman articulates a cogent awareness of the numerous issues which have brought her to the situation in which she finds herself: the promise of opportunity in the city of Bombay; the fact that her home is being razed because the politicians of Bombay are accepting bribes from developers who want the land she and thousands of others have settled on and made habitable. Although she lacks formal education, she knows that she and others in her position have been tolerated on that patch of land so long as their presence has had some value to the middle-class and the wealthy who live nearby. (Typically, they serve as a supply of domestic servants, vendors and service-providers.) In the film, she accuses the film-maker of profiting from her situation, of commodifying her misery and misfortune in the name of gathering information. In its most malign form, this kind of representation has been labelled 'poornography', a rendering of poverty, deprivation and difficulty which dwells voyeuristically on people as helpless victims.

This scene, which of course is *in* the finished film, and which the woman who has lost her home is unlikely to ever see since she has no access to the requisite technology, exemplifies the problems I wish to discuss here, which are some of the internal and external critiques which have been levelled at ethnography and at academic involvement in development issues. Those critiques can block the sky with uncertainties about motives and practices and threaten to overwhelm any possibility of ethical practice (Patai 1991).

There is an irony in the pervasive and invasive power of the camera. It is an extension of the observer's ability to focus a sympathetic gaze on a terrible situation, in its ability to capture events as they happen, and the literal embodiment of an 'object'ive position. The film maker can claim sympathy with the situation of the 'squatters', but he is also engaged in his own economic enterprise, and at the end of the day he has a home to

go to. The film-maker defends himself to the woman by saying that he wants to inform people in other parts of the world about the situation of the victimised; that if he does not make the film, then no-one outside the immediate vicinity will know or care about the problem. But that claim is, in turn, based on the assumption that knowledge of a problem will lead to change, or improvement. Sympathy for the poor may drive well-intentioned interest, but change seems unlikely to be generated by the collection of data and the accumulation of interpretations, no matter how sophisticated these may be, without the political will to act on information.

This question of the relationship between the researcher and the people one is studying is not new. Discussions of subjectivity and objectivity have served as the material of methodological worldviews in the social sciences. There are arguments about the existence and nature of masculinist and feminist 'objectivities' and 'subjectivities' (Caplan 1994, Haraway 1991). The positive side of detachment, or objectivity, is that the numerous strands of a story are brought to light and examined. The risk of detachment in a study of the poor is that the poor will come to serve as the equivalent of a resource base for reports and for information. Perhaps, in the most cheerful scenario, they will serve as a source of information for policy-makers. The risk of engagement, sympathy and subjectivity is that 'the poor' might become romanticised and/or exoticised, their socio-economic status made an economically-determined 'otherness', positive qualities substituted for negative ones, and people valourised as victims, instead of their capabilities being acknowledged and woven into the social context in which they operate. As Haraway remarks: "To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic" (1991:191). She adds that "*how* to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the 'highest' techno-scientific visualisations" (*ibid.*).

The echo of one criticism of anthropology can be heard here. This is the argument that academic theorising comprises a closed discursive loop, in which the poor, the

dispossessed, the marginalised, serve as a resource for further study and for the construction of theories. Although the claim is made that the purpose of studying the 'other' is 'interpreting each other to each other', it is more realistically a matter of academics discussing, with each other, an "other" who is never present, or is transmuted through the metaphors and analytical constructs of 'the One' (Trin Minh-Ha 1989). To further dismay the would-be ethnographer, Grimshaw and Hart (1994) note, echoing a Geertzian idea, that the content of the discourse is "essentially commonplace."

The contamination, as some theorists would have it, of political and disciplinary histories in a post-colonial world is another of those critiques. Trinh Mina-Ha argues that traces of positivist and colonialist anthropology, exemplified for her by Malinowski, inevitably contaminate any contemporary encounter. In the last decade, interpretive approaches to understanding, and reflexive textual strategies of representation, have been attempted as efforts to alter the relations of ethnographic production, but these have not resolved the issue of appropriating voices, and representing 'the other'.

Another issue is the kind of engagement between the anthropologist and the subjects of her interest. Enslin (1994) argues that there is a need to combine academic with activist practice, to get 'beyond writing' as she puts it, and beyond exclusively intellectual or theoretical efforts by those who would re-form ethnography. She is one of many theorists who argue that experimental ethnographic efforts do little to resolve the issue of representing and speaking for others, appropriating points of view, and focussing on otherness. But intervention is also fraught with dilemmas (Sacherer 1986)[13]. Escobar (1991) is a caustic critic of anthropologists who engage in development anthropology, arguing that the 'underdeveloped world' is only the most recently forged link in a great chain of subordinate being. He claims that the underdeveloped world has succeeded the

[13]Sacherer discusses her involvement as an anthropologist in development programmes. She points out that the task of the anthropologist is onerous: she must learn the languages of the local people *and* the foreign experts working on a project; she is an outsider to both groups; she is often resented by the development experts and charged with impeding their work.

'primitive', the 'pre-literate' and the 'tribal' as the focus of dominance cloaked in the language of development, aid or research. He is one of many critics who argue that the policies of first world government agencies establish development agendas, determine the nature of the problems, propose solutions, which may or may not benefit the poor, and engender the theoretical space and resources for further research, while the situation of those being 'developed' remains unchanged. The creation of a permanent body of recipients or beneficiaries, and the administration of the proposed solutions, then become the purpose of existence. Escobar argues that anthropologists have helped make 'development' into a commodity, that they have helped create the 'culture of development', with its external experts and international conferencing in locales distant from the site of 'the problem'. If these critiques are about anthropology's reliance on 'otherness', claims to similarity based on gender and class are equally problematic (Caplan 1994), since so many cultural, economic and educational distinctions function to challenge such claims.

I raise these issues because of my own unease with the disparities between my situation and that of the self-employed members of SEWA with whom I talked. I was often uncomfortably aware that I, too, would be leaving Ahmedabad with information with which to write a dissertation which would have a value from which they were excluded. I, too, would be using expensive equipment and facilities to create an image of the people I was meeting, an image that most of them would not be able to relate to, never mind read, even if it was translated into Gujarati. My audience would be remote from the self-employed women. I was challenged on more than one occasion, in the *chawls* of Ahmedabad and in 'remote' villages, with being a member of the tribe of researchers, Indian and non-Indian, who would go to an area, talk to people in distressed situations, and then leave. If one takes these issues seriously, one must ask, with Haraway, how it is possible to avoid what she calls 'radiant descent into cynicism' which disallows action and leaves one impotent. I find some hope that a methodological ethic is to be found in what Haraway calls "situated knowledge". Although she is speaking of feminisms' relationships

to the 'hard' sciences, rather than about the social sciences, Haraway's remarks about the need for knowledge to be "situated" (that is, knowledge which requires the researcher to position herself or himself with respect to theories, *personae* and cultural politics) are relevant to an anthropological endeavour. She says: "Feminists have stakes in a successor science project that offers a more adequate, richer, better account of the world, in order to live well in it and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of dominations and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions" (1991:187). For the anthropologist, the route to that 'richer, better account' is to be found in the practice of participant observation and its complement, observant participation, and in ethnographic accounts which situate, to use Haraway's term, the researcher and the research as fully as possible.

Finding One's Feet

Some of the experiences of "fieldwork" in another culture are common to every research endeavour. One such similarity is some degree of "culture shock"[14], for example, and the experience of what Geertz (1973) calls 'finding one's feet' in the numerous trajectories one must traverse from incomprehension to some degree of understanding. For myself, the elements of culture shock included the reactions of a newcomer to the poverty in which some people must live. Juxtapositions of wealth and poverty, crowding, and the sheer amount of physical effort, unmediated by technology, which is required in so much 'informal sector' labour, are other elements of the shock. Dealing with the public quality of so many things which are private in North America is another.

Finding one's feet means beginning to understand the logic of the everyday, beginning to comprehend the social constructions which signify and embody ways of thinking that accomplish necessities and desires. This immensely complicated business is learned through the body and the mind. As Golde put it 25 years ago: "That lesson, the

[14]Golde discusses the term culture shock as it relates to anthropological fieldwork (1970:11).

learning of culture, is not an intellectually dispassionate one, nor is it even necessarily mediated by words: it is direct intuitive learning that seeps through all the senses" (Golde 1970:11). It is through the apprehension, accumulation and layering of minute details that such qualitative changes in understanding occur. Just as nothing disappears completely, as Derrida and Singer, in their different ways, would have it, so also does cultural knowledge accumulate slowly. This is the primary advantage of participant observation: immersion in another culture, to the limited extent that this is possible, allows one to accumulate the details of epistemologies and practices and to pose and re-formulate questions in numerous settings and contexts until some understanding of purposes and of puzzles is reached.

Finding one's feet has to do with such commonplace things as transportation, shopping, cooking and eating, as well as the more esoteric details of one's research agenda.[15] It means learning one's way around places. I found that moving around the city was an overwhelming experience at first. My ability to move about on foot, on the buses and in rickshaws, became a yardstick of my 'acculturation' and, eventually, of my capacity for ironic detachment while trying to do this.

I was never afraid that I would be harmed. This was probably because I never really understood how potentially hazardous Ahmedabad could be, although I heard many stories of peoples' experiences in the riots. It required some learned skills to recognise and dodge the 'eve-teasers'[16] who congregate on the pavements. I had to learn how to read the signals between people and vehicles, so as to learn when to move aside, when I had

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[15]Kumar (1992) discusses this at length in her *Friends, Brothers and Informants*. Gold's *Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani Pilgrims* (1988) provides a shorter discussion of similar issues.

[16] A benign-sounding term for what in North America would be called sexual harassment, 'eve-teasing' may take the form of a man confronting a woman on the footpath, and making sexual gestures or remarks. Women apparently have to deal with this all the time in public places, according to my young assistants. I learned that walking about with my head up, and looking men in the eye was not the thing to do. I developed a kind of tunnel vision, not easy when traversing crowded streets and laneways. I learned to skirt groups of young men in the bazaars, and to never make eye contact in public with men I did not know. Without the experiences I had, I would have thought anyone saying these things was prudish or had an overactive imagination. I also thought that I was past the age when I would be so 'teased'. Yet I rarely made a bus trip without having to remove a hand from a significant part of my body. Too embarrassed to say anything at first, I was also worried that if I swore at someone in English, the curses would be flung back at me to add to the 'teasing'. Searle-Chatterjee (1981) and Kumar (1992) discuss similar experiences.

the right of way, how to walk past importuning vendors and how to dodge the seemingly amiable cows which could put a hole in your spine if you got in their way. I was eventually able to touch the cows, although never push them aside, or touch them reverently as the Ahmedabadi women did. I learned to shout the right words at the dogs, some of which never failed to recognise me as a 'foreigner', as people would tell me, and I learned to walk past a camel without being overawed by it, and to cross the street while reading a pamphlet.

I learned from the warnings of women who became my friends, and from my own experience that to be a passenger, and sometimes the lone passenger, in a rickshaw had its dangers: drunken drivers and grisly accidents of which the newspapers reported the unspeakably gory details being two of these. Travelling by rickshaw had its own etiquette, I learned, as 'dropping' one's friends and 'being dropped' applied as much to rickshaws as it did to scooters. I learned that rickshaws could legally take a maximum of three passengers, or face a fine, so if there were four of us, or seven, as sometimes happened, someone would have to jump out while going past a police *chowki*, then climb back in around the corner. Paying for rickshaws was often a delicate matter. I would want to pay, if I was with the women I spent most of my time with, since I had some knowledge of their financial situations. Sometimes I would be allowed to do this, but more often they insisted on paying for me, or going 'fifty-fifty', which they would say in English.

Buses were less expensive than rickshaws (Rs. two for the journeys I took most often, as opposed to Rs. 13-15 for an auto-rickshaw) and felt safer, so long as they were not too crowded. It is a struggle for anyone to find a spot on the overloaded buses which ply the narrow and crowded streets: the nimble young men who accomplish last-minute "flying leaps" onto the rear platform of the buses might, in North America, qualify for a gymnastics team. Here, they land a seat, or a spot on the rear platform on a bus. And occasionally, sickeningly, miss grasping the pole and tumble into the road. More than once, I was manoeuvered onto a moving bus by friends, and experienced sensory overload

while waving goodbye and being received in astonishment by my fellow passengers. I would then be required to demonstrate my efficiency in Gujarati, by announcing my destination to the conductor. I soon learned to say 'Nagri Mill', (the name of a textile mill in Gomtipur which has not operated for a long time), *popadya vad* (the name of a street) and *navi civil* ("new civil", the name of a large municipal hospital) with ease but often felt my status as 'the entertainment' rather painfully.

Riding the buses was often a reminder that my getting used to Ahmedabad was only one side of a multi-faceted coin. My learning my way around was only one side of the story: I also had to account for and explain myself when I travelled alone, and had to be accounted for by the people I was travelling with. One SEWA friend remarked ironically that every time we went somewhere together, we had to 'give an interview'. My presence was, on some occasions, a burden to the people I was with, as it was the time a man wearing a *sari* and rather too much lipstick leaned out of a moving rickshaw to shake my hand, and the reserved and modest middle-class women I was with had to explain the role of *hijras* (eunuchs and hermaphrodites) to me.

'Finding one's feet' means learning that economic realities inform the protocols of hospitality, by determining the scale of possibilities. Offering tea and food to a *meman* (guest) is as automatic as any non-biological act can be in Ahmedabad. A family member from the home village, a neighbour, a fellow co-operative member, a foreign *bhen* (sister), the man who roams the *galis* (narrow lanes) selling piece goods wrapped in a bundle he carries on his head: the arrival of any of these guests requires sending a child for a rupee's worth of (probably watered) milk, to put into the *chai* (tea). Everything is shared: two oranges amongst 10 children, a paper twist of roasted groundnuts, a 50 *paisa* (one half rupee) packet of sweets, according to protocols determined by sex, age, degree of familial closeness and status. I learned to share tea by pouring half of it into a saucer, and passing it to someone, usually the eldest woman present, because sharing tea with a man, even an elderly man to whom I would want to extend the courtesy, would be too 'intimate' a thing

and would transgress the boundaries of cleanliness. Refusals of tea and *nasta* (snacks) are customary, but so is insistence and both have to be learned.

Finding one's feet means getting used to a different kind of sociability. This meant learning to live with more people, being more 'visible' and being 'accountable', so to speak, to the people with whom I spent time. I had to account for where I had been, how I had spent time, how much money I had spent, and so on. The fact that I had more money than most of the people I spent time with (*i.e.*, the self-employed women) was always a problem. I also had to learn how to deflect the direct questioning when I needed to, and to learn to offer information about what seemed to me trivial or personal things. I learned to accept and to respond to direct questioning about subjects I am not accustomed to making "public" and learned what was and was not appropriate to say or do in particular situations. Being dependent on others is also part of 'finding one's feet', since initially one requires help with almost everything. I sometimes relied on - and acted on - the knowledge that I had the financial resources to escape something dreadful, if I absolutely had to. I could, for instance, jump into a rickshaw if I could not walk another step in the heat, or if my attempts to fight my way onto a bus were thwarted again by the piercing elbows of the elderly, or the young men. I was reminded of many such instances, when I read Searle-Chatterjee's book about her experiences in Banaras, in which she alludes to "the definition of the role of the anthropologist as an observer who can so easily escape from the conditions for which he (*sic*) expresses sympathy (1978:8)."

Some intensification of self-knowledge is inevitably an aspect of doing fieldwork: I found that I was as pleased to observe people as some of them were to observe me. I vividly recall turning a corner near my 'home' early one morning, and walking into a flock of goats being led by a young *Marwari* boy. He and I stared at each other in surprise, started to take in all the exotic details of the other's strangeness, then stood laughing in the street at the whole encounter. On other occasions, though, I was distressed to realise that children were terrorised by my appearance. The three sons in a family with whom I spent a

lot of time were more than once delighted to wave a neighbour's baby in my direction, and hear her scream with fright. Several times, I turned the corner at the bottom of the stairs in the Reception Centre, and startled an elderly peasant woman into making the sign to avert the 'evil eye'.

I wondered more than once just how far my sense of politeness would allow and force me to suspend my anxieties, when I felt endangered. In one family's one-roomed home, for instance, the only place to situate the portable cooker was just inside the door. No-one cooked outside, because, I realised, neighbours would come to observe and comment on the food. Watching women light the kerosene that fuelled these stoves always made me anxious: I imagined the soaring flames igniting garments or the flimsy cloth in the doorway. It must happen, but did not happen anywhere I was present, although watching the women cook made the stories of "dowry deaths" seem frighteningly plausible. I was told in horrifying detail the story of one co-operative member's son killing his wife this way. After a series of furious arguments, over many days, he had set her clothes on fire, and she had died, exonerating him on her deathbed, and no-one would go to the police because if he was imprisoned then the children would lose their father as well, and the man was mad with grief at what he had done and the women were angry and sad and seemed to accept the hard reality and grieved with the mother of the man, with whom they worked every day.

To spend time doing fieldwork is to experience the distance between the sanitised 'preparations' one makes, prior to doing research and the 'lived experience' of it. Those preparations assume a more or less linear progression towards understanding, a slow accumulation of data which can be processed into 'information' and analysed. The lived experience, of course, is that flashes of culturally-informed intuition and the occasional lack of need to have something explained to one, as distinct from needing to have everything explained, arise now and then. One example of this kind of 'culturally-informed intuition' stays in my mind: the women who work at SEWA and the self-employed

members who attend meetings there are required, although not compelled, to wear *khadi,*[17] the 'homespun' cloth which is so closely associated with Gandhi. It was explained to me that, at Rs. 400 plus for a sari, *khadi* is expensive for the middle-class office-goers, and out of reach for the poor. I noticed one day, while sitting on the purple couch, that some of the members look even 'poorer' in the Reception Centre than they do in their own homes, because the cotton or *khadi saris* they keep to wear to SEWA are so old and worn out. Of the women I got to know, those who had a choice would wear a creaseless, brightly coloured and fashionable polyester *sari*[18] at home and their somewhat drab and earnest cotton *saris* to attend events at SEWA.

I sometimes preferred being alone to being part of a crowd. My being a *gori* (white) made me visible in ways that made me recall what friends in Canada had said about being a visible minority, and I was always glad of the hospitality cum protection offered by the families I went to visit. Someone would always walk with me to the bus stop, whether it was night or day, although I sometimes chafed at this. In the poorer neighbourhoods, schoolchildren would stare as if I were in a zoo, until I learned to tease them about this. In the areas where I went most often, local shopowners eventually found me less of a visual aberration, and would call out a greeting.

It was part of my education as a woman in Ahmedabad to learn that women and men occupy different social spaces, and that women occupy space differently than we do in North America. I came to realise that I was sometimes more 'forward' physically, than the women I came to know there. I would find myself leaning on a desk, or taking up a lot of room for instance. It was also the case that the physical boundaries I took for granted were different from those I was accustomed to in Canada. I was astonished more than once by physical intrusions which I had to realise were informed by familiarity and

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[17]The requirement is regulated by keeping aside a portion of each month's salary which must be spent on *khadi* when it is disbursed. The *khadi* stores hold a sale in October to coincide with Gandhi's birthday. Prices are reduced by 20% in those sales. The *khadi* stores are a "government undertaking".

[18]Polyester *saris* could cost as little as Rs 125.

helpfulness. On one early morning bus ride to a city some four hours' journey away, hot and a bit confused by a lot of racing about to find a 'semi-luxury' bus (my four companions and I got on and off three buses before leaving the city) I suddenly found one of the women I was with putting white powder under my eyelids. I had horrified 'visions' of being blinded, as the powder bubbled and stung under my eyelids. As I was trying to get rid of the powder and stifle my distress, I became aware of the man in the next seat watching in approval, and asking for the vial of powder. When he put the powder in his eyes, and seemed to derive satisfaction from it, I relaxed a little and the effects soon wore off. I never learned what the powder was, but that incident was an intensive and immediate lesson in learning to be careful of my physical being.

Living Arrangements

Finding a place to live in crowded Ahmedabad was not easy. I did not stay in a *chawl* with the people I was working with, because there was not enough room for the family members as it was in the homes of the co-operative members, and I did not think I could have borne the rats and mice that were a constant presence. The fact that there was absolutely no possibility of any privacy, as I would construct 'privacy', would have been unbearably stressful although I realise that this is an aspect of hitherto unthought privilege. Mary Searle-Chatterjee has discussed some of the problems faced by 'outsiders' in doing this kind of study. In her case, she was a resident of Banaras, living with her Bengali husband's family and studying a 'Sweeper' community (1978). Her decision not to live with her informants was based on the fact that her husband's family might well have shunned her had she done so. She would also have had to use the public latrines, which she found an intolerable idea, as did I.

I also thought that the presence of a non-family member would have created tensions in the cramped dwellings in which all the co-operative members I knew lived. My presence as a 'guest' would have entailed expenses and, even if there had been room, my

presence as a 'paying guest' with one family in a co-op would have altered my relations with the others.

The privacy that we in Canada accomplish with space and doors is accomplished in those small houses through averted gazes and gestures. At first I was very self-conscious, not knowing where to look, and not recognising the signals of the need for privacy, but eventually I became less awkward. People spoke about the problems of living in such crowded quarters, pointing out that there was no room to keep anything, or that complicated storage structures had to be demolished in order to find a single item.

Going from one co-operative member's home to another brought home to me the fact that, no matter how 'simply' I lived, I was immensely privileged, with my Shastri stipend. I could spend money on a garment or a bus trip or a book or a kilo of mangoes, but such expenditures were beyond the capabilities of the co-operative members. What money there was had to be spent on necessities such as rent or taxes, food, children's school uniforms, loan repayments, loans made to family members in need, and so on. One of my 'coping' strategies was hardly the stuff of intellectual or experiential 'engagement with the other', but I found that I could see what I needed to see, and avoid what I wanted to avoid (the rats and mice) by the simple expedient of not wearing my glasses. Part of the women's own representation of the physical difficulties of their lives was their nonchalance in saying that they were used to such things. I vividly remember moving away from the wall in a co-operative member's house on one occasion, on hearing a rustling only inches from my ear. The adult sons who were home at the time laughed at my involuntary flinching: 'See how unfit you are for this way of life', they were saying and 'see how we have to live'.

My life as a 'paying guest', which is surely a contradiction in terms, was instructive in a number of ways. I tried to find a place to stay where there was no connection with SEWA, but that proved impossible for the longest part of my stay, and taught me something about the housing shortage in Ahmedabad. Instead, I stayed with a family who

had an empty room upstairs in their suburban house. The woman in the family was one of the co-ordinators of the child-care centres operated by SEWA and the man was a manager in a co-operative bank. While my being in that household was never happy (because they were an unhappy family) it was instructive in many aspects of the aspirations, prejudices, and lived realities of (unhappy) middle-class life. That household served as one of my windows on middle-class perceptions of such things as parts of the city and on the problems faced by middle-class people with children to educate and 'settle' in businesses and marriages. I do not suggest that this family was typical of the middle class, only that its members provided as legitimate a view of middle-class life as any other.

I met many middle-class people who were concerned about the poor, whether positively or negatively. Some of those people felt threatened by the 'reservation' policies which they saw as taking away their own rights. My experience with the family I stayed with was also useful in understanding some of the day-to-day aspects of being middle-caste Brahmins, as that status was extremely important to the woman of the house. I will call her by the pseudonym Gita. Born into a very poor Brahmin family in a village, Gita's childhood was made even harder when her father died and left her mother with two children to raise. Gita told me stories about economic deprivation in childhood and a life of striving for improvement. She managed to get an education and taught school for two years. Her life changed when she married a man belonging to the same sub-caste. Her husband's family is well-off financially and connected to the political elite of Ahmedabad through her husband's father. Her father-in-law knew 'Elaben', the General Secretary of SEWA, as Gita never tired of telling me. Their first child, now 18, was a son, and their daughter was born some ten years later. Gita told me many times that her sympathy for the very poor arose from her own intimate knowledge of poverty in childhood. Gita had worked for SEWA for 11 years when I first knew her and was proud of the fact that she worked for SEWA. She enjoyed the opportunity to travel occasionally to nearby cities on

SEWA business. In part this was because it got her away from the endless round of household tasks for which she was responsible.

Another aspect of finding one's feet concerns time. Time in 'the field' has particular qualities. Every day counts, but the time one can spend interviewing and gathering information is dependent on people finding time for you. It takes time to establish contacts, time to understand networks and personalities and time to find one's way around, literally and figuratively. It is a truism of fieldwork, as it often is of the rest of life, that nothing happens and then everything happens or rather, that what counts as an event must be defined as something other than 'nothing happening'.

Apprehensions of, and relations to, time are vehicles for some of the differences between the organisers at SEWA and the members. Time to wait for improvements is a luxury unavailable to the poor, although much of their time is spent waiting. They wait at the Reception Centre for work and for those who are more powerful to pay attention to them. In my experience 'nothing happening' involved people not showing up for arranged meetings, and proposed journeys not materialising. It required a stoic kind of patience, sometimes, to arrive hopefully for meetings, wait while every other necessity was looked after, then be granted an interview in the last few minutes of a working day. 'Everything happening at once' meant that some days began before dawn and ended after dark, including in the meantime an arduous journey to a social forestry project, attending a meeting and visiting someone at home in the evening. It also meant that I was required to make decisions about which 'event' to participate in, when conflicting opportunities arose.

The SEWA Reception Centre

Since my view of Ahmedabad was, at least initially, SEWA-centric, I have woven some of *what* I learned about SEWA into a description of *where* I learned it, which is the cluster of buildings which constitute the Reception Centre. In what follows, I move in and out of the buildings and in and out of interviews and observations. The Reception Centre

was my principal destination most days, whether I went to the Reception Centre first and travelled into the city or the countryside with people from there, or went to the Reception Centre with co-operative member friends, as they went to the Reception Centre to attend meetings or go to the bank.

Ancient Ahmedabad was a walled city built on one bank of the Sabarmati. It is compellingly 'symbolic' to point out that old and new face each other across the five bridges which span the Sabarmati, although old and new also co-exist on both sides of the river. The SEWA Reception Centre is located on the 'old city' side of the Sabarmati, at one foot of the century-old twice-built Ellis bridge. There are several designations for this area. Ellisbridge, the name of the electoral district, is one. Another is *Bhadra*, which is "the name for Kali, in her auspicious form", who is the "patron goddess of Ahmedabad", according to Gillion (1968:19). The area is also known as *majoor mahajan* (the Gujarati name for the Textile Labourers' Association) since the TLA headquarters are immediately behind the Reception Centre. On the newer, less congested side of the Ellis Bridge, is the two-storey building called Krishna Bhuvan, which houses the 'SEWA Academy' and its related sections: the video unit, the library, the research unit and the training session rooms.

The roadway broadens slightly and slopes downward as one leaves the bridge and reaches the road. Hand cart pullers are able to coast a little, down the slight slope in front of the Reception Centre, where a metal railing separates the front entrance of the Reception Centre from the flow of traffic. Half a dozen jeeps and a small bus (some of these gifted to SEWA by the Aga Khan Foundation) are parked to the right of the entrance. So are the 15 or so auto-rickshaws owned by SEWA. It is from this space that some of the daily connections between SEWA and the city and the countryside are made. Use of the vehicles is determined through a combination of the priorities of a journey with the status of the requester. I knew people to refuse a journey because a vehicle was not available, and it was a matter of prestige to some of the women I got to know, that they

could book a jeep for a journey. Travelling about can be difficult, and is not something that the SEWA women would do for pleasure, since State Transport (ST) buses are dirty and crowded and the trains are usually packed. Because the lower-echelon SEWA fieldworkers are required to be as frugal as possible, however, they must always travel by the least expensive means and that means taking public transport.

The area in front of the Reception Centre is a "symbolic" as well as practical, space. The presence of expensive vehicles is itself symbolic of SEWA's importance. When distinguished guests come to SEWA they and the government officials who accompany them are received in this area, which is then decorated with flowers and *rangoli* (auspicious rice-flour designs which are used to decorate a home and to signify welcome).

The area is symbolic in other ways as well, one of them being that SEWA is a safe place for women to be. One of the many kinds of resistance which operates to keep women in their homes and neighbourhoods and not moving about in public, is the possibility that they might be sexually harassed or assaulted by men. The streets and most workplaces are the domain of men and it is especially difficult to 'move around' if one is female. For many women, SEWA is a good place to work because only women work there, and their fathers or husbands would not allow them to work in a 'mixed' (female and male) setting. This is as true for the Muslim women who run the block-printing co-operative from the roof of the Reception Centre building as it is for the middle-class Hindu or Christian women who work in the offices, and the village women who come to SEWA for training. Several women told me that their families had made strong objections to their going to SEWA at first, and that some of those family members now say "isn't it time you were going there?" if they have not been for a couple of days.

I came and went many times, taking for granted that there would be clutches of village women enjoying *chai* after a journey that might have started in the early dark, before realising that it was unusual for women to be gathered in the city like that. In the poorer parts of the city, crowding and congestion make it impossible for people to gather

safely in large numbers, and social norms would militate against women doing so anyway. At government offices and at the banks a *chowkidar* (security man), sometimes armed, would keep people moving and keep unauthorised people out, and on the footpaths, pavement dwellers and vendors occupy all the available space.

There is always work being done in the space in front of the Reception Centre. Members of the *Aabodana* block-printers' co-operative do some of their work here. The interminable tying of knots for *bandhani* (tie and dye) for example, is done in the warmth of the sun. Some of the dyeing is also done here, and every now and then dozens of lengths of dyed cloth are hung to dry on the railing, giving a colourful air to the place.

A tea stall in this open space between the road and the building is run by a woman who used to be a member of a fish processing co-operative, one of SEWA's efforts that had to be abandoned when it became clear that it was unprofitable. She sells tea (Re 1) and coffee (Rs 2) every day that SEWA is open aided by her two teenaged sons, when they are not in school. Her sons carry the water from inside the Reception Centre and her customers are the women who come for meetings, and those who work at SEWA. Her sons fly around all day, collecting orders for tea or coffee, balancing scalding pots of tea and juggling cups, summoned by a call or observing quietly-signalled orders as they go from office to office, collecting payment.

There must be thousands of tea stalls in Ahmedabad. This is the only one I ever saw operated by a woman and it is certainly the only tea stall operated by a member of the Executive Committee of an internationally-known organisation. Shantaben has been a member of SEWA for 18 years. Operating the tea stall is the most recent of her efforts to earn a living for herself and her family. Her husband is a mechanic at the Naroda State Transport office. They had four children, but their 15 year old daughter died two years ago. Her surviving daughter does not come to SEWA. Prior to running the tea stall, she had worked in the Matsya fish co-operative, a precarious venture in drought prone Ahmedabad. The co--operative had bought fish from the wholesale market and distributed

them to vendors. Shantaben is devoted to SEWA, and says that work is 'successful' if one belongs to a large and powerful organisation. It is successful because of the strength of numbers, which Shantaben analogises thus: 'just as small drops of water form the ocean', so do large numbers of SEWA women constitute a force to be reckoned with. Not only is the organisation strong, she says, but her daily life is better since she 'came to SEWA'. Shantaben is one of the many women who say that their lives have been transformed through their membership.

There are kinds and degrees of transformation: Shantaben began her working life as a "home based" worker, stitching readymade garments in her home. Then she sold vegetables for some time, and it was from that work that she was recruited by SEWA. After joining SEWA, she began to work in the bank, doing accounts and loan applications, using training she received in two places, the Gandhi Labour Institute and the Kanpur Workers' Education Centre, both in Ahmedabad. She is clearly an excellent example of SEWA's argument that the poor and self-employed are willing and able to take advantage of any opportunity that comes along, and to optimise the potential of those opportunities.

During the drought years of 1985-87, Shantaben worked for SEWA, doing surveys of government-operated drought-relief programmes. Those programmes required people to work in exchange for foodgrains, and Shantaben and her colleagues found that the conditions of this labour were extreme and inequitably enforced. She says that she and her nine co-workers found that Government relief money, clothing and food were not reaching the families for whom these items were intended, and that the village *sarpanches* were harassing some of the women, and enriching themselves with the money and resources. She says that when the results of the SEWA survey were made public, the money was directed properly. Shantaben was invited to go to Delhi with Ela Bhatt and some other SEWA women, where they gave an interview to government officials. She is very proud of her involvement in this matter, and feels that SEWA can justifiably call itself a 'guardian' of the welfare of the very poor. She says that since coming to SEWA, she has

become 'courageous' and that now, if she stays home, she feels 'depressed'. The value of SEWA's efforts, in her words, lies in its pursuit of justice (*nyai*), which meant, to her way of thinking, more work and more money.

In addition to drought-relief work, she continued her banking work in 10 rural districts, under the direction of the head of the bank, then decided to stay closer to home, and to begin a co-operative. The co-operative is still registered, although there has been no income from it for three years. In addition to the tea stall, she has a job in an office, which nets her a small additional income.

Through the Door

Above the front entrance of the 3-storey Reception Centre is a sign in English identifying the organisation. The rear entrance has a battered and rusty metal sign reading *seva offices* in Gujarati. When I first went to the Reception Centre the front stairs led one into the bank, a seemingly chaotic place with not nearly enough room for the dozens of women, men and children who would be sitting on the narrow bench along the wall. A high counter divided the public from the working space. A picture of Laxmi, Hindu goddess of wealth and good fortune also hangs there, as does a poster that one sees in buses and other places which says, in English 'No Politics Please'. In some of its literature (*e.g.*, Bhatt 1976) SEWA comments on the fact that the self-employed women were not welcome in the regular banks. This has more to do with economics than with behaviour, but one factor in their lack of welcome was apparently the fact that their 'manners' and demeanour are not those of the middle-class. The atmosphere in the *Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank* is cheerfully and rowdily remote from that of other banks, as women compete with each other to gain the attention of a clerk, have their thumb prints registered and consult with the family members who have accompanied them.

The business is serious, of course. Women come to get loans to start businesses, to renovate dwellings which have been damaged, or perhaps to add an extension or a new

roof to a house, or to obtain a loan for the electricity connection, so that working hours can be extended. Loans can be secured or unsecured, depending on whether the applicant owns any collateral. If the loan is for income-generation, and if the applicant is known to a SEWA member or organiser, and/or has a good record of saving money, an unsecured loan is likely to be granted, even though there is no collateral.

During the time I was in Ahmedabad, a new bank was built in the Reception Centre, and most of the bank functions were transferred there, leaving this space for office work. The new bank has been built by doing extensive renovations on the building next door, which SEWA also owns. The new bank is much more orderly. Departments are separated from each other, making it easier to work, reducing crowding and increasing security. There had been one or two robberies at the bank, and there was a very sad story of a woman who had taken out her savings to pay for something, and been robbed just outside the building. This could happen anywhere, but the crowding made it easier for the thief. I found it an interesting example of the ways in which SEWA enables multiple versions of modernity to co-exist, to learn that transactions which might begin with a thumbprint, if a depositor is not literate, are transformed into a database with the use of a sophisticated computer.

One of the services of the bank is mobile banking, on the basis of the principle that if women cannot get to the bank, the bank will go to them. SEWA is concerned that any number of things will keep the members from banking their earnings or repaying a loan: husbands will spend it; it will be spent on immediate necessities, rather than being saved, or moneylenders will appropriate it. SEWA is proud of the loan repayment rate of its members, said in SEWA's 1993 Annual Report to be 94%. I was told that since the SEWA bank is a government registered bank, and must comply with government regulations, the interest rate for a loan is the same as it is at the State Bank. That can be as much as 18%. SEWA claims, though, that this rate is much less than the women would pay to a moneylender and it is the case that the bank does not cheat anyone.

I made the rounds with Taraben, an officer of the mobile bank, several times. Formerly, Taraben made this journey twice a week, on foot and by bus, covering several sections of the city in a day's journey. Now she has a vehicle at her command and she is grateful for this, but the traipsing about is still arduous in the heat. Two days a week she sets out from the Reception Centre by jeep, and travels from neighbourhood to neighbourhood collecting savings and loan repayments (*hafta*) from women, where they work or live, which is usually the same thing. On the main road, the SEWA jeep is not an exceptional site, given the diversity of vehicles that ply the roads, but in the narrow lanes and the poor neighbourhoods, it was like a building on wheels, occupying a great deal of space. The jeep would stop, and sometimes a SEWA member would be waiting for Taraben at the pre-arranged place, drawing money out of her *sari* blouse. In some locations no-one would be there, and Taraben would send someone to go and find the SEWA members. I was surprised more than once by the amounts of the deposits (*e.g.* several hundred rupees), given SEWA's descriptions of the meagre wages the self-employed earned. Taraben said that when she first started to make these journeys the women would come with deposits of two and three rupees. Now that some of the members are relatively prosperous and some of the relatively prosperous are members, many deposits are substantial amounts. The laborious process of recording transactions by hand in large ledgers, and having thumb prints registered, was carried out in the back of the jeep.

From the first floor of the Reception Centre the stairs lead one either up to the main floor, or down to the ground floor. The stairways are always busy, with women from the blockprinting co-operative on the roof toiling up and down with water and with products in various stages of completion, with the youngsters from the tea stall and with women who have combined a journey to the bank with a meeting at SEWA. Here, too, I was aware of being an apparition when, as happened several times, women absorbed in

conversations looked up and were surprised by the sight of me. A grin acknowledging the strangeness of my presence usually resulted in a welcoming smile.

The stairwell is full of information for the visitor. Much of this information has rhetorical value. There is a map of Gujarat with the principal sites of SEWA's activities pointed out in red. This map makes the point that although the Reception Centre is in the city of Ahmedabad, SEWA's work is carried out everywhere in the state. It makes the point that connections exist between the SEWA headquarters and the furthest districts of the state. In another spot on the stairwell there is a beautiful piece of framed embroidery which was done by a self-employed artisan. On the wall of one of the landings there is something I found useful, which was the Gujarati alphabet and the numbers from 1-10 in large yellow letters. I took these to indicate SEWA's commitment to literacy. Once some people knew that I could read the alphabet, I was quizzed on it many times while standing on that narrow landing between floors, and felt the need to perform well. Past the alphabet, one comes to more information about SEWA: the current copy of the newsletter *Anasuya* (in Gujarati) is tacked to the wall, as is a list of SEWA's '10 questions'. These questions are found everywhere, and are the touchstones of SEWA's operating principles. I discuss these '10 questions' in Chapter Three.

The secretarial work of the organisation is done in the main floor office, a large room which occupies the whole floor. The sounds of the traffic are only slightly muted in here, since all the windows are opened in the morning by the woman who opens up the building. Letters, reports, requests for information and literature about aspects of activities similar to SEWA's are received from all over the country and the rest of the world in this office. From desks in this office, some of the SEWA organisers make frequent and extensive journeys in their efforts to organise women in the rural areas.

Old photographs hang from the walls of this office in a manner analogous to the way in which religious pictures hang in people's homes. All of these images seem to indicate the organisation's connections with powerful people and institutions. They include

a photograph of a lean and ancient Gandhi, and one of Arvind Buch, the leader of the TLA when SEWA was originally formed. Some of the archetypal images from SEWA's history are hung on this wall. These include the original of a photograph of a woman (who seems to be poor) who is holding a video camera on her shoulder. This picture is reproduced on many SEWA documents. The woman seems to represent a reversal of the stereotype of the poor woman as object: she is gazing confidently at something she chooses to pay attention to, rather than being the object of someone else's gaze. This woman will produce an image, rather than being one, and she will do that using equipment not traditionally available to women.

Another photograph shows the front cover of *Shram Shakti*, the Report of the Commission on Women in the Self-Employed Sector, commissioned by the Government of India, and published in 1988. That report is one of the milestones in the history of SEWA, and represents the ability of the organisation to influence government policy regarding the self-employed. This ability is an extremely important aspect of the establishment of an alternative form of development. Other photographs show collections of SEWA women at meetings. In one of these, Indira Gandhi is shown in the centre of a group of women from SEWA.

Ela Bhatt's office is a small room adjacent to this large main office. When Ela Bhatt is in her office, the atmosphere in the Reception Centre is quietly charged with expectation. The visitor who arrives at the entrance three floors below can tell that she is 'in'. When Ela Bhatt is in her office, the *paniwalis* (women who serve water to guests), for instance, do not sit on the purple couch gossiping with members, but can be found sitting outside Ela Bhatt's office, waiting to carry a briefcase or respond to the small handbell she rings to summon them.

Ela Bhatt's office is one of the few offices in the Reception Centre which has a door. The room is very simply furnished with a large desk and two chairs. A copy of the

certificate awarding her the Magsaysay Award[19] hangs on the wall. Otherwise there is no decoration. From this room, Ela Bhatt travels to centres of power in India, Europe and North America. I spent time with her only twice, as she was often away and always extremely busy with the affairs of SEWA while I was in Ahmedabad. I cannot speak with any "authority" about her, except to say that she is very sure of the value of SEWA's efforts and activities on behalf of the very poor. She is well aware, probably better aware than most people, that structural changes in the lives of the women who are SEWA's members will take a long time. The problems have existed for decades, and even two decades of concerted effort by SEWA, alone and in conjunction with branches of the government, has only mapped out the territory of the problems.

Ela Bhatt is a charismatic leader, comfortable discussing issues with heads of state and with the self-employed women who throng the Reception Centre. She has attracted some very good people to the organisation. She has a reputation for being extremely well-organised, and for proposing creative and independent solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Because *she* responded to the injustice of being forced to leave the TLA by creating a powerful organisation, she is one model of behaviour and action for the entire organisation. In Eyerman and Jamison's terms, she is a social activist who has "learned by doing" (1991:57). She has learned by talking to women in the *chawls* and slums of Ahmedabad as well as by being a member of the National Planning Commission.

We discussed a number of things in those brief interviews. One issue was her strong sense that SEWA must remain outside the party politics of Gujarat. One reason for this is that SEWA's international visibility could be claimed and appropriated by a political party, and the women who had struggled to build SEWA might then be marginalised within their own organisation. A pressing political issue while I was in Ahmedabad was

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[19]The prestigious Magsaysay award has been called the equivalent of a Nobel Prize. Ela Bhatt has also been awarded the *Padma Shree*, the most prestigious civilian award given to an Indian citizen and the *Padma Bushan*, both from by the Indian Government and the 'Right Livelihood' Award from the Swedish Foundation of that name (Selliah 1989:13).

the rising power of the right-wing BJP. Ela Bhatt and all of the other high-level organisers I spoke to were apprehensive about the potential of BJP-driven politics to deepen communitarian divisions in Ahmedabad. We also discussed the effects of economic liberalisation on the economy of Ahmedabad and the effects of that liberalisation on the economically-marginal members of SEWA. She was rather pessimistic about the possibilities of liberalisation creating employment opportunities for the unskilled and uneducated workers, whether women or men. We also discussed the possibility of SEWA including men in its programmes, at some unspecified later date. I raise this issue again in Chapter Six, the concluding chapter.

Some of the details of the history of SEWA are the details of Ela Bhatt's lifelong involvement in efforts to improve the working conditions of the self-employed women of Ahmedabad. Many of the self-employed women I spoke to told me about 'Elaben' coming to their homes in the poor parts of the city and urging them to join SEWA and to join with other women in similar economic circumstances, to improve their lot. Ela Bhatt is, so far as I know, largely responsible for making the Self-Employed Women's Association an independent and an internationally-recognised organisation. Gandhi serves as a model for ethical action, for her. It was Ela Bhatt's unwillingness to be silent on the issue of reservations for low caste members of the TLA that led to her being expelled. In a masterfully symbolic gesture, she resettled the independent organisation in a building only a few hundred yards from the Textile Labourers' Association (TLA) headquarters. I was told that the building had been built in stages, as the new organisation was able to find the necessary funds.

Ela Bhatt and the well-educated and uneducated women who have since joined her at SEWA have inscribed the history of SEWA onto the history of Ahmedabad. The explicit connection between SEWA and a "Gandhian" approach to social reform reflects the position of Ela Bhatt. She is a Gandhian herself, and considers SEWA to be a

Gandhian organisation.[20] She is responsible for making the theoretical connections between the negative effects of industrialisation on the poor, and the need for an holistic approach to problems, beginning with and returning to economic factors, but also affecting every other realm of social life.

Gandhi is, to Ela Bhatt and some, although not all, of the other organisers at SEWA, an exemplar of efforts to reconstruct social systems which were destroyed by British colonialism and by industrialisation. They do not imagine that 'village republics' will rise again, or that the effects of industrialisation will be abolished. They do, however, argue that the foundation of a re-vision of the present is to be found in beginning with those people who are most disadvantaged, and in re-establishing some of the economic activities which existed earlier, insofar as that is a practical thing to do.

The Pratna Hall.

The quietest room in the SEWA Reception Centre is the *pratna* (prayer) hall, the large room at the top of the stairs. This is the place where the Muslim women from the blockprinters' co-operative come to say their prayers during the working day. The fact that they can come here to pray is another example of SEWA being a safe place to be. They come when the room is empty and when there is a meeting going on. In the latter case non-Muslims simply make room for them.

The SEWA working day officially begins in the *pratna* hall at 11:00 am, with those women who have been able to reach work on time. The day begins with the recitation of Hindu and Muslim prayers, the National anthem, and some other songs and a few minutes of physical 'exercising', the latter more a matter of amusement than anything serious, the times I attended. Attendance is not compulsory, but it is encouraged. This gathering is mostly intended for the women who work at the Reception Centre (*i.e.*: self-employed

[20]This is evident from a number of statements she has made in published essays (e.g., in Borden, 1989) and in unpublished SEWA documents. Some of the latter are listed in the Bibliography and are in my possession.

members are not expected to attend, but are welcomed if they happen to be there). Getting to work on time was also encouraged, but it is recognised that this is a complicated matter. When I first arrived, I was dismayed by the fact that things seemed to take so long to get started, but it was part of my acculturation to realise the amount of work women had to do, before going out to work. Although most of the office workers are middle-class women, their day begins at about 5:30 or 6:00 a.m., when they rise to collect the water that runs in Ahmedabad taps for an hour or so in the morning. They must then heat water for baths, cook the lunchtime meal and put it in tiffins for everyone, cook breakfast for the children and get them off to school, have their own bath, cook breakfast and do the day's laundry. By about 10:30 a.m., these women have been working for 3-4 hours, and are ready to go to work, by rickshaw, bus or perhaps on the back of a moped, if a husband is going in the same direction. Since bus service is not altogether reliable and since some women travel great distances in a day to get to work, it is not surprising that many of them do not arrive at the *pratna* hall in time for the morning programme. For some, of course, not attending has to do with other factors: religious ceremonies are domestic matters, for some, and schedules often do not permit attendance. The self-employed women's days begin equally early, and many of them to whom I talked were at work in the early hours of the day, whether they worked at home, or roamed the streets looking for paper.

The *pratna* hall is a place where people come together for meetings, small and large, formal and informal. I attended numerous meetings, of several kinds, while I was there. Some were held to inform visitors about the organisation: the verbal equivalent of reading a report, I came to think, as those meetings seemed to be the expression of unchallenged and rhetorical opinions about SEWA. An organiser would outline SEWA's accomplishments and answer questions, then, sometimes, the self-employed women would be encouraged to speak up about their involvement in SEWA. I was invited to some of these meetings, requested and granted permission to attend others, and discouraged from attending those meetings in which the subject matter was confidential.

Distinguished visitors to SEWA are taken to the *pratna* hall to meet with the organisers and members. Mary Robinson, the President of Ireland, was the visitor with the highest profile while I was there. Danuta Walesa, wife of the President of Poland, came to the SEWA Reception Centre while her husband was discussing commercial matters with the Ahmedabad Chamber of Commerce. Flora MacDonald, a former Canadian Cabinet Minister, came to SEWA because she was making a television program about aid and development. Apart from meeting Flora MacDonald, I was never allowed to be present while these distinguished visitors were at SEWA. The refusals were framed as a matter of security and of the limited space in the building being reserved for SEWA members. I did, however, see SEWA history in the making (albeit after the making) on video, because the video unit had captured every step of these visitors' journeys through the building.

Most of the meetings I attended were about serious matters: problems with traders and with supplies of raw materials, the harassment of vegetable vendors by the police, the need to persuade a government official that something needed to be done. I was invited to a celebration of Ela Bhatt's birthday, a *festschrift*, so to speak, in which women sang songs, recited poems, and told of meeting Elaben for the first time. That particular meeting was also a painful occasion for some members: I learned later that day that the husband of one of the high-ranking organisers had died that morning.

At the very last meeting I attended in the *pratna* hall, new links in SEWA's international connections were being forged. A trade union organiser from South Africa had come to SEWA with the intention of establishing a similar organisation in Durban and she later invited and paid for some of the SEWA women to go to South Africa. The women I talked to were pleased to be able to make the connections between Gandhi's early involvement in the Indian national movement in South Africa and this proposed effort to take SEWA's experience into that country. The head of the SEWA union and some of her colleagues were slated to make that journey.

The Purple Couch

Gaining the approval from the Executive Committee to do this research was only the initial level of approval. Rather like getting a passport or a visa, it allowed me legitimate entry, but it was up to me to chart the rest of my course. It was necessary to explain my purpose again and again, when requesting permission to attend a particular meeting or to go somewhere: not an unreasonable thing, and something I managed to perfect and to adapt to particular circumstances.

My proposed methodology, so eloquently and academically articulated on paper, (I believe Gold [1988] calls this pre-meditation) was quickly reduced to the maxim of accepting every opportunity to accompany someone somewhere, to accept every offer of hospitality, to visit every office in the cluster of buildings that constitute the Reception Centre, and to wait on a purple couch in the Reception area, for events to happen. This reception area was the place where the majority of people coming to work or to attend a meeting would arrive.

For the most part, the contacts I made and the networks I became familiar with were built more on personal than on 'institutional', connections. I did, eventually, go from being an apparition at the Reception Centre, an object of some amazement and occasional fear to being, if not invisible, then far less of an oddity, and a person. At first, I was required to tell everyone my life story: to account for how my husband could have let me go so far from home, and who was looking after him and our son while I was gone. I was asked to tell as many details as possible about my family. Only one child? Well, at least he was a boy, and I could have more, they consoled me. They wanted to know my age, and to know how I could be less than old if my hair was that colour. They were surprised and sympathetic when I told them I, too, had had to leave school when I was young. They were surprised because they had absorbed the stereotype of foreigners as privileged. They wanted to know my salary, which was a source of embarrassment to me, since one of the women knew that dollars were worth a great deal more in India than they were in

'America', and she also knew that my scholarship, which included airfare to India, was worth the same amount as the cost of her new house. They wanted to know things about my country and wondered how people could live in such a cold place as I described. They were interested in what I had seen of other parts of India. They especially wanted to know if I had been to some of the Hindu temples they knew of such as the one at Madurai. They also wanted to know the amount of rent I paid in Ahmedabad. They wanted to know what I ate in Canada and in India and whether I enjoyed their food, whether I ate meat and what the food was like in Canada. They wanted to know how we cooked food and where we got it and whether people in Canada ate *chapatties* (flat bread) and *dal bhatt.*[21] When we talked about religion I found it easier, for the most part, to agree to being a *Christi* than to try to explain or defend agnosticism. I could hardly complain about this desire for information, since I wanted their attention and similar information from them. On occasion, the people who knew me best would deflect these questions, or answer them on my behalf.

It was even possible, eventually, to become a fixture on that purple couch, where the SEWA women who became friends would teach me the Gujarati word for something, watch me write notes, inquire about the price of my clothes and show bemused sympathy for my taste for plain garments. They would laugh at my face which was often scarlet with the heat, or be concerned when my limbs were corduroyed with mosquito bites, and share their problems and concerns with me. Those concerns usually involved an illness, a husband's or a son's unemployment, the constant lack of ready cash and their efforts to find "a suitable boy" for a daughter. They would commiserate with my occasional loneliness, advise me how best to travel somewhere, when it was or was not safe to move around and how to get places by bus. They also told me when meetings were to be held, so I would know to request permission to attend. In time, I also learned to overcome my

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[21] *Dal bhatt* is a Gujarati dish consisting of lentils and cooked rice. *Dal bhatt* is the central part of a Gujarati meal and is usually accompanied by several cooked vegetables, yoghurt, sweets and a number of condiments. For the very poor, however, *dal bhatt* is an entire meal.

natural reticence and to offer information about what seemed to me the simplest and sometimes personal matters. Once, I was telling some of these friends that I had some peculiar and painful swellings under my arms. They knew right away what the problem was, and the next day one of them produced a tube of ointment from the free dispensary at the hospital, to kill the lice they thought I had.

One aspect of finding common ground with people requires accumulating a history of experience with them. Journeying around together was one aspect of our finding common ground with each other. I went to temples in Ahmedabad and other cities, to weddings and funerals, to workplaces and of course to homes. Sharing life-stories, as distinct from collecting them, is also an aspect of finding commonality. Those women were astonished that I had been forced to leave school before completing high school, and had worked in factories and supported a husband and child for many years.

At first, it seemed that nothing was private, that everybody had to know everything about everyone, including me, and of course it is the case that information about work and friends and situations in other parts of the city is passed around orally amongst people who have no telephones, who cannot read and who cross the city from numerous points of origin to attend meetings at the Reception Centre.

Spending time on that purple couch in the Reception Centre provided many examples of the interactions between organisers and members: I recall the imperious order "go now ... go" emitted by an impatient organiser when a consultation in her office had turned to bickering. I saw a high-caste organiser paying dutiful attention to the story being told to her by a Muslim woman. I observed and heard the sceptical reception by a Hindu organiser of an account of the difficulties which had prevented a Muslim woman from keeping the records of a child-care centre up to date. I saw the cheerful and respectful attention of two high ranking women as they greeted new SEWA members who had come to the Reception Centre for the first time. Within the walls of the SEWA Reception Centre these events were as commonplace as dust in the air yet they were, so far as my

experience went, quite extraordinary in a social system in which low caste and/or very poor women, do not typically converse with those 'above' them on such terms.

Perhaps anthropologists sound authoritative in their texts as a kind of compensation for the psychological stress which arises from being entirely dependent on others to keep appointments, answer questions and engage in the issues one wants to raise, while doing fieldwork. One of the factors which affects the fieldwork experience is one's 'position' and status as a researcher. The fact of my being alone, and not a representative of a union, or another NGO, or a government body, or a 'donor' with a mandate to account for donated resources, had some effect on my psychological well-being and on the progress of my study. Being alone in the field has its own salience. It can mean having no-one who understands that everything is strange, or what one's points of comparison are. For me, it meant, to cite a rather unhappy example, having no-one who would understand why I was shocked that the sweet little daughter of my paid hosts had been trained to throw stones at the beggars who followed me home. My hostess would put food aside for the cows, and for the servant who came every evening to clean the cooking vessels, but not for the children or for the women who lived in the hovels around the corner and who came chanting a plaintive request for food every evening.

A polite fiction operated from the beginning to the end of my stay at SEWA. This was the perception that I was under the wing of one of the highly-placed organisers, who was therefore responsible for me. The practical reality of our relationship, however, was that she was far too busy with the work of the organisation and usually not desirous of having a persistent questioner at her side. This organiser theorised the situation of the self-employed women in the terms one finds within much of the literature on 'women and development'. It is also the case the practical and pressing problems are always on the agenda for her and for others in her position. I was impressed by her ability to keep track of the numerous and varied problems she was required to address. She was responsible for all the artisan co-operatives run by SEWA, the Design Library, the State of Gujarat Co-

operative Federation and the three stores which SEWA runs. (All of these are discussed later in the text.)

We worked within what I have called a polite fiction however and she inquired periodically how I was doing and made appointments she sometimes could not keep. She called on me to contribute to her own labours when I could, asking me, for example, to use my experience as a technical writer and academic to help craft reports. I always did, hoping that this would serve as some sort of reciprocity. The relationship was analogous to fictive kinship and was useful because through it I came to know people and their job categories, backgrounds and professional concerns, and gained insights into the structure of the organisation. The relationship allowed me to pursue my investigation of a textile co-operative, and to come to understand how the various co-operatives were connected with each other.

This organiser is warm-hearted and generous, deeply committed to SEWA and its numerous activities. Just as Ela Bhatt and some of the other original SEWA members are exemplars of a Gandhian approach, she is an exemplar of a different conceptualisation and style of organising the self-employed. She is responsible, so far as I know, for applying the term 'entrepreneur' to the self-employed, and for ensuring that their work is acknowledged as *being* entrepreneurial: that is to say, that the work is an exact analogue of what an independent shopkeeper, for instance, would do. She brings an artistic flair to everything she does and enjoys the challenge of creative effort. She 'stages' events, such as the boisterous and poetic birthday celebration for Ela Bhatt. At the Annual General Meeting, the artisan co-operatives for whose economic performance she is responsible performed their annual reports with music and dance, rather than reciting them as the others did.

This woman is responsible for a number of the co-operatives which flourish in connection with the Design Library, an institution I discuss in Chapter 5. She is also a former President of the SEWA Bank, and is currently the President of the Gujarat Women's Co-operative Federation. This Federation is a government agency, but this

woman's capacity for organising co-operatives and making them successful, *and* SEWA's expertise in gathering data have led to her being given that post, in another example of SEWA's experience and success being utilised by the Government.

Observant Participation

Participant-observation has its own ethical, existential and intellectual perils. My journey from observer to participant was halting at first, but a little easier with every passing day. I could never be sure what my next role(s) would be, as I moved between being an anthropologist eager for information, a teacher of English in the homes of some of the co-operative members I got to know well, a guest in the homes of SEWA members and organisers, a family member and an exotic foreigner. Once, I agreed to someone's insistent "come, we will go" and found that we were going to a *Navrattri* celebration[22] in a hall near the Reception Centre. The room was full of women from the paper-pickers' co-operative, circling the room doing 'garba' (a dance involving clapping sticks together and complicated steps- all in the intense heat) in their best clothes. My protestations were futile: I must learn to dance, because that was how I would become a Gujarati, they said. The elderly women whom I had come to know from spending time at the Reception Centre were dancing sedately; the younger married women with more abandon. The children and unmarried women danced with their elder sisters, mothers and 'aunties', but also danced in a group by themselves. When they did, the women's *bhajans* (religious

[22]*Navrattri* (nine nights) is a Hindu/Gujarati fertility festival. Celebrated in the villages and in the cities, it takes place in October, when the rains have ended and the fields are ready for sowing. Grain seeds are sprouted in a pot of soil which is placed in the family's shrine or placed on the floor and surrounded by icons. In the homes of the poorer women I knew, calendars depicting deities were used to surround the pot of soil. The fertilising is accompanied by *pujas*, visits to the *mandirs* (temples) and by daily prayers. The social manifestation of *navrattri* involves dancing every night for nine nights in a dance form called *garba*. *Garba* is danced by women and men, who dance in separate circles. Both men and women carry two sticks which they knock together in alternation with clapping. Everyone wears their finest clothes and jewellery for *navrattri*. I danced with people in the poorer parts of the city, where women sang *bhajans* and played drums to accompany the dancers. I also attended a session which took up several blocks of a four-lane roadway and was accompanied by political speeches in favour of *dalits*. There, the music was popular *filmi* songs. Another site for *garba* is the 'party plot'. A phenomenon of suburban Ahmedabad, a party plot is an empty grassed space which sometimes has a beautifully embroidered cloth overhead. Refreshments are sold from a booth on the site. Middle-class Ahmedabadis also rent these party plots for weddings. One buys tickets to these party plot events to cover the cost of the rental and the hiring of a professional singer.

songs) were replaced by raucous film music, blasted into the hot room from a two-in-one (cassette player). The event had been organised by SEWA, I learned, and each woman present was to be gifted a small stainless steel bowl. When I understood that I was supposed to participate in the distribution of stainless steel bowls that SEWA had purchased, I was uncomfortable, because it seemed to grant me a status I did not want, and the deference the paper-picker women were required to show, in the Reception Centre, was suddenly directed my way. I was a foreigner and a guest and both of those roles carried obligations.

Participant observation and observant participation meant not only spending time with co-operative members, but also discussing development theories and the situations of working women in North America with organisers. It also meant giving a workshop on proposal writing to a number of co-operative organisers. This latter activity gave me the opportunity to learn something about the ways in which middle-level organisers, in this case the administrators of artisan-based activities, conceptualised their work and the efforts they made to get government funding for various projects.

In people's homes, it was difficult to break through the 'barrier' of being a guest and being given the only chair, or being fed first and watched while I ate or being invited to sit with the men on occasion. At first, of course, I hardly knew how to be a guest. Food was always a problem, because I could never eat enough to satisfy my hosts and I fretted that I was consuming scarce resources, or that people had spent money they would otherwise have not, but nor could I override their sense of obligation to a guest. Abstractions about reciprocity became urgent realities, as I tried to find appropriate things to take along. I usually took tea or coffee, or *mithai* (sweets) "for the children", explaining that that was what Canadians did when they visited each other. I could not, of course, take items that subverted the role of 'guest', although it was hard to know what that meant at first. Eventually, I learned a little better how to reciprocate, as we became personalities rather than sociological categories to each other. Photographs were a very popular gift,

and a great deal of my research budget was spent in the 'Lazor Photo Lab'. I was inspired to buy small tins of Amul *ghee*[23] on special occasions, and this was a most welcome gift.

Ambaben. An instance of my discomfort with being there and being 'other' remains in my mind as exemplifying my ambivalence about empathy and presence and participation. It was an extraordinary event, but nevertheless an intensive illustration of more ordinary discomforts. I am sitting on my knees in the stone doorway of a small two-roomed house in a crowded *chawl* (a one-storey tenement). Another woman sits beside me on the small stone threshold and we block the light that is rarely willing to enter these rooms. It is hot and nearly dark indoors, despite being only one o'clock in the afternoon. The room is full of keening women, some of whom I have come to know by sight. They are women I have visited in their homes, drunk tea with, rattled on 'semi-luxury' buses on local pilgrimages with, women I have seen dusting the desks of the government *sahibs* in Gandhinagar, women who are now absorbed in the cultural forms of grieving for a friend. On the only piece of furniture in the room lies the still body of Ambaben. She is dead. Her rough skin is darkened by years of labour in the hot sun, her grey hair pulled back as she has always worn it. No contestations over public or private spheres for her, a woman married to a mill-worker, or later in life a widow. If she did not work, she and her daughter and her beloved grandson did not eat. Her work was picking up any re-useable paper and plastic that she could sell to the wholesaler. She travelled miles in a day, and, like the other paper-pickers, was inured to hardship and worn out by it. Ambaben had been a leader, along with Laxmiben, of the paper-pickers' co-operative. They had got on so well with each other because both were very strong, although, in my limited experience of her, it was Ambaben who had been more willing to placate and to speak quietly.

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[23]Amul is the name of an extremely successful co-operative dairy enterprise in Gujarat. *Ghee* is clarified butter which is used in food and can also be offered to the deities.

She had always taken my hand when we had met at SEWA, welcoming me and seeming to approve of my presence, somehow. Or so I needed to think, when I picked her face out of the crowds at SEWA. I have been a guest in her home, a room across the way from where we now sit, up a flight of stairs that seemed to be made of metal cobwebs. She must have climbed those steps many times, carrying water, babies, paper, as a young bride. When I went to visit her she fed me and gave me a picture of *Krishna* as a child.

I am an alien presence in the room, my foreign-ness overlaying my sympathy. All of my anxieties about intruding, all of my mixed feelings about the ethics of doing this work, all of the dilemmas of 'participant-observation' which have been academic and intellectual until now are suddenly my garments, the flesh on my bones. I embody the intruder. I am appalled that I am here, not knowing what to do, how to be, how to show my sorrow, how to acknowledge the people I know, who are alternately weeping and sitting silently. I notice things that indicate grief. Some women have torn their clothes, and loosened their hair and no-one wears the vermilion *tikka*.[24] I worry that I am sitting in the wrong place, because I have dropped to the ground when I entered the room and now I realise that I am probably taking a special place at Ambaben's head.

When I am able to look around, I see people I recognise, whom I want to comfort, but cannot because it seems so invasive and presumptuous. The shock gives way to sadness, and I am finally able to weep. For Ambaben, for her daughter who sits holding the grandson her mother had loved and for the other leader of the paper-pickers who is bereft now of Ambaben's company and strength and distraught as I have never seen her.

I am here because I had been sitting on a couch in the Reception Centre, waiting for something to happen. A woman with whom I had journeyed on a training session in a rural area had asked me only an hour ago, in her direct way, whether I had known Ambaben. Put that way, it was obvious that something had happened. Ambaben had died

[24]This is the powdered vermilion mixed with water that a married Hindu woman applies to the centre of her forehead or to the part in her hair after the morning *puja* (worship). It is an auspicious mark. I was told by some friends that "nothing would happen to me" if I wore it.

early that morning, most likely a victim of what would become a hepatitis epidemic in which hundreds of people would die, victims of the poor sanitation coupled with lifetimes of poor nutrition and cursory care in a public hospital. There was some confusion about how to travel to Ambaben's house from SEWA. Would the jeep be going? Were people going in rickshaws?

The last time I had seen Ambaben, I had had the vertiginous experience of seeing other 'foreigners', two Finnish journalists, as both like myself and truly foreign. They had come to Ahmedabad to see SEWA members' living and working conditions for a photo essay about "the Third World poor". Two of the paper-pickers, one of them Ambaben, had been assigned by the leader of the paper-pickers to help them find the photographs and stories they needed. I was invited at the last minute to accompany them, because the journalists spoke English and I spoke some Gujarati, and because the two paper-pickers and I knew each other and because the paper-pickers wanted an interpreter so that their questions could be answered. Their desire for knowledge about foreigners was endless, and they were delighted to have an opportunity to have some of their questions answered directly. Laxmiben, especially, was fascinated by the fact that the woman had a prestigious job, and was educated and independent, and travelling around as an equal, a professional, with her husband. She spoke of her as "strong", and it was clear that Laxmiben admired her.

When we all climbed into the SEWA jeep, however, I saw that Ambaben and the other woman were shocked by the casual clothing they wore and by the ease with which they interacted with each other. The journalists were carrying what must have been a thousand dollar's worth of camera equipment with them, to photograph 'the poor'. The SEWA women and I might as well have been camels, for all the care they took to acknowledge us. It soon became apparent that the journalists were looking for the most dire and degrading situations they could find for their photographs. Ambaben and her co-leader directed the driver to *Vadaj*, an extremely poor area close to the Sabarmati Ashram

and nowhere near their own neighbourhoods. We went to the home of a woman who was sorting paper, and had to climb over hillocks of refuse to reach the door of her house. The Finns refused water and tea automatically, but accepted a "cold drink" costing Rs 6 each, which the SEWA women bought. They seemed to take it as their right to ask these people about their income. They took some photographs there, taking care to pose people next to the refuse. Next we went to the *godown* (warehouse) where the Gandhinagar paper-pickers dumped and sorted the paper they collected from the government offices. Here, too, the journalists condescended to sit in the only chairs, and to drink another 'cold drink', with no offer of reciprocation. The SEWA women asked me to ask the Finns to take their photograph, which I did. We were all surprised when they refused, and I was extremely embarrassed by their refusal. When I pointed out that these women had given up their afternoon to show them around, and that they would treasure a photograph, I was informed that the journalists did not "buy favours" or give copies of pictures to people, since they were engaged in an economic enterprise and it would reduce their income to do so. When I told the SEWA women they shrugged and said nothing.

The final indignity, to my mind, was that the journalists wanted still more photographs, and asked that we now move on. Laxmiben and Ambaben directed the driver to an area near a wholesale cloth market, where they could find handcart pullers. Not content with any handcart pullers, the journalists turned down the opportunity to photograph wife and husband teams, fathers and sons, mothers and sons, waiting until they could find two women pulling a heavily-laden handcart, then 'bagging' their prize photograph. We then drove them to their hotel, were not invited in, and said goodbye.

Interviewing and Its Discontents

The term "interview" is comprised of two parts. 'Inter' means across or between, and to 'view' means to see or to reveal. An interview, then, is a 'seeing across': across cultural boundaries, across systems of meaning and practice that define us culturally,

across educational levels, across kinds of experience, across world-views, across notions of family structure, across protocols, across social systems which define the appropriateness of kinds of behaviours and understandings of the ways in which the world works, across notions of reciprocity, and across linguistic conventions, to mention only the most obvious.

You see, you are seen: people learn something about you, as you learn something about them and of course they are sometimes as incompletely-informed as you are, in a way which brings to mind Geertz's comment that "what we call our [anthropological] data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (Geertz 1988).

I found that interviews, discussions, arguments, explanations and confusions of what I thought I understood could happen any time, anywhere: on the bus, in rickshaws, in *galis* and *chawls*, walking from one house to another. The formal, sit down and write it down interviews were sometimes the least satisfying ways of gathering information, as there would be a constraining formality to those events. The fact that some of the women at SEWA have had experience in talking to the foreigners who come there had an effect on some of the interviews I conducted with them. Some of the women who were experienced in this way would pick up my tape recorder and speak into it confidently, although other women were far more reserved. This 'experience' also had an influence on their expectations of 'foreigners'. Being comfortable with being interviewed meant, for a few of the women I met, that there was a 'practiced' quality to their responses. With very little prompting they would begin to describe the first time they met *Elaben* (Ela Bhatt), the resistance of their family members to their membership, and their satisfaction with their membership in SEWA. I do not mean to suggest that these were not genuine positions, but it was clear from interviewing some of those women that they were representing SEWA, and so were responsible for contributing to the good name of the organisation, when they spoke to visitors. With some other people there was an impetus to conceal

details, to be vague about what they were up to, or give polite and meaningless answers to the intruding questioner. For these formal interviews, most of which took place in the *pratna* hall, I used a notebook. The Reception Centre is located in an extremely noisy part of the city, and it was sometimes all but impossible to hear the quiet-spoken responses of the women over the ambient noise. Raising our voices altered the nature of our exchange, especially if they wanted to tell me something which countered the cheerful accounts of improvements in their situations.

Not enough attention is paid to the fact that fieldwork is written in the body of the researcher: a great deal of attention had been paid to 'the gaze' of the observer, but less to the aural nature of information that must be taken in linguistically, as one strains to hear someone who has been conditioned to speak quietly and is accustomed to the noise level, and trying to hear over the clamour of the traffic.

This 'experience' with other foreigners also had one or two repercussions which made me think that previous visitors had offered cash or some kind of 'aid' or payment to the women they were talking to. I was, for instance, directed to send any donation I might wish to make, directly to the co-op members, rather than to the organisation. Since I never made the suggestion, I had to think that previous visitors had done so. It was sometimes difficult to know how to respond to these 'suggestions', as some of the women were evidently extremely poor. I did not have the economic resources which I assume other researchers had had, so could not promise or deliver any 'aid' of a substantial nature. I compromised, so to speak, by trying to ascertain immediate needs, and meeting those when I could.

Any number of factors contributed to the nature of the interviews, in addition to the characteristics of assistants and my own knowledge. Some of the people I spoke to were politically sophisticated, and articulate, regardless of education levels; others were beaten down by a system that has placed them at the bottom of a hierarchy. With some people I set out to 'interview', I could do no more than share in their despair. This was the

case with two members of the paper-picker's co-operative, both elderly women whose economic and personal difficulties seemed overwhelming. One term they taught me to understand was *dukh* (sorrow, unhappiness). With others, however, it was possible to discuss ideas and experiences in a more detached and analytical manner.

Motivations for talking to me varied, in that some people had stories about how something *really* worked, as opposed to what was commonly thought, or how someone had been wronged, or had benefitted from an activity or a programme or the intervention of an organiser.

Outsiderness is a complex issue, and there are degrees and kinds of 'outsiderness', as there are degrees and kinds of understanding[25]. Some of these are obvious: clearly I was an outsider trying to understand the implications of membership for the women I was talking to. Other kinds of outsiderness are more subtle, and connected with one's sympathies, no matter how 'objective' one tries to be. I found that I could relate analytically to the economic issues of development and efforts to improve things, with the high-ranking organisers, since I had an academic understanding of the development issues they were dealing with. My sense of the time it might take for structural improvements to occur was similar to that of the organisers, for example, while the self-employed women needed improvements in their economic situation to come about as immediately as possible. I was also aware of the dilemma which existed, between the goals of the organisation, and the reasons which had motivated some of the self-employed women to join. These are, I suppose inevitably, conflicting goals: SEWA wants to increase the base of its membership and the reach of its international affiliations: some of the very poor women see their own situation as being unchanged, while 'SEWA' prospers. More than once, I was entrusted with this opinion by a self-employed member, who would indicate

[25]Caplan (1994) discusses her experience with a middle-class women's organisation doing 'social work' in Madras. She found that she could 'relate' to their position as women intent on doing 'good work', but that her own political sympathies lay in other directions from those of the women. She was 'studying up', with respect to most of the members of the organisation. I was also 'studying up' with respect to the high-ranking SEWA organisers, all of whom are well-off economically, highly educated, and married to men in powerful positions.

that I should move closer, while she dropped her voice and looked around carefully to see if anyone else was listening. Most often, the 'accusation' which followed concerned the use of foreign funds that were being contributed to SEWA. The women who said this to me pointed out what must have been 'obvious' to them: SEWA organisers travelled around the world to attend meetings, the SEWA Reception Centre had been expanded several times; there was a new bank building, there were more jeeps and rickshaws in the parking area, and the funds for these expansionary activities came from the foreign funds which were donated to SEWA. Wherever the money came from, however, their own situations remained unchanged as they saw it. They were still earning very little money, or were further in debt than they had been, despite years of belonging to SEWA. Some of the women thought that it was their membership fees which paid for these things.

Interpreters

The relationship between interpreters, 'informants' and the anthropologist's inquiring self is one of those issues common to any research endeavor, in which one lacks linguistic ability. Nita Kumar describes her pleasure and relief in finally finding a research assistant who was capable of understanding her purpose and willing to aid her in her study of artisans in Banaras. I never found the equivalent of the person she describes as the "eloquent interpreter of my project" (1992:164). I thought that it would be like finally having enough to eat after a long hungry day, or perhaps like entering a state of grace after a long and comfortless stretch of existentialism, to find a research assistant or interpreter who could understand my purpose and provide the kind of help I required. I would think that if only I could find the right person, all that I could see would become comprehensible in a different way. Some of this understanding did come about, but never to the extent I would have wished.

I began from the assumption that I had to find a female interpreter because a man could hardly gain entry to the homes of the women during the day while their husbands

were not present, or talk comfortably to women, or even be quite comfortable enough in the all-female environment at the Reception Centre. SEWA had a few interpreters in its register, but no-one who could become a full-time or even regular assistant. My arduous efforts to find someone (asking everyone I knew, putting an advertisement in the *Times of India*, asking at the *Gujarat Vidyapeeth*) were only partially successful. I found, however, that Berreman's insights (Berreman 1962) about the impact of a research assistant on the research were given specific and profound salience. As my Gujarati improved I was less dependent on interpreters, although my understanding always outstripped my ability to speak. Much of the time I relied on what one friend called 'tutti-frutti' Gujarati, and the fact that some people *i.e.* neighbours, passers-by and people at bus stops spoke some English, and often offered to help. I bought Gujarati-English dictionaries for those of my co-operative member friends who could read, and would then be able to find the word I wanted in English, then read the Gujarati aloud, or show the book to someone. So our conversations, our understandings across boundaries, proceeded and the art of 'seeing' took on multiplex meanings.

Twice, I was fortunate to have an assistant for a few consecutive weeks. Both assistants were extremely helpful and interested in my efforts to learn things, and were able to come with me as I moved about the city. Both were very young and were willing to go anywhere with me so long as their families gave permission. They belonged to different communities and social *strata* and had different personalities. All of these factors influenced the nature of our shared experiences.

Both were sensitive to the need for confidentiality, although for Mary (whose first name and surname name identified her as a Christian), this was something to be learned, since she was accustomed to reporting everything to her mother. Confidentiality was always important, but especially so when it came to women who were dissatisfied with and critical of SEWA. (There were some allegations of personal corruption and dishonesty, for instance.) She was the daughter of a woman who worked at SEWA, but

had herself never spent any time there. Convent-educated, she had finished high school and was waiting to begin college. Her family were conservative and Christian. She was flexible and unassuming, willing to go anywhere, and to learn what was required. In the very beginning, she and I both had to overcome our cultural inhibitions concerning discursive styles (for example, about asking penetrating questions, probing for further details, engaging in dialogue with the women we were interviewing). Some of this had to do with her youth. Young women in India do not 'interrogate' their elders, or press them for details. She had a strong sense of responsibility, and this was her first job. I made her nervous at first, unwittingly, but we did eventually relax with each other's roles.

The other woman, Meenakshi, had finished college and was a very 'modern' Brahmin woman. She was far more relaxed with me from the beginning. She was very sensitive and able to tell me when my questions were inappropriate, and to re-phrase my questions appropriately, whereas Mary would suffer with embarrassment and try to translate literally, at least in the beginning.

I was sometimes worried by the degree of responsibility that I felt for them, in going all over the city with these young women, and was occasionally constrained by the fact of their youth, and my need to 'protect' them. They, of course, had in common with each other the knowledge of their own competence, and a sense of the adventure of 'roaming about' with a foreign *bhen* (sister)[26]. I was grateful to both of them for their ease

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[26] *Bhen* is the Gujarati term for sister. *Bhen* is used by women and men when addressing married women of approximately the same age. Adult men of one's own age are referred to as *bhai* (brother). The term *bhen* is appended to a woman's given (rather than familial) name. A woman's full name will be comprised of her given name, the term *bhen*, her husband's given name and the term *bhai* and the family surname which is that of the husband. Thus, in the name Indiraben Nagarbhai Rathod, Indira is the woman's given name, *bhen* is the term for sister, Nagar is her husband's given name to which *bhai* is appended and Rathod is the surname. *Bhen* is a general term, as distinct from the more-specific *didi* (elder sister). A woman who is older might be referred to with *ma* instead of *ben* appended to her given name, so we might expect Palima Jivanbhai Jadav to be older than Pushpaben Shivrambhai Jadav. The use of *bhen* is one of several possible social referents. Some Muslim women at SEWA use *bhen,* as in Fatmabhen Mahamad-Usman (a member of the SEWA Executive Committee in 1992) and *bibi*, as in Sairabibi Abdulkadar (also a member of the Executive Committee). *Bhen* is attached to almost everyone's name at SEWA as part of SEWA's effort to dispense with hierarchy between and amongst members and organisers. The term is also added to the names of non-Gujaratis. I was called *Ginnyben* by the women I knew best, who seemed to find Virginia a peculiar name. This did not seem to be a matter of difficulty in pronunciation, since I met SEWA members named Vibhuti and Vibhavana.

in any situation. They came with me to the poorest homes, never literally or metaphorically drawing aside their skirts, as some of the other people I met did. Meenakshi was as exotic to some of the SEWA members as I was, with her short hair, no *bindi*, and wearing a blouse and skirt or jeans. It was revealing to hear, one day, that she had been asked by a SEWA organiser why she did not wear a *salwar kameez* when she came to SEWA, which she took as a disparaging reference to her choice of clothing.

It is tempting, after the fact, to downplay the difficulties caused by lack of understanding, but reflexivity surely requires one to examine the reasons for the obstacles. In my experience, some of these obstacles concerned the fact that my 'informants' had strong preferences and prejudices. This was in fact a much more complicated matter than I first realised, but it took me a long time to realise the implications of some of the signals I had received but not recognised and to piece together a plausible explanation. For instance, the husband of one of the women I knew was jealous of the fact that his wife was the recipient of attention by SEWA. He wanted to control his wife, the co-operative she belonged to, and the interactions between his wife, the co-op members and myself. (This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.)

Another illuminating difficulty began with what seemed a positive thing: I was very pleased to be introduced by my Gujarati teacher to a woman whose English was extremely good, and who had no connection with SEWA, but was interested in the possibility of doing some voluntary work there. I thought that some of the difficulties to do with the youth of my assistants would be solved, since Madhu was middle-aged, unmarried and had lived in the US for a while, all of which I naively took to mean that she would be independent and open-minded. However, she was almost as constrained in her freedom to move about as the younger women were, because of her father. She came to one of the weaver's homes with me. I had carefully explained where I was going, and she had agreed to come, but she was not comfortable when we reached our destination, and I found myself more of an outsider with her present than if I had been alone. I understood, with

dismay, some aspects of the problem immediately: she refused water (an automatic gesture of hospitality) and tea and biscuits. When we were leaving the home of some members of a weaving co-operative, to all travel together back to the Reception Centre, I had recognised the activities that signalled departure: another cup of tea, changing clothes, and re-applying vermilion. I knew that the family were "ready" to go. I was surprised when Madhu said something which she would not translate, and the woman (Parvathi) returned to the other room to change her *sari*. When I inquired again, Madhu said that she had 'told' Parvathi to change her clothes, deeming her too shabbily dressed to go outside.

When I went back the next day, alone, I was told that Madhu was not welcome, that she was "too big" as they put it. This was more symbolic than literal, although she did take up a lot of space in that small room. It turned out that she carried many middle-class preconceptions and negative stereotypes about 'the poor' and the lower-caste and thought that the family members should be grateful to SEWA for anything that came their way, rather than being critical of an aspect of it in our conversation. When I pressed them for more details, the explanation given was put in terms of relating the caste system in India to apartheid in South Africa. Madhu was a Brahmin and her refusal of water and food and her superior manner, had offended the family. I tried to suggest that she could be made to understand the problem, and perhaps learn something from the experience, but to no avail. Much later, when I learned about this family's opposition to Brahmin oppression of the 'lower' castes, and their claim to be Kshatriyas, I was able to make more sense of the problem, and to obtain some glimmering of the intricacies of 'thick description'.

Two of the potential interpreters with whom I came in contact provided rueful insights but not much useful information. One of them was also the convent-educated daughter of a woman who worked at SEWA, but she perhaps best represented the reason mothers were anxious about their daughters roaming about. My misgivings about her (*i.e.* turning up for an interview with her boyfriend) were put on hold for a time by her mother's claim that she needed the money, and by the fact that the family I was spending most of

my time with liked her. Not until later did I realise that she and one of the sons in the weaver family had come to be seen as prospective marriage partners. She was unreliable and would often not show up, and then our positions were reversed: with me arguing with the family that I could not keep her on, and they arguing that she was fine. After one episode which involved six of us waiting for her in the sun, it was mutually agreed that she would have to go.

The most unfortunate experience concerning interpreters involved a young man named Arjun. His surname (Parmar) identified him as a member of the same caste as some of the self-employed women. He was quiet, his English was good, and he was good to his grandmother, which I thought boded well. I came to know him after an extremely frustrating weekend, spent trying to convince the family of a young woman who was superbly fluent in English, to allow her to accompany me to a village, for the wedding of one of the members of the weavers' co-operative. The superbly-fluent woman, named Meena, is the cousin-sister of a woman who works at SEWA. It was an interesting, if ultimately frustrating, exercise in family negotiation and complicated, of course, by the needs of a foreigner who had been designated a friend, and whose needs they wished to meet, but not at the expense of the peace of mind of the young woman's immediate family. Hearing the arguments in favour of her going, and the articulations of how she would be allowed to go (which other female family members must go with her and who could not) and after an extended discussion, I left, better-educated in the pros and cons of family negotiations (I thought) and thinking that Meena would be coming with me. The next day at SEWA, an urgent message that Anu wanted to see me was a forewarning that our arrangement was less firm than I had thought. As with so many of the arrangements in which one urgently needs to think that the outcome will be positive (even if that requires suspension of one's own reasoning towards a conclusion) it was in fact negative. Meena's mother had simply said no, after I had left, and nothing more could be said. The disappointment was tempered by an alternate proposition. I was 'offered' Arjun, a student

of Anu's sister Veena, whose English was said to be superb. Arjun is a very sensitive and willing young man with good English, but the demands of the job were too much for him. I am left with the uncomfortable recollection of him in tears, when I tried to explain to him that I needed him to be a more active participant in the process we were engaged in. But that degree of active and informal participation was foreign to his experience and none of my efforts to change it could make it otherwise. He was also constrained by social factors that had to do with gender, class and his own position as resident of a locality, as I realised when he simply would not speak to someone I wanted to talk to (a neighbour of a SEWA member) when we met her outside his house. Only reluctantly would he tell me that she had a reputation for being 'not decent'.

Two members of SEWA co-operatives came closest to the ideal articulated by Kumar in their sensitivity to my need for information and their willingness to take me anywhere I wished to go. Although we did not have much linguistic common ground, one of these women, Parvathi, took me to the homes of all the members of the co-operatives she belonged to, and made me welcome at her home any time I wished to go. The other woman, Laxmi, incorporated me into the paper-pickers' co-operative, to the extent that that was possible with my lack of Gujarati. This meant that I went to everyone's home, spent time with them at Gandhinagar, where the paper-pickers' co-operative has an office-cleaning contract, travelled on pilgrimages with some of them, was a "tourist" with some of them on a couple of occasions, and learned about their lives, their personal and economic struggles, their investments in everyday activities, their networks of friends and SEWA members, and their histories of involvement with other people at SEWA.

As to personality and its effects on fieldwork, my perception is that mine is closely aligned with that of Gold (1988) who, in her discussion of the experience of fieldwork in a village in Rajasthan, describes frequent confusion and shyness at first, and the sense that she was not competent to carry out the study or endure the constant sense of cultural displacement, although she did in fact live with this uncertainty and continued the effort. I

also find some elements of Kumar's description of what she calls 'ethnographic emotions' apt. She calls these "indefatigable curiosity, an observable greed for explanations [and] a thick-skinned facility to withstand any discouragement in the quest for information" (1992:137).

Just before I left Ahmedabad, I met a man from Bangladesh who was doing some research in the city. He asked me whether I had gathered 'enough data' and whether I had learned 'enough' for my purposes. I found myself replying that, after a year, I felt ready to begin. As I have indicated in this chapter, the fieldwork was impeded by my inability to become fluent enough in Gujarati. I had learned a great deal of course, about how to go about making inquiries. I had learned to distinguish members of communities from each other by their dress and had made valuable connections with SEWA members within those communities. I had also learned a great deal about the structure of the organisation, so was able to trace connections between organisers, members and co-operatives. I had also been able to relate the problems of the self-employed women I had met to the context of daily life in the city. I have constructed what I was able to learn of that context of daily life in this chapter, principally in terms of the problems that the self-employed women I knew dealt with every day. These include the erratic water supply, the lack of facilities and amenities, the crowded homes, the effort required on the part of the SEWA members to get to work, to go out organising and to attend the many meetings which active participation in SEWA requires. I do not mean to suggest that these problems make up the entirety of daily life, as they clearly do not. They do, however, give depth and context to SEWA's arguments about the situations in which the self-employed women live and work.

I had also been able to understand, in that year, some of the complexities of SEWA's organisational structure, ideology and operations. In the next chapter I discuss the organisation's ideology and organisational ethos and my understanding of the terms on which SEWA constructs its ideas and practices.

We realise that through the alternatives that are emerging from our work we are also creating our own body of knowledge, and our meaning of development.

Ela Bhatt (1988:148)

CHAPTER THREE: SEWA'S APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

The establishment of alternative and contestatory development practices such as those in which SEWA is engaged requires a reconceptualisation of the social and physical aspects of the world, and a re-examination of assumptions about the existing social order. It requires those who would participate in such a re-conceptualisation to acknowledge the situatedness of their own ideas, practices and ideologies with respect to a number of sites of power and authority. It also requires them to acknowledge that disparities are cultural, rather than natural. In Eyerman's and Jamison's terms, it requires the establishment and dissemination of new kinds of knowledge.

In its efforts to establish and disseminate new kinds of knowledge, SEWA must challenge a great many existing ideas concerning women's conceptualisations of themselves and their ideas about economic and domestic relations. SEWA must also engage in the construction of a number of systematic transformations of existing ideas. In order to exist on its own terms, SEWA must construct 'itself' - which is to say its history, its members and its purpose - in terms which defy the dominant discourses and which engender the terms and the possible forms of the desired alternative. SEWA must accomplish these reconceptualisations in two directions. One is 'outward', so to speak, from the organisation and in the direction of its relations with government departments and agencies. The ultimate destination of this particular re-conceptualisation is government policies and programmes. The other direction is 'inward', in the organisation's efforts to bring about changes in the world-views of its members. I mean by

this such things as encouraging the members to think of themselves as self-employed, as entrepreneurs, as independent, and as working women who are members of a union.

This chapter discusses some of SEWA's efforts to create new knowledge, to transform prevailing and dominant conceptualisations of women and work, to construct meaning on its own terms and to represent its purpose.

The successful establishment of an organisation which is attempting to establish a reformist development alternative requires a number of things. One of these is a critique of a situation (i.e., the need for the economically-marginal women of Ahmedabad to earn a better living) and a perception of the form that an alternative might take, which is to say, the construction of a situation as problematic and the formation of proposed solutions. It requires an institutional form and an operational praxis in which and through which to disseminate whatever ideology it has constructed. It requires a medium for the message. It requires a fund of symbols, signifiers, events, actions and lore with which to represent its origins and its history, its purpose, its allies and antagonists and its prospective members. I discuss these later in this chapter as representational strategies, some of which utilise what Hayden White has referred to as the "tropics of discourse"[1]. The establishment of this kind of organisation requires an economy and an infrastructure so that what it considers to be its work can be carried out. It requires a thorough knowledge of the social and political contexts in which it operates if its representations are to be meaningful to the participants and if those representations are to carry weight and be effective. It also requires the establishment of a position with respect to the institutions of the state, as those theorists who criticise existing development discourses in India have noted, since a great deal of the dominant discourse on social change is constructed by the government agencies which control the funding for development programmes, determine development policies, and have the power to alter the political structures in which SEWA and its members operate.

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[1]Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978) discusses the use by historians of literary tropes such as metaphor, hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche and oxymoron, in their accounts and analyses of events.

If SEWA is to operate successfully it must effectively communicate and interact with numerous other participants such as government agencies, experts in various fields (fields as diversified as health care, irrigation, and accounting) and people with authority in the fields in which it wishes to engage. It may also require interaction with national and international organisations with similar purposes.

Within the organisational space which it inhabits, SEWA contributes to the construction of new practices and conceptualisations of development, which it asserts are humane, in opposition to existing models which it claims are alienating and destructive, and holistic where others fracture. Within that space, SEWA reworks the terms of such concepts as traditional and modern, governmental and non-governmental, political and apolitical, developed and undeveloped, dependent and independent, working and non-working, radical and conservative. It performs these reconceptualising activities on its own terms, insisting on its own definitions of institutions, activities and membership, and adopting, for example, the government's programmes on its own terms.

In its efforts to establish new kinds of knowledge and new solutions to the social and economic problems of its members, SEWA utilises "ideological[2] struggle which ... [which] "represents an intervention in an existing field of practices and institutions, those which sustain the dominant discourses of meaning in society" (Hall 1990:10). SEWA is engaged in a number of struggles against 'the dominant discourses of meaning" which operate within contemporary India. The term "ideological struggle" might conjure up images of political heroism, and seem more appropriate - if still undefined - when applied to the action of several thousand SEWA members marching to protest a municipality's harassment of market vendors, or "sitting *dharna*"[3] to force a government official to keep his word. The term 'ideological struggle' might seem exaggerated when matched against the sight and sound of numerous noisy 'paper-pickers' vying with each other to make a

[2]SEWA uses the term ideology in its documentation, but does so without elaboration.
[3]Fox describes this as a Brahmin practice of fasting in view of opponents, "thus making the offenders (and their souls) responsible for any ill that might befall them [the Brahmins]" (1990:49).

deposit or negotiate a loan in the SEWA bank. Nor might the claim that SEWA is engaged in ideological struggle seem congruent with the image of a small number of Muslim women sitting in a cramped and airless room, filled to the ceiling with scraps of *chindi* (a remnant of cloth) out of which they will fashion a bedsheet cum quilt called a *khol*, which costs them Rs. 5 to produce and can earn them as little as Rs 7-8 in a day. The term seems an academic hyperbole when put against the image of 20 women sorting dozens of kilos of scrap paper, bits of cardboard and used carbon paper according to size and weight, in an open-air *godown* (warehouse), or that of an illiterate woman selling a kilo or two of fruit from a piece of sacking laid on the ground. However, for the bank to exist and for those women to own and operate a workshop cum *godown* to make a profit for themselves, and for the paper and vegetable vendors to occupy that literal and metaphorical ground, what has been required on SEWA's part has been persistent and determined efforts to alter many ideas about the rights of those women, and their place in the social system, as discussed below.

My calling these "ideological" struggles is based on the definitions of ideology expressed by Geertz (1973a) and Thompson (1990). As they both note, ideology is a notoriously difficult term to use without it suggesting a political platform, typically someone else's (Geertz 1973a). Thus, ideologies seem always to belong to some adversarial 'other' or, more sinisterly, adversarial others belong to ideologies. The term is often used as an accusation of adherence to a rigid set of ideas, or to identify an ideational programme which *determines* action (Thomson 1990), or which operates as an illusion (*ibid.*). Ideology is a difficult term to employ neutrally, because the term itself has become 'ideologised' (Geertz 1973:193). "To characterize a view as 'ideological' is, it seems, already implicitly to criticize it, for the concept of ideology seems to convey a negative, critical sense" (Thompson 1990:5). It is nowadays as difficult to think of ideologies being neutral (*ibid.*), as it is to think of patriarchs being protective or 'development' unproblematic.

One thing these authors have in common is a concept of ideology as a set of symbols which operate in social contexts. Thompson has devised what he calls a "critical conception of ideology ... [which] preserves the negative connotation of the term and binds the analysis of ideology to the question of critique" (1990:6). He goes on to define ideology as "meaning in the service of power" and to argue that "the study of ideology requires us to investigate the ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds, from everyday linguistic utterances to complex images and texts; it requires us to investigate the social contexts within which symbolic forms are employed and deployed; and it calls upon us to ask, whether, and if so how, the meaning mobilized by symbolic forms serves, in specific contexts, to establish and sustain relations of domination" (1990:7). He adds (*ibid.*:8) that "symbolic forms or systems are not ideological in themselves" but whether or not they can be considered ideological depends on their "social use". Geertz is concerned, as he always is, to make a case for a better understanding of the symbolic and the figurative, and for the inclusion of cultural systems (*ibid.* p.219) in social-scientific studies of ideology. Specifically, he argues that social-scientific analyses and interpretations would be more productive if they were to consider "ideologies as systems of interacting symbols, as patterns of interworking meanings" (p.207) and to address what he calls "[T]he problem of how ... ideologies transform sentiment into significance and so make it socially available".[4]

I would suggest that an important aspect of SEWA's efforts to participate in alternative approaches to development is the connections it makes, between and amongst, women in Ahmedabad, other parts of India and the rest of the world. SEWA and its

[4]Geertz argues that it is in times when a culture's most important ideas and practices are dissolving that ideologies are most likely to flourish: that ideologies "tend ... to emerge and take hold" (p.219) when the dominant political practices begin to lose their hold". He draws on examples from the post-war period in newly independent nations, but it seems difficult to imagine a time when some such condition of upheaval would not exist. Certainly, in India as elsewhere in the world, wars, revolutions, economic depressions, mass communications revolutions, agricultural revolutions, and numerous social movements such as the women's movement have caused proactive and reactive ideologies to flourish.

members are an active part of what Appadurai calls "the global ethnoscape"[5]. The term is intended to suggest that relationships between centres and peripheries of power and knowledge are changing. One example of this is the fact that SEWA's long years of experience as an independent and increasingly powerful voice in the development discourse as it applies to self-employed women are a powerful example for organisations and institutions in other parts of the world. SEWA members and organisers have travelled around the world in search of information and to convey their own experiences of issues and solutions to problems to organisations in other parts of the world. Most often it is the high-powered organisers who do this international travelling, in part because they speak English and because they command the concepts and terminology of the international discourse on women and development. Perhaps more prosaically, some SEWA members, both literate and not, travel to other parts of India to purchase raw materials and to meet with women in other Indian organisations. They travel to trade fairs selling the products of the artisan co-operatives (typically clothing and textiles). These journeys are sometimes combined with pilgrimages. Some of the women I knew had been to Nepal on such a journey. I met other women who had been to Madras to purchase raw materials, and to Delhi to meet members of the government. Since SEWA has branches in cities in some other states (Indore, Bhopal and Lucknow) women also travel back and forth between those places on SEWA business. These latter kinds of journeying might seem an ordinary enough thing to anyone not conversant with the limitations placed on the lives of the self-employed women of Ahmedabad. For many of those women, however, such an exposure to other organisations, other places and other women has a transformative capacity.

Of course, Ahmedabad has always been a part of a global ethnoscape, as its history (Chapter Two) shows. Some Muslim members of SEWA whom I met had family members who had, for example, worked in the Gulf and brought back stories of other ways of life

[5] This is Appadurai's proposed replacement for the term culture. Replacement is necessary, according to Appadurai, because the term culture has become implicated in the notion of boundedness, and associated with a determinative relationship between places and ways of being.

and the kinds of new possibilities to which Appadurai refers. And of course the women at SEWA "always/already" constitute an 'ethnoscape', since to be "Gujarati" is to be an Ahmedabadi *bania*, a Saurashtra Brahmin, a villager from Mehsana District who may or may not choose to identify herself as a *dalit*, an Ahmedabadi Jain, a Muslim whose family has lived in Ahmedabad for ten generations, an *adivasi* from Banaskantha and a Rabari cattle herder who has moved to the edge of the city, to name only a few of the elements of that ethnoscape. The lived possibilities which arise from experience in SEWA include attendance at training sessions where they hear about women like themselves, who have broken through otherwise determining limitations, and where they learn that what they might have experienced as personal difficulty is sometimes evidence of the systematic disadvantaging of women because they are women. These are new and powerful ways of experiencing new possibilities. In those training sessions a woman may hear for the first time that she is an individual with rights. One of SEWA's contributions to the existing global ethnoscape, then, is to extend that access to people who might otherwise never have it. This might include the landless labourer from Vadodara for instance, who attends a SEWA training session or a meeting and who is unlikely to have this opportunity in any other way. Another is the inclusion of the problems of the self-employed women of Ahmedabad on national and international agendas.

Women and sometimes men, also come *to* SEWA, from other parts of India and the world. I met an award-winning film-maker from Bombay who had come to help edit a video on the girl child that SEWA had been commissioned to do by the State Bank of India. I also met members of a research team from Tamil Nadu who had come on a project concerning co-operative formation. An American doctor did a month-long paediatrics *cum* midwifery practicum while I was there, under the auspices of SEWA's health unit. She examined and diagnosed infants and participated in a *dai* (midwife) training programme.

SEWA connects the self-employed women of Ahmedabad and other parts of Gujarat with institutions and movements in other parts of India and other parts of the

world through a number of linkages. These include some multi-national trade unions. Since 1983, SEWA has been affiliated with the International Federation of Food, Beverages, Tobacco and Allied Workers (I.U.F.) based in Geneva and, since 1985, with IFPAAW, the International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers[6] also based in Geneva. SEWA's 1992 Annual Report lists affiliation with two Brussels-based unions in addition to these. These are the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation, (ITGLWF) and the ICEF (the International Federation for Chemical and Energy Workers). The purpose of these linkages is to ensure that the economic needs and the working conditions of Ahmedabad's home-based workers, in particular those of the garment workers and the *chindi* workers, are acknowledged and granted a place in the international labour movement. SEWA is also linked with international aid and development agencies. It has worked with the Aga Khan Foundation on rural projects. There are connections with the international women's movement, and with numerous research organisations, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The ILO has also worked with SEWA on a wasteland development project, and Oxfam has contributed to the purchasing of a *godown* (warehouse) used by one of the SEWA co-operatives.

SEWA's Critique of the Dominant Discourse

SEWA's critique of the dominant discourse as it pertains to women who are poor begins with the idea that 'women', 'the poor', kinds of work, sectors of society, are social constructions, created and contested by multiple interests for multiple purposes. If the organisation is to thrive, it must be successful in its contestation of the characteristics of those categories and in its constructions of meaningful alternative representations. SEWA draws the material of its own alternative constructions of these categories from a

[6]According to the 1988 Annual Report (p.38) SEWA belongs to the former "on the basis of its membership of *bidi* workers" and to the latter through its agricultural labourers.

Gandhian ethic, from the contemporary women's movement in India and, to some extent, from the terminology of the private sector (i.e. referring to self-employed women as entrepreneurs). Sometimes these are combined, as is the case in the use of the term 'self-reliance'. Self-reliance is, on the one hand, a reflection of a Gandhian purpose and reflects back to the Nationalist movement which encouraged Indian people to manufacture and purchase only goods made in India. The self-reliance movement encouraged people to refuse to buy the products of the colonial power. The term self-reliance is also a variant of the term independent. When SEWA encourages its members to be self-reliant it is also encouraging them to become independent of the conditions which contribute to their being controlled by others, such as family members or moneylenders. The term is also used to encourage members to be independent participants in the organisation. (This latter point is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.)

SEWA's Ideology: A Woman-Centred Approach to Development

Parajuli asserts that " contemporary women's movements in India are the most visible in challenging the established political, economic and cultural order" (Parajuli 1994:177-178) and that efforts by women's groups "dispel the myth of the state as guardian and protector of women" (*ibid.*). This is probably too broad a statement to be very useful, but it is the case that SEWA is one of the many women's organisations which contribute to this visibility while it insists that its participation in those efforts is based on its own definitions of problems and solutions.

SEWA takes the position that development which is intended for women must begin with them if they are to reap its benefits. Only women can be members of SEWA because, SEWA argues, women are the most disadvantaged sector of the population. That is to say, although many women and men are disadvantaged by poverty, illiteracy, lack of ownership of assets and lack of access to resources, women constitute a special case by

virtue of their sex. The claim is made by SEWA that there are more women than men in the informal sector (Bhatt 1989). This is deduced from the fact that there are more men than women in the formal sector. The argument is that if women are to benefit from the efforts of governmental and non-governmental agencies to improve their situation, those efforts must be directed explicitly towards women, rather than towards men in the hope that those benefits will trickle 'across' the gender boundary from men to women. Just as benefits to the very poor do not usually trickle "down" from the wealthy, nor do they usually trickle across the gender boundary. Implicit in SEWA's ideological position on this matter is the idea that the benefits which accrue to women will be put into such things as education, improved nutrition and so on for their children and families.

The population figures support SEWA's claim that women are disadvantaged, in rather grim detail. Gujarat is the 10th most populous state in India (Census of India 1991). The population stood at 41,174,060 in the 1991 census. Of that number 21,272,388 were males and 19,901,672 were females, meaning that there were 1,370,716 fewer women than men. The state-wide sex-ratio has decreased in the decade ending in 1981. It stood at 942 women per 1,000 men in 1981 and at 946 women per 1,000 men in 1991[7]. The fact that there are fewer women than men is a cultural, rather than a natural, phenomenon.

SEWA's own surveys of the self-employed women of Ahmedabad bear out the assertion that many women in India are denied the most basic health care or access to education. Often, the women who become SEWA members have little or no input into such things as the number of children they will bear, where they will live, or how, in rural areas, the agricultural products they grow are marketed (Parajuli 1994:178). Women's needs have, until the last few years, been left out of state development projects, even when those projects have had an impact on their lives. In the past, women have been constructed as dependents of husbands and male kin, rather than as decision-making agents. Many of

[7]The all-India sex ratio, for the years 1901 to 1991 is as follows: 1901 (972) 1911 (964) 1921 (955), 1931 (950), 1941 (945), 1951 (946), 1961 (941), 1971 (930), 1981 (934) and 1991 (929). India 1992: A Reference Annual , pp. 16-17.

the large-scale development projects have had particularly disadvantageous results for women, in that they actually reduce the supply of readily available fodder and water for household use and mean that, as machines replace people on the farms, it is often women who are rendered jobless (Government of India 1988).

SEWA organisers argue that mainstream development, has, until quite recently, failed to incorporate women into development planning and programmes, and has therefore failed to improve the lives of women. Women, their labour and their contributions to agricultural, industrial and domestic economies have been rendered invisible (Nelson 1979) to use a term which is frequently used in SEWA's literature. Women's labour is still often not acknowledged as work (Anker 1980, Baster 1981, Beneria 1981, Dixon 1982a). This lack of acknowledgement has started to change and SEWA is in the forefront of efforts to ensure that women's labour is counted as work and that women's contributions to economies are acknowledged. SEWA is now involved in efforts by the state government to focus development programmes directly on women. These include such initiatives as dairy co-operatives, fodder programmes and nursery projects.

Until the present, SEWA has not allowed men to belong to the organisation, arguing that when men take part, they tend to take over, and also that women themselves assume a different perspective on activities when men are involved. That is, they tend to become deferential, to grant men authority and to consider their own involvement to be secondary to that of men.

It is fundamental to SEWA's ideology that the failure of development policies to incorporate women into development planning and programmes, for most of the period since Independence, has had profoundly negative effects on women. This position follows from arguments put forth by participants in the literature on women and development concerning the invisibility and devaluation of women and their work, and their contributions to agricultural, industrial and domestic economies. Some elements of this

position have a basis in SEWA's history, specifically, in the split from the TLA. SEWA was thrown out of the TLA because a woman dared to speak out, in contravention of the male leadership's position on Reservations.

Another reason given for not allowing men to become full members of SEWA[8] is that, in the lore of SEWA, and most likely in fact, it is men who are the moneylenders, many of them lending money at usurious rates. It is usually men who do the trading (because they are free to move about the city and because they have access to credit and to capital) and who take advantage of their status as traders to exploit the women who work for them. They also keep those women in subordinate positions in the various trades they ply. There are many examples of male traders who have attempted to deny the terms of their economic relationship with the women who work for them. The case of home-based workers is one example. These traders sometimes claim that they have no employees, but are dealing with buyers and sellers. A *bidi* trader, then, might claim that he sold tobacco leaves and thread to a woman, which would make him the vendor in this transaction, and, in effect, at the mercy of the woman buying from him. He would then claim to be buying *bidis* from her when he returned to claim the finished product, and would argue that he had to be careful to purchase only the best quality goods in order to get full value for his money. From the woman's point of view, this is a travesty of the truth, because she is at the mercy of the trader. She is an employee of the man, who provides her with tobacco leaves and thread, then purchases the finished *bidis* from her at rates over which she has no control. He can choose to turn down some of her *bidis* by claiming that they are below standard. He can also pay her less than a fair rate and less than the price they have agreed upon. There is always the fact that if she does not comply, he can easily find someone else who will.

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[8]Selliah notes that the constitution of SEWA was amended in 1985 to allow men to be members on the following terms: "Men engaged in the same occupation or trade may be associate members, subject to having no voting rights and no claim to the property of SEWA" (Selliah 1989:14).

Although SEWA's entire focus is women-based, the SEWA organisers I spoke to dissociated themselves from feminism, maintaining that feminism has come to be associated with the West, with a loss of commitment to the family, and with antagonistic relationships between women and men. There is a long history of women-focussed activism in India but the issue of whether or not to identify the most recent manifestation of this activism, *i.e.* that which has emerged since the women's movement of the 1970's, as "feminist" is an issue on which there is no consensus.[9] One author who knows SEWA asserts that SEWA exemplifies "Gandhian feminism" (Spodek 1994) which seems to me a contradictory term since Gandhi held rather essentialist notions of women as "naturally" nurturing, passive and non-violent. Gandhi did, however, bring women into the nationalist movement, which Srinivasan argues is unique in the history of such nationalist movements (Srinivasan 1987).

Perhaps this woman-focussed but not feminist stance says more about the need for flexibility in terminology than it does about how SEWA organisers conceptualise feminism and women. It is also analogous to the contestation by outsiders in the Chipko movement discussed earlier. There, the issue was the assumed right of definition of an environmental movement's ethos and politics by activists, scholars and journalists from a spectrum of points of view, many of them self-serving. Perhaps SEWA is resisting such efforts by Indian or western feminisms.

SEWA's Relationship with the Government

A critically important aspect of any effort to construct alternatives is the relationship between an organisation and the numerous levels of government which establish policies and control the disbursement of funds. There is clearly a potential danger of having an organisation's efforts co-opted by the state. Sheth (1984) argues that

[9]The work *Feminism: Indian Debates 1990* provides examples of the issues which women activists in India have addressed. These include legal rights such as the right to economic support after divorce, efforts to alter situations which denigrate or threaten women such as dowry and *sati*, and economic issues concerning wages. Women activists in India have theorised their efforts on a continuum ranging from reformist to revolutionary.

successive Indian governments have attempted to co-opt NGOs, and have therefore rendered those NGOs unable to adopt a critical stance with respect to government policies. There is also the possibility that credit for successful programmes will be appropriated by governments and responsibility for failures attributed to the NGO. However, some of SEWA's most successful programmes are those in which the organisation has made connections with existing Government programmes, such as wasteland development, dairy and artisan co-operatives, and a housing scheme for *bidi* workers. To put all of this in a more positive light, there are situations where the government does respect and even depend on the efforts of NGOs (John Wood, personal communication).

SEWA challenges the government of India to fulfill the terms of its own legislation on the rights of women and to acknowledge and to address and rectify economic disparities as they affect women. SEWA is careful to insist that it is an apolitical organisation. Shah would argue that it is not realistic to isolate political motivations from social ones since "Any collective endeavour ... to bring about social transformation - change in the labour and property relationship - and to struggle for justice, involves capturing or influencing political authority, though it may not be on the immediate agenda" (Shah 1990:20).

In posing its challenges primarily in economic terms (*i.e.* jobs and better wages for the very poor) and as demands that the government live up to the responsibilities it has defined and acknowledged, SEWA dissociates itself from the political, insofar as the political is about forming governments. SEWA is not political in the sense of wanting to hold political power. SEWA takes care to stay away from the party politics of Ahmedabad and Gujarat, and to not get caught up in becoming a vote bank for either the Congress party or the right wing BJP (Bharata Janata Party). Nor does SEWA want to allow either of these parties to claim the credit for the victories which SEWA gains. SEWA's independence as a social movement or trade union would be compromised by association

with a political party. Another reason to remain apolitical is that the Congress party has held power in Gujarat since independence but has become more and more burdened with accusations of corruption. Spodek makes the point in his discussion of the split between the TLA and SEWA that the TLA "had been crippled by its continuing connection with the losing faction in India's Congress Party when that venerable institution broke apart in the late 1960s and early 1970s" (1994:195). But of course SEWA is political in its efforts to alter the social system in the ways it finds appropriate.

There is also the fact that party politics typically requires an adversary, and SEWA claims as part of its purpose the drawing together of women from all communities on economic grounds. Given the difficulties which SEWA claims operate within families concerning economic matters, it is difficult to imagine women belonging to a political organisation which excluded their husbands, or which did not have the approval of their husbands and male kin.

In remaining apolitical, SEWA remains free to act and speak, and to make connections with other organisations as *it* sees fit, rather than any of these factors being determined by a political platform. This apolitical position allows SEWA to point out the innumerable ways in which the governments of Ahmedabad, Gujarat and India fail to honour their own legislation concerning the poor and the dispossessed. At the same time, SEWA draws on Government programmes for its members. These programmes include subsidies in training programmes, child-care projects, wasteland development projects, milk-co-operatives, and many others.

SEWA's Definition of Grassroots Development

SEWA describes itself as a grassroots movement, which is one way of describing and representing the very poor who are its members and of situating its development activities. In essence, SEWA argues that "the grassroots", should be valued rather than be taken for granted, or be 'consumed' for the benefit of those 'above' them. SEWA's

identification of itself as a grassroots organisation does not mean that SEWA is opposed to any governmental development schemes. Rather, it means, again, that SEWA reserves the right to self-definition on its own terms. Just as mainstream development comes equipped with metaphors which embody the economic and political principles on which it is predicated, such as scientistic language, a rationalism which is supposedly universal, the driving force of improvement, evolutionary development and successive stages of growth, so also does the kind of development which claims to be diametrically opposed to it, which is grassroots development. The term grassroots suggests strength and durability, and perennial re-flowering despite sometimes extreme conditions and hardships. The grassroots are said to be close to the ground. Grass is natural and requires no cultivation. It conserves and sustains human and animal life. Grass is found almost everywhere that people live. If we imagine a lawn or a field, however, we are confronted with a social, rather than with a natural construction, since lawns require maintenance, have boundaries which distinguish them from other spaces and are predicated on ownership, rights of access, property rights and hierarchy.

Grassroots development is said to operate on the principle that small-scale and appropriate improvements accumulate, coalesce and are capable of generating widespread changes from the ground up (Bhatt 1989, Berreman 1989, Sheth 1984). It is also premised on co-operative, rather than hierarchical, relations amongst organisers and organised, and claims to value local knowledge. Grassroots development is said to focus on the economically-marginal men and women who have either been left out of mainstream development, or have become its victims.

This metaphor can, of course, lead to a kind of 'othering' that situates those needing help in a subordinate position to those 'providing' it. There is little or no likelihood of lawyers, physicians, academics or economists terming themselves the grassroots, although they might agree to being "aerial roots". This terminology also suggests that the grassroots are not a threat to the social order, in the way that 'the masses' for example,

might be. (I discuss the relationships between two of the high-level organisers (the aerial roots) and some of the co-operative members (the grassroots) in Chapter Five.)

How, then, is SEWA a grassroots organisation? It is, in focussing its efforts on the very poorest women, and in the fact that the poorer women have a significant decision-making place in every level of the organisation, from membership in a co-operative to membership on the Executive Committee. Decisions are made by poor women which affect every aspect of the operation of the organisation and its component parts. It is true that those decisions are made in collaboration with high-powered organisers on many occasions but SEWA insists that those organisers have a thorough knowledge of the situations of the women they are working with. This is part of SEWA's wider claim to be a grassroots organisation in that decisions are said to always be the outcome of that thorough knowledge. It is gathered through surveys conducted by the SEWA Academy and through discussions with the women who are the self-employed membership.

Another example of SEWA's grassroots operation is its advocacy of the idea that small-scale improvements accumulate to alter the structure of social systems. The story of SEWA's efforts on behalf of and with the vegetable vendors and the paper-pickers are two examples of these almost infinitely small beginnings having a cumulative positive effect. Similarly the argument that a savings account which contains Rs 10 is better than no savings account speaks to the value of small beginnings leading to great things. The examples multiply and become the history of SEWA to date and the route to its future. This advocacy of the small-scale is powerful in part because it symbolises the self-employed women themselves. They have been devalued and cast aside by the powerful forces of society and now gather their strength in numbers and staying power to challenge the dominant forces.

SEWA's Constructions of Poverty and 'the Poor'

SEWA strives to alter perceptions of the poor as an empty well, swallowing up resources, being dangerous and uncontrolled, indigent and undeserving. It does this by representing its members as workers and pointing out that the labour of its members contributes to the economy.

Beck's articulation of the social construction of poverty (Beck 1994), gleaned from his study of poor villagers' relationships with the non-poor in Bengal, is useful in thinking about these issues. He argues that the purpose of social constructions of poverty and its constituents, *i.e.* poor people, poor health, poor nutrition, poor housing, the deserving poor and so on, is twofold: one purpose of such constructions is to control the poor and the other is to control efforts to improve their lot. An important implication of this process of construction is that those who establish the parameters of the category, such as economists, government policy makers and welfare boards, and NGO's, take upon themselves the right to define the characteristics of the poor. Those characteristics might be positive or negative, and the poor might be considered to require help, or to be regulated so that their condition mirrors that of the higher classes, or be identified as the beneficiaries of some provision or another, but the social construction of the poor nevertheless remains in the hands of the non-poor.

Beck traces the modern and secular origins of ideas about the poor in India, their supposed characteristics, and the reasons for their poverty, to 19th. century Britain. Beck argues that many conceptualisations of the poor which operate in Government policies in India today, were imported to India during the colonial period, and have been utilised there ever since by bureaucrats for whom such constructions matched their own ideas. Specifically, he argues that the scientific measurement of poverty has become the most important tool in what is thought to be an understanding of poverty. Understanding must be based on empirical knowledge, and knowledge must begin with numbers. How many poor are there? What percentage of the population constitute the poor? How do the poor

become non-poor? How many calories do they require to stay healthy enough to work? How many children do they have? How much does it cost to provide education and housing for them? How do they spend their money? How thrifty are they? Beck points to the social implications of measurement which are embedded in the linguistic term, and finds that regulation is an inherent aspect of tallying (*ibid.*:7).

Always in these arguments about the poor in Bengal which are familiar also in North America, are a number of implicit assumptions about the poor. The first of these is that the poor are intrinsically different from the middle and upper classes and that they do not want to work. The poor are thought to be irresponsible. They do not recognise opportunity when they see it. They are improvident. Another of these middle-class ideas about the poor is that they are dangerous to the social order because to be poor is to be immoral. They cannot be relied upon to value property. They engage in illegal and immoral activities such as bootlegging, smuggling and prostitution. They are not 'decent' in the ways that middle-class people are. They are dirty and ragged, noisy and coarse. There are too many of them. They threaten to overwhelm the order of things. If they hold intrinsically different values, and if those values lead them to be the kind of people they are, then they must be different from the members of the middle class. I do not argue that the poor are somehow exempt from any of these characteristics but it is to say that economic standing is often taken to be an indicator of the social value of people. If that valuing is to be done, SEWA argues, it should be done on terms which take account of the facts that poverty is not the fault of the poor and that the poor do make valuable contributions to society.

Beck's study was done in Bengal, and he does not claim an India-wide universality for his findings. However, in Ahmedabad, I found similar attitudes towards the poor expressed over and over again, typically when being warned by middle-class people about them. I was told they would only "take", that they would not work, that no amount of "giving" was ever enough, that the poor had too many children and did not care for them

properly, and moreover they were not bringing up their children to be subservient and to replace their parents as servants and labourers. They were getting above themselves, as it were. The difficulties of finding and keeping a servant occupied some of these discussions. It sometimes seemed to me that the middle-class thought of the poor as a different species, physiologically other than themselves, in that they did not mind the extreme heat or hard labour, because they were habituated to hardship, to use the term I heard often, and rather coarser folk anyway.

SEWA works to replace those negative stereotypes with what it considers to be more realistic and more positive representations of its members and their work. SEWA does, however, replicate one element of what Beck describes as a nineteenth century notion of the poor, which is the division of the poor into the moral and the immoral poor. The moral poor are those who are willing to work, who are at the mercy of traders and others who would exploit them. The members of SEWA are the respectable poor, those women whose efforts to find work have not been fruitful, or whose labour is not adequately compensated in wages, or whose working conditions are such that their labouring is hazardous to themselves or their children. SEWA also insists that labour and income, and thrift and saving, are the cornerstones of the right to SEWA membership. Paradoxically, the self-employed women must be represented as requiring and deserving help and as having the right to have their needs met, so to some extent must be characterised as victims (since those needs are not met) but also as having capabilities and entrepreneurial skills which are worth developing. The representations are found in SEWA's reports, in the organising of new members, and in its training and education programmes, and is done through texts, videos, speeches and posters.

SEWA's representation of poor women is made, in part, in contrast to negative representations of poor men. In SEWA's literature and in conversations I had with organisers, women are often represented as victims and men as victimisers. Husbands, especially, are depicted in negative ways which are similar to those in which Beck suggests

the poor in general are and have been represented: as being irresponsible, not looking after their families and as spending money on luxuries rather than on necessities. The problem with such a generalisation is that it cannot bear the weight assigned to it. It cannot usefully be applied to all men and it ignores the fact that many men are also victims of the social and economic order. It is an ideological position intended to justify SEWA's exclusive focus on women's economic status. If it were taken seriously, as I do not think it is by the members of SEWA, it would have the unfortunate effect of isolating SEWA's members from the social contexts in which they live and work.

SEWA's Definitions of Self-Employment

SEWA refers to its members as self-employed and as members of the informal sector, in its English language publications. These terms are so tightly woven in SEWA's representations of its members as to be synonymous. The strategy of representing its members as self-employed members of the informal sector is intended to replace such negative designations as unemployed with self-employed and unorganised sector with informal sector. The strategy is also intended to signify that the actual and potential members of SEWA make a valuable contribution to the economy (Bhatt 1989). The members of SEWA who are self-employed members of the informal sector do not have the resources of the people usually referred to as self-employed, but they are, in terms of SEWA's ideology, both as individuals and by virtue of their combined numbers, as valuable as the lawyer, shopkeeper or industrialist who is also self-employed. This is one of the ways in which SEWA makes the point that its members and others in similar positions are no different from other people except for their economic situation.

Informal-sector labour is by definition characterised by the lack of a formal relationship with an employer, which means that those relations tend to be personal and individualistic (Bremen 1976). Those relations may be exploitative or they may be

beneficial to both parties. Informal sector labour is usually temporary and insecure and offers no benefits when it is the economically-marginal who are doing it. Given the high rates of unemployment which pertain in Ahmedabad, people in the informal sector, women and men, and people who occupy numerous positions on a continuum of poverty, must compete with each other for work and thereby drive down their own potential wages.

SEWA argues that women are particularly disadvantaged, even within the informal sector, because of a number of social factors. Men who work in the informal sector do similar kinds of work, of course, and many must endure similar economic exploitation but the women have what has been called a "double burden" (Davies 1983). They are responsible for the care of children and do all the household work. They are also vulnerable to potential sexual exploitation. Some of SEWA's data on the details of women's work in the informal sector are derived from the National Report of the Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, titled *Shram Shakti* (Government of India 1988). Mrs. Ela Bhatt, the General Secretary of SEWA, chaired that Commission, which was struck in 1986. The Commission travelled to 17 states, gathering information about wages, working conditions, benefits, occupational health, the utilisation of technologies and so on, in innumerable job categories. The Commission found that access to work of any kind is eagerly sought by women, because of widespread poverty and because of the seasonal nature of many kinds of rural and urban employment. Many of the women the Commission spoke to were responsible for the incomes of whole families because a husband was ill or unemployed or had migrated elsewhere in search of work and no longer sent back any money to support the family. The Commission found that women often do the hardest work, and, like men, are subjected to demands for bribes by officials. The Commission found that women's wages were, with a single exception out of hundreds of cases, less than those of men doing the same work, and that women were almost always denied the use of equipment which would improve their productivity and wages.

The Commission found that women's labour was always considered to be unskilled and therefore worth less, and that women workers were and are considered to be replaceable by employers who know that, given the sheer numbers of people needing employment, there will always be people needing work and ready to replace anyone who complains or fails to be as productive, or subservient or compliant, as an employer deems suitable.

SEWA's self-employed members are amongst the thousands of women in the urban and rural areas of Gujarat who contribute to their families' income, and sometime provide the totality of that income, by picking tobacco, making *bidis* (cigarettes) and *agarbattis* (incense sticks) and rolling *pappads* (a crisp, sun-dried wafer). They stitch thin quilts called *khols* out of remnants (usually soaked in oil and grease when they buy them) which they purchase from the textile mills. They weave plain cloth out of cotton and synthetic fibres. They make salt. They look after other peoples' children in *creches* (childcare centres for infants), *anganwadis* (childcare centres for toddlers) and *balwadis* (childcare centres for older children).[10] They make utilitarian objects out of cane and bamboo. They collect and sort waste paper and plastic from the streets and sell it by weight to traders. They engage in "social forestry" projects in villages remote from Ahmedabad, carrying water to nourish seedlings that will stem soil erosion and provide food and fodder. They do this on land on which it is all but impossible to grow anything, because there is no water supply. They sew garments for the 'readymade trade'. They do embroidery, patchwork and *zari* (decorative gold thread) work. They test fresh milk for fat content in rural dairy co-operatives. They process and sell fish. They work in shops. They collect the waste paper from Government offices.

I deliberately list these activities here, as one would pull pieces of cloth from a bag, so as to convey the multiplicity of kinds of work which SEWA classifies as "self-employed". One thing which underlies and typifies the work is that it does not, with a few

[10]These three terms, one French and the other two Gujarati, are all used by SEWA.

exceptions such as some artisanal work, require a great deal of formally learned skill. Some of the kinds of work that these women do such as agricultural labour, headloading and construction work, require backbreaking labour that can damage their health. Informal-sector work earns the women very little money, sometimes as little as Rs 6-8 in a day (SEWA Annual Report 1993).

SEWA's use of the term self-employed to refer to its members and the fact that an extremely wide range of wage-earning activities is included in the category by SEWA, are aspects of the organisation's ideology. SEWA says that anyone at all who is female and who has no formal relationship with an employer but who is engaged in a working relationship which earns her an income, belongs to the informal sector. Bremen (1976) argues that the category 'informal sector' is ill-defined, and is premised on an overextended dualism between the 'formal' and the 'informal' sectors, where the term 'formal sector' is taken to apply to "wage labour in permanent employment" and large scale private and Government enterprises (Bremen 1976:1870) and the 'informal sector' is taken to be anything and everything outside the boundaries of this category. Bremen argues that this 'negative' and residual categorisation, *i.e.* work that is not within the formal sector, "not enumerated", and not subject to legal statutes (*ibid.*) is, in fact, not *defined* at all, but is often just a listing of the kinds of jobs which people perform.

Nevertheless, SEWA would acknowledge as valid and useful Bremen's definition of labour relations in the informal sector. He says that "activity in the informal sector is characterised by low capital intensity, a low level of productivity, a small and usually poor clientele, a low level of formal schooling, intermediate technology, preponderance of family labour and ownership, ease of entrance and lack of support and recognition on the part of the government (1976:1871). Informal sector labour is also "typified by fluctuating and discontinuous employment and a gradual transition from employment to unemployment"(*ibid.*:1872). All of SEWA's efforts by and on behalf of its members are focussed on transforming that negative diagnosis and on integrating women into the

formal sector where this is possible, and altering the conditions of their labour in the informal sector where it is not.

SEWA's Classifications of Self-Employed Labour

SEWA classifies the work carried out by its members into three types. These are enduring classifications and are found in some of the SEWA documents written when SEWA was a part of the TLA. In Sebstad's report on SEWA one finds "small-scale sellers, home-based producers and casual labourers and service workers" (1982:2). The terms have continued to be used in all of SEWA's Annual Reports until the present.

Hawkers and Vendors. The first category, and the smallest, with some 6,780 members (1993 Annual Report), is 'hawkers and vendors', women who sell things either from a fixed location or from a cart or basket (*topla*) carried while walking about. Most are residents of Ahmedabad. Some move about the city, covering miles in the course of a day. Others put in long hours in the market places or on footpaths, walking before dawn to the wholesale markets, then carrying their wares either from door to door or to a spot on the pavement, where sometimes three or four vendors will gather. Many of these women sell a single commodity, and many of the women who do this kind of work must borrow a sum of money from a moneylender in order to purchase the goods they will sell. This work is only feasible economically when there is a very low economic value placed on the time spent doing it.

Home-Based Workers. Women doing 'home-based work' constitute the largest category of SEWA members. In 1994 26,534 of SEWA's members were engaged in home-based work. Home-based workers include weavers, potters, *bidi*, *agarbatti* and *pappad* rollers, readymade garment makers, processors of agricultural produce and artisans. The classification is based on the location where the labour is performed. The labour might be

transforming raw materials into finished useable or edible products or executing a single step in a manufacturing process from the textile mills or other factories. When it involves work from the mills it is referred to as contract labour but it is still home-based work. The classification 'home-based' also identifies the relations of production. Home-based workers typically work for a trader who supplies them with raw materials, which might be cloth for readymade garments, tobacco leaves and thread for *bidi* rolling or sticks and powdered essence for *agarbattis*.

Home-based work is usually combined with the labour that is part of everyday life in the household. It is done when there are a few minutes to spare between other tasks, such as an hour or so before the baby wakes, a meal is needed, water flows in the tap again or older children must be fed. Home-based work can constitute a welcome source of income, earned without leaving the domestic domain, which is important for many women whether they are Hindus or Muslims[11]. SEWA argues that home-based work is oppressive because the terms of employment are established by the traders who set the prices and evaluate the finished products on their own terms. These terms may be different from those they use to establish the wages they will pay. Some of the traders also require the women who do this work to use their own equipment such as a sewing machine.

Home-based work is often a family enterprise, since the labour can be divided into tasks which are appropriate to skills. Thus a child, an elderly parent or an unemployed husband might fill bobbins with spun thread, turn a *charka* (spinning wheel), cut the tobacco leaves into the correct shape before they are filled with tobacco or tie the thread which completes the *bidi*.

Manual Labourers and Service Providers. The third of SEWA's categories, and the category with the second largest membership (20, 291 members), is 'manual labourers and

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[11]The importance of working at home and of *not* going out into the area beyond one's immediate neighbourhood was discussed in Chapter Two.

service providers'. This category includes agricultural labourers, women who work on construction sites, contract labourers (who work at home for the factories), headloaders, cart-pullers, and laundry and domestic workers (SEWA 1993:3). With the exception of domestic workers, this category of labour is the most physically demanding of all these categories. Manual labourers and service providers are perhaps the hardest to organise, since there is a nomadic imperative to this kind of work. Landless agricultural labourers must follow the crops, insofar as that is possible; construction workers must move on to another site when a building is finished. This kind of work exemplifies the harsh fact that the poor must compete with each other for even a minimal living. Many manual labourers are migrants from the villages, and carry debts and the responsibility to send money back to the villages. In Ahmedabad men who do this work gather to wait for supervisors on construction sites hoping for a day's work. Some of their wives also wait and the wives are simply adjuncts of the men. Hire a man for the day or week, and his wife will also work and will command a fraction of his wages.

So far, I have discussed the ideology of SEWA, and its representative strategies, in terms which are somewhat abstracted from the everyday practice of the organisation. I will conclude this section by addressing the 10-point programme which is at the heart of SEWA's conceptual and practical efforts to construct development on its own terms.

SEWA's 10 Questions: Alternative Constructions of Development

One route to a more direct apprehension of SEWA's ideology lies in an understanding of SEWA's '10 Questions'. The foundation of SEWA's ideology and operating principles, these questions are displayed in Gujarati and in English in the public places at the Reception Centre, published in *Anasuya*, the fortnightly newsletter, and used in the Training Sessions held at the SEWA Academy. They serve to remind SEWA people of the purpose of their efforts, and to proclaim SEWA's purpose to visitors. These ten points, posed as questions, are the measure of SEWA's evaluation of a "problem" and its

route to solutions. Like any map, this 10-point programme remains one-dimensional without a key, and requires contextualisation and articulation with histories and socio-political settings which is to say, with the participants in a discourse, to render it topographical. I attempt to provide such a key in the following section. I hope to show how these 10 points combine the practical with the idealistic, the possible with the visionary, in an attempt to create a pragmatic approach to improving the situation of SEWA's members.

The 10-point programme appears in the following form in SEWA's 1993 Annual Report:

1. "Have our members obtained more employment from our efforts?
2. Has their income increased?
3. Have they obtained food and nutrition?
4. Has their health been safeguarded?
5. Have they obtained child-care?
6. Have they obtained shelter?
7. Have their assets increased (their own savings, land, house, workspace, tools of work, licences, identity cards, cattle and share in co-operatives, all in their own name)?
8. Have the workers' organisations been strengthened?
9. Has workers' leadership increased?
10. Have they become self-reliant both collectively and individually?" (1993:31).

According to the account in the Annual Report, items one to seven "are linked to the goals of self-employment", while items eight to ten are "concerned with SEWA's goals of self-reliance" (*ibid.*). The term 'goals' is perhaps not the best choice, because most people's goal is not to have to be self-employed, even in the ways in which SEWA defines it. However, if the necessity is there, then the goal is to reduce the kinds and degrees of exploitation of the self-employed which occur. Other goals are to regularise the work itself, so that there is work as often as the women want and need it, and to regulate the terms and conditions of the work.

1. Have our members obtained more employment from our efforts?

Employment generation is the foundation of SEWA's platform for development. The concern with employment originates in SEWA's history, as was discussed in the section on the SEWA union earlier in this chapter, and in SEWA's position that its members are first and foremost workers. As workers, they deserve to benefit from the legislation which applies to working conditions. Even SEWA's riot-relief efforts are represented in terms of the women losing the opportunity to work during a riot or a curfew. Similarly, flood-relief efforts are put in terms of enabling members to recoup lost equipment and materials, so they can resume earning a living. The SEWA organisers argue that the members say that work is the most important thing to them.

'More employment', as SEWA means it, means more women working, which is itself an ideological position, and works against the dominant discourse of meaning in which men are breadwinners and heads of households and are the 'true workers'.

It is fundamental to SEWA's ideology that changes in a woman's economic activities enable changes in other domains of her life. This is usually put in terms of increased decision-making ability on her part. The assertion is made that when women gain some degree of economic independence (meaning the capability of earning a living, independence from moneylenders and traders, and not being exclusively economically dependent on husbands or family), they are in a position to make decisions about themselves and their families, rather than being subject to their male relatives' wishes. Implicit in this way of putting things is the claim that women cannot do any of this, unless they are able to alter their economic position. SEWA asserts that women's low status stems, in part, from their lack of money. Some degree of independence is equated with having an income, and not being dependent on a husband, who may or may not be employed, and may or may not look after his family's needs. Implicit in the organisation's perspective is the idea that the women have, as some of them put it, only their physical capabilities out of which to fashion an economic life. Some of the members say this

themselves, pointing out that their lack of formal education renders them ill-equipped for any kind of work that is not based in physical strength, and that when their physical capability is threatened by illness or old age, they are made even more vulnerable. SEWA's position also assumes that women will look after their families first when they have an income.

In SEWA's terms, more employment means regular employment, with regularised and enforceable contractual obligations, as distinct from workers needing to negotiate on a daily or weekly basis with a trader, or working on short-term contracts, the terms of which have to be constantly re-negotiated. SEWA's attempts to alter these relationships are part of its effort to transform the situation of the self-employed into something analogous to that of the formal sector. I would call this effort visionary, given the scale of the problem and the inertia against which the effort is made. The route, however, is pragmatic.

SEWA defines full employment as everyone who wants to work being able to work. The routes to increased employment include specific job-training, much of it the reclaiming of trades and skills which have been lost to industrialisation. It also includes establishing contracts for its members with government agencies.

2. Has their income increased?

'Increase in income' is an extremely difficult thing to accomplish and to regulate, given the rate of unemployment in Ahmedabad, and the fact that SEWA's members work in the informal sector. With unemployment so prevalent, it is often the case that workers must compete with each other, taking a lower wage in order to have some income. In fact, protecting existing levels of income is often difficult enough. I discuss a specific case of income being threatened, and SEWA's efforts in that situation, in Chapter Four.

The problems of maintaining income levels for people with tenuous relations with employers are legion: workers may not be paid regularly, the purchasing power of their

earnings fluctuates, the costs of food, required raw materials and other necessities go up, there are debts to repay.

In order to participate in negotiations with those government bodies which control such things as the prices of raw materials, wage rates, increases in income and working conditions, SEWA must construct a position for itself *vis a vis* the state, as has been discussed earlier. SEWA has been able to negotiate increases in income for some of its members by bringing pressure to bear on several levels of government. Some of its efforts have taken the form of legal challenges. The struggle waged on behalf of a number of vegetable vendors (described later in this chapter) is one of these. One factor which impedes the ability of women to obtain employment and to increase their income is lack of access to credit. One of the most important institutions which SEWA has established is the *Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank*, the operation of which is discussed in Chapter Four.

3. Have they obtained food and nutrition?

'Food and nutrition' is a 'basic needs' issue. It is related to the first two points, since one must have money to purchase food, and one must have work in order to earn money. At least minimal standards of nutrition must be met if people are to be able to work. The very poor are entitled to a ration book which allows them to shop in 'fixed price' shops, although they are sometimes kept from obtaining a ration card by officials demanding a bribe. Some of the very poor have sold their ration books. SEWA will help a woman get a ration book if she does not have one and if there are problems with being cheated, SEWA will send an organiser to lodge a protest with the government agency responsible.

There are many cultural factors which are important in the issue of food and nutrition in addition to the economic fact of not having enough money to purchase the amount of food needed. One of these is that a woman will likely meet her family's nutritional needs before meeting her own when there is a scarcity of money or food supplies. Another is that women remove themselves, as it were, from consuming the

family's food supply, when they fast. Many women fast one day a week even though they work. Every woman I came to know fasted regularly to ensure the marriage of a daughter or son, to keep a vow, to ensure a husband's health, to maintain a relationship with a specific god or goddess and probably for many other reasons. The fasting is done for religious reasons but there are evident economic implications of this as well. Men also fast of course. A fast typically involves either missing all the meals in a day or not eating before sunset. A fast might also involve abstaining from food considered to be a luxury such as coffee or ghee, or meat if the person would otherwise eat it.

4. Has their health been safeguarded?

Good health is intimately connected to the ability to work, and poor health detracts from that ability. SEWA's health care branch, called *Lok Svasthya*, and headed by a woman with a graduate degree in public health, works to define a 'healthy workplace' as one which possesses enough space, clean air and water and protection from toxic materials. These conditions are difficult to accomplish because the vast majority of workplaces are private dwellings, which makes intervention extremely difficult. It is also the case that altering those physical conditions would require money, which most SEWA members could not afford. Reducing the likelihood of physical injury is also important for many of the kinds of work done by SEWA members. It is equally important to enroll them in insurance programmes for the times when physical problems keep them out of the work force. It is easy to imagine that women doing such things as headloading and handcart pulling would be at some physical risk when they are working. There are instances where women resist SEWA's efforts to improve their safety. For example, the block-printers who work on the roof of the Reception Centre refuse to wear rubber gloves when they are mixing dyes because, they say, the gloves get in their way.

The health care branch of SEWA addresses public and private health issues, as these relate to women's capabilities to earn a living. Maternal health is related to the ability

to work, so SEWA tries to ensure that its members are included in government-operated maternal health, maternity insurance and family planning programmes. One of the programmes being run while I was in Ahmedabad was a *dai*-training programme. *Dais* are traditional midwives who work in the villages. They are formally unschooled but knowledgeable about childbirth. SEWA has attempted to upgrade their skills, and to teach them to alter those of their practices which are potentially detrimental to mothers and infants. This is part of an effort to (i) make low-cost health care available, because the doctors' fees are out of reach for the very poor and (ii) raise the qualifications and the prestige of the *dais*. Both of these are immensely complicated issues, because people prefer the services of a doctor if this is at all possible, and because the *dais'* services can rendered unaffordable, for the extremely poor, if their fees rise.

'Public health' is, for SEWA, another issue connected to working conditions. Public health is a political issue, in that, for example, the availability of clean running water depends on funding from municipal and state authorities, and the public hospitals are government operated. If the women are perpetually in a poor state of health because of fevers from contaminated water, or TB because of crowding, or because of constant pregnancies, their ability to work is impaired. The vaccination of children is another public health issue addressed by SEWA with organisers encouraging the members to have their children vaccinated. In the society's dominant discourse - the taken for granted commonsensical worldview - girl children in very poor families are likely to receive a smaller proportion of a household's resources, including the money spent on health care. SEWA organisers, in concert with government-run health care programmes, work to convince families that girl children also deserve to be healthy and to spend the money necessary to maintain their health.

Many health issues such as having enough space in which to work and proper ventilation are both living conditions and working conditions for many of the home based workers. Other health issues concern working conditions in which women are exposed to

toxic or otherwise dangerous materials. For example, women who work in the tobacco industry, whether they are picking tobacco or rolling *bidis* in their homes, are likely to inhale the tobacco dust, and, I was told, are prone to tuberculosis as a result.

When they have a health-related problem, SEWA members can avail themselves of the services of one of the three SEWA dispensaries in the city. One of these is located just around the corner from the SEWA Reception Centre, and the two others are located in government hospitals. These dispensaries are extremely valuable resources for the very poor. No-one will be asked for a bribe, or kept waiting beyond the necessary time, as I was told might well happen at a government run dispensary. The dispensaries are staffed by women who have been trained in the diagnosis of simple illnesses, such as coughs and colds, and conditions such as malaria and the myriad fevers that people are prey to. A doctor visits each dispensary twice a week, and anyone with a severe condition such as TB, typhoid, cholera or malnutrition or a problem with pregnancy, is encouraged to return. These dispensaries stock low-cost generic medicines and vitamin supplements. The service of the doctor is free to SEWA members. Another service provided by the dispensary is the completion and filing of the forms necessary for the payment of a government-operated maternity-benefit programme. The recipients of this insurance scheme must register before the baby is delivered, then come back to the dispensary two weeks after the birth, with the infant. The insurance scheme pays out a cash benefit to the new mother, so that she can take some time off work to regain her strength. It also ensures that the infant is examined by a health care worker, and any evident problems can be seen. Again, the women benefit from the scheme itself, but also from the fact that they are not required, as they might be at a government hospital, to pay out a sum of money for services that are supposed to be free.

One of the SEWA organisers named Susheela, who has retired from her occupation of practical nurse, now does *seva* at SEWA. Susheela runs what are called 'know your body' workshops. In these, women would be taught some basic health care for

themselves and their children and could, if they wanted to, learn something about 'family planning' in one of those courses. For many of the extremely poor and uneducated women who are members of SEWA, this might be a unique opportunity to learn how to go about limiting the size of their families.

5. Have they obtained child-care?

Child-care is very much a 'women as disadvantaged sector' concern, because the self-employed members of SEWA cannot afford to pay for child-care, yet need it in order to work if there is no older person to look after a child. This is a complex matter and is also gendered. Older children, especially girls, are often kept from school to look after infants. Much of the employment that the poor and uneducated can get is physical labour, such as pulling handcarts, working on building sites, headloading bricks, or herding donkeys laden with sand on construction sites. Whatever the labour, it is common that the children go along, either because the mother is nursing a child, or because there is no-one at home to care for them or because, even if the children are in school, the school day is not as long as the working day. It is a common sight to see an infant snuggled into a hammock tied to the underside of the handcart and cloth cradles set up on construction sites. Those cradles symbolise the human desire to protect children with whatever means are at hand, but, objectively, how defenseless the infants appear to be, protected from the frantic traffic only by their parents' wits and strength and a piece of cloth.

SEWA provides child-care for working women, through a division of its health care branch. SEWA *creches*, *anganwadis* and *balwadis* care for infants, toddlers and school-aged children respectively. The funding for the purchase or rental of space comes from the state Government, which requires meticulous record-keeping. Some of SEWA's office staff members are responsible for that record-keeping. These centres have been established so as to enable SEWA's members to have a safe place in which to leave their

children while they work. In this instance, SEWA is a point of articulation between the Central Social Welfare Board which funds the child-care programmes and the SEWA members. This is a necessary and useful linkage because, although the programmes are in place, the poor would be unlikely to ever hear about them or to think that they would be eligible for such programmes. This is another example of SEWA insisting on the rights of its members to the programmes which the government provides.

Parents pay a small sum for the child-care, but the amount is subsidised by government funds. SEWA finds the teachers and clean and safe locations, and in some of the urban centres a SEWA co-operative called *nasta ekam* provides food for the children who attend. The food is usually *kichdi* (kedgeree), a nutritious and inexpensive rice dish. A government-paid doctor will visit the child-care centres periodically and identify health and developmental problems. SEWA health unit workers will then try to keep track of the children identified as having health problems.

When I visited some of these child-care centres with one of the organisers, I was struck by the ability of the teachers and child-care workers to care for so many children, sometimes as many as several dozen in two rooms. Two of the teachers I met had training in Montessori methods. Another teacher was fluent in Hindi and Urdu and gave 'tuitions' to supplement her income as a child-care worker. One of the most refreshing events I attended was the opening of a new *anganwadi* in a poor locality. The two-room building had been renovated and whitewashed for the opening and flower garlands were hung across the doorframe. The children sang songs, encouraged by the SEWA organisers, one of whom was the head of the health division. After the formal inauguration of the building, everyone trooped around the corner for lunch at the teacher's home. All of the children who belonged to the child-care centre were given a new set of *khadi* clothes.

6. Have they obtained shelter?

Connecting the need for shelter with employment is an indication of SEWA's understanding of the spectrum of needs of the economically-marginal. Moving into home ownership is an almost impossible thing to accomplish, given the cost of housing. However, the SEWA Bank will advance loans for house repairs or renovations, if these are required to provide better conditions in which to work.

While I was in Ahmedabad, there was a government scheme in process which was intended to provide houses for some of the bidi-workers. In its capacity as a union, SEWA had managed to arrange for 110 of its members to become eligible to own those houses, which were to be built on the outskirts of the city. I was not involved in any of the organisational meetings, so have only hearsay about how the negotiations were proceeding. I did attend one union meeting at which some of the women who were eligible for the houses were present. They were complaining that the houses had not been properly constructed. I understand that only 55 of the original 110 SEWA women who were to own those houses would eventually occupy them. On the one hand it is a tremendous accomplishment to have connected 55 economically-marginal women with the means of owning a house, presumably in their own names. On the other hand, the fact that only half of the original number would become occupants speaks to the sheer temporal inertia, and perhaps corruption, of a government funded housing scheme. There were some suggestions of corruption on the part of government officials and SEWA people mooted about, but I did not learn enough about them to be able to say any more.

7. Have their assets increased?

SEWA identifies a member's assets as whatever is required for her to earn a living, and something which is in her own name, rather than those of her husband or male kin. Such assets might include a savings account at the bank, a piece of land, a house, a workspace, the tools required to work (a loom, for example, or a handcart which was

owned instead of rented), licenses which grant the owner the right to occupy a space or conduct a business, and an identity card (SEWA lists as one of its accomplishments for 1993 the fact that 6000 women received an identity card). Identity cards entitle the owner to shop at 'fixed price' stores, and to be eligible for some subsidies. Cattle ownership is also an asset in rural communities. It is rare for a woman to own a cow, bullock or even a goat. A purchased share in a co-operative is a more accessible asset, given SEWA's stress on the formation of co-operatives. Share costs are modest (Rs 21 for one co-op that I knew of), but in excess of SEWA membership fees. Being a shareholder entitles a woman to contribute to decisions about the disbursement of funds and the operation of the co-operative. In other words, being a shareholder in a co-operative is an economic investment.

8. Have the workers' organisations been strengthened?

This point has both organisational and ideological content. It refers to increasing the number of co-operatives and the number of union members and the support services they require to stay in business. By strengthening is meant the ability to resolve conflicts, solve problems and negotiate with employers, in addition to improving economic conditions. An example would be any co-operative which became independent. This requires that the individual members of the organisation such as a Trade Group, a committee or a co-operative or SEWA itself, increase its capabilities for self-reliance. As each element in the organisation, such as a co-operative or trade group, becomes stronger, it can branch out and support the creation of others in yet another example of grassroots development. In addition, the umbrella organisation can focus its energies on further diversification and outreach.

9. Has the workers' leadership increased?

This is another complex issue, as the term 'leadership' is open to many interpretations. At SEWA the measurement of increase in leadership is most broadly taken to mean a change in the demeanour of a woman, from being submissive and retiring, to being able to articulate opinions and speak out about issues at home and at meetings. In the training sessions at the SEWA Academy, for instance, potential leaders are identified as those women who are vocal in their participation, and do not only sit back and listen. At SEWA leadership is also defined as the ability and willingness to tell other women about SEWA, so that SEWA organisers are defined as leaders. This leadership ability is also made evident in independent decision-making, a point which has implications for, say, the successful and 'self-reliant' operation of a co-operative.

In order to gain an understanding of the purpose of the organisation, members must undergo a training session, in which they will learn some of the basic facts of SEWA's purpose and the organisation's understanding of the reasons for women's poverty. Some will achieve the ability to speak out in public. One purpose of these training sessions is the identification of the women most likely to be leaders of co-operatives, or potential SEWA organisers. The desired characteristics include the outspokenness mentioned above and a quick grasp of SEWA's purpose and point of view of SEWA. Literacy is not a requirement and age is not a factor in this identification of potential leaders, but willingness and the ability to participate in the affairs of the organisation are highly valued. There are no constraints placed on this ability by SEWA: very old or quite young women might become organisers. The work involves encouraging others to become members of SEWA, an effort which typically requires many visits to neighbours and to areas where people live who do similar kinds of work. The work of an organiser involved in bidi-rolling, paper-picking or *pappad* and *agarbatti* rolling, for instance, will likely take her to numerous districts within the city, since *bidi*-rolling and paper-picking are done by women in the poorer areas all over the city.

Clearly, there is an ideological cast to this work of organising: a successful organiser must convince her neighbours that there is something to gain from belonging to SEWA, which requires her to speak convincingly about the honesty of the organisation, the value of its institutions, the respectability of its work and the importance of establishing common cause with women in similar economic circumstances. Organisers must have the patience to return to an area many times and sometimes must be willing to face verbal and physical abuse from traders who do not want the women to be making demands for higher wages.

10. Have they become self-reliant both collectively and individually?

This point is the culmination of the previous two. If the organisations are strong and the leaders are strong, these conditions should lead to self-reliance. This is perhaps the most ideological point of the ten, since self-reliance is defined as a shift from dependence on others, and a shift from dependence on the institution of SEWA. I take this point up again in Chapter Five, in a discussion of co-operatives.

SEWA's Representational Strategies

In this section I discuss another important aspect of SEWA's efforts to establish new meanings, which is its strategy of challenging prevailing representations of its members and creating new ones in terms it finds preferable. I will use an example drawn from the struggle over the right to earn a living in *Manek Chowk*, a busy market in the heart of the old city. A woman selling two kilos of bananas from a piece of sacking on the ground in a crowded market is hardly visible to passers-by who are looking for other commodities. She may represent just another obstacle to swerve around, to the middle-class shopper on a motor scooter, and a source of inexpensive commodities when he or she dismounts. That same woman is, in SEWA's representation of her, a self-employed woman using entrepreneurial skills to make a living. Her right to retain her position and to

earn a living in the (literal and metaphorical) market place is a moral right which predates the right of the motor scooter driver who would have her shift her place of business so he or she could have a place to park. It is also a legal right. In SEWA's representation of that woman, she provides a useful service to the shoppers and she makes a contribution to the economy of Ahmedabad through that service. She is also working rather than begging and her participation in the economy is that of a micro-entrepreneur, to use the term some SEWA organisers use.

Extremely fine socio-economic gradations operate in this market place. Not only is every available inch of space used, but the conditions and the status of the work are determined by rights of access to space and money. A great many SEWA members, women and men who are associate members, sell fruits and vegetables there. There is nothing evidently 'heroic' about this crowded, lively and somewhat squalid few yards of road and pavement, but this space called *Manek Chowk* was one of the sites of SEWA's struggles to uphold the right of some of the vendors to make a living there. It is here that the right of SEWA vegetable-vendor members to 'hold their ground', as it were, was waged and won. This is an example of synecdoche, a small thing standing for a larger. In SEWA's terms these women *represent* all the SEWA members, who *represent* all the vendors in Ahmedabad, who *represent* all the self-employed women in the country. The rights won here apply, theoretically if not in actuality, throughout the city.

Inside the Municipal Market, a large brick building which is an axis of *Manek Chowk*, the stalls are elaborate, the displays lavish, gleaming and ordered. The men sitting amidst their wares are subject to slightly less pollution from vehicles than the people sitting outside, and, while they probably are required to pay some kind of 'protection' on demand from the police, they are less likely than the people outside to lose goods to thieves or to cows. Their customers are the better-off purchasers. The building affords protection from the sun and the rains, and some protection from the 'communal violence' that has swept the city on several occasions since 1969 (Tully 1992). On the footpath

directly outside the market building is found the next level in the hierarchy of fruit and vegetable stalls. Here, the displays are less permanent, having no cover and affording less shelter from the natural and social 'elements'. No women work in these stalls. The narrow road outside the Market is a more contested space, clotted with the portable/wheeled carts which sell all manner of inexpensive wares. This is where the vegetable vendors who are SEWA members spread a yard or two of burlap on which to display the staples they sell.

When some of these women went to SEWA, complaining that they were being threatened with eviction and exploited by police demanding bribes, SEWA went to court on their behalf (Bhatt 1989:209), arguing that the women's right to work from that spot pre-dated the 'rights' of people with cars to park their vehicles, and that the effort to evict them was an example of "modernism" displacing a long-standing tradition; that is, the requirement of a formal permit in order to do something they have been doing for many decades.

The trope of personification (the technique of embodying a situation in an individual's life) is used to good effect by SEWA, in its representation of itself and its members. Individual stories of difficulty and triumph, one woman's struggle to improve her situation, another woman's ability to do something she had considered beyond her capability, are all examples of personification. This representational strategy allows SEWA to point to individuals who have themselves experienced hardship and have been changed by virtue of their membership in SEWA. The organisational biography of Chandaben Jagaria (her real name) as told by SEWA, is one example of this. According to the originary lore of SEWA Chandaben, who is unable to read or write, was one of the founding members of the SEWA Bank. Chandaben sat up all night to learn to write her name, so that she could sign the documents required by the government to establish the bank. Before the bank was established, Chandaben was self-employed working as a roaming vendor of kitchen utensils (*vasan*). She had not been a member of the TLA, although her elder brother had. Elaben was a TLA social worker at the time. She and

Chandaben met each other in the Victoria Gardens (across the road from where the Reception Centre now stands) where Chandaben told about being harassed by the police, who demanded money on the threat of laying fictitious charges against her. Then Elaben suggested that she and some other utensil vendors open a shop to sell their wares. Each member was to contribute Rs 21 to be deposited in the TLA bank. That first effort to organise women failed, because the other depositors lost their trust in the TLA bank and in Chandaben and Elaben and withdrew their money. Chandaben would not tell me why the trust had been lost but the 1988 SEWA Annual Report and Selliah (1989:12) provide the following details. During the 1975 Emergency the Government announced that the rural poor would be exempted from repaying any outstanding loans they owed to private moneylenders. Some SEWA members took this to mean that they were not required to pay back the government-sponsored loans they had taken from the SEWA bank. Others, however, continued to repay their loans. The SEWA bank was still under the umbrella of the TLA, which refused to guarantee any further loans for the women.

Chandaben told me a vivid story of having a garland of slippers hung around her neck by some of the women who lost their access to credit as a result. This is a matter of great shame and disgrace and she swore that one day those women would hang a garland of roses upon her. Chandaben is proud to say that she "took the leadership" in the matter of forming the SEWA bank. She herself carried the registration fee of Rs 400 to the bank, and was one of the eleven signatories to the registration.

The fact that the charter document of the SEWA bank was signed by an otherwise illiterate woman is taken by SEWA as an example of the organisation's argument that it is a grassroots organisation. Chandaben's story is used in the lore of SEWA to symbolise "empowerment" and the establishment of new formations which benefit the self-employed. By "empowerment" is usually meant such things as the ability to make independent decisions, the ability to assess a situation with an eye to its long-term implications, and assuming responsibility for decisions which are made. In talking to Chandaben, however, it

is clear that she thinks the organisation has benefitted some people more than others, and that it has put the growth of the organisation ahead of the needs of its members. Put in terms of representational strategies, she remains at one level of representation, that of an heroic founder. She told me that she was unhappy that other women had been selected to represent SEWA at national and international events while she had never been granted that honour.

SEWA has moved into the technological representation of its members and its purpose. SEWA is connected with a communications firm in the USA called Martha Stewart Communications. This New York based organisation donated video cameras, editing equipment and video terminals to SEWA, thereby providing the foundation for an important element of SEWA's ability to represent itself to its members and to outsiders. SEWA has used the equipment to establish SEWA Video, a division of the SEWA Academy.

The video unit is staffed by four women, one of them a woman who serves as another example of SEWA providing its members with opportunities she would not otherwise have. Neelamben is a former vegetable vendor who cannot read or write, yet she operates video equipment by memorising the function of the buttons on the various control panels. She has produced a video about vegetable vendors. The shift from vegetable vendor to video producer represents a rather extraordinary example of the ways in which belonging to SEWA has changed some women's lives. The other members of Video SEWA are all educated, and are presently engaged in training a new batch of video producers and editors. The training is a valuable asset for these young women, who are the daughters of illiterate SEWA members. They themselves are educated, however.

The videos, most of them produced in Gujarati with English voice-over are about the lives of the working poor, and their participation in SEWA. The topics include milk-co-operative training, the establishment of child-care centres, the history of SEWA, interviews with tobacco workers, health issues such as immunisation and oral rehydration,

the SEWA bank, and accounts of various struggles waged by SEWA members. Although they seem rather unspontaneous to someone accustomed to North American television, they are intended to be educational, a term which has its own cultural salience. Their somewhat didactic tone and rhetorical language reinforce the message that SEWA is successful. Although middle-class people in India might be accustomed to videos of weddings which capture every moment of the event, the presence of the video crew and their technology is something of a novelty for those new members who come to SEWA for training sessions. Some of the paper-pickers whom I got to know were pleased to have been the subject of a video which portrayed their struggle to keep their co-operative working, and insisted I make a point of seeing 'their' video at the SEWA Academy.

Some of the SEWA training sessions held in the SEWA Academy are videotaped, and the results played back to the women. Villagers who have never been to Ahmedabad before, or perhaps have never seen a television, find themselves and their friends on the screen, and one imagines it will make a wonderful story when they go home.

The Annual General Meeting is also videotaped for archival and educational purposes. At those meetings, the co-operatives recount the highlights of the year's activities: the resistance they have overcome, the struggles they have waged, the number of new members they have reached. Those videos are also shown in the villages, when it is technologically feasible to do so. A special program of the highlights of the week's activities is shown at the meetings held every Saturday in the *pratna* hall of the Reception Centre. If a delegation has gone to see the Chief Minister, or a new dispensary has been opened, the event will be taped and shown in these Saturday meetings. The video crew is on hand to record the passage of every important foreign guest through the Reception Centre, and to record those peoples' words and actions. The sight of Mary Robinson, the President of Ireland, being greeted by Ela Bhatt, Renana Jhabvala and Lalita Krishnaswamy, and being led through the building and being shown how to apply a woodblock to a piece of fabric, will always be accessible to SEWA members. In 1994, the

Doordarshan TV station in Ahmedabad began showing a segment of the 'weekly highlights' video, on Wednesday evening. This raises the visibility of SEWA in Ahmedabad, and perhaps will increase membership. Video serves as an equivalent of the newsletter for those members unable to read, and able to attend the meetings, in a way which seems to fulfill McLuhan's predictions about new forms of literacy in the global village.

The national and international media are also an influence on the creation and forms of a global ethnoscape, as Appadurai notes, and serve to represent peoples to each other, as more people gain access to radio and television. Even some of the poorest residents of Ahmedabad own or have access to a television sets. The representations in this global ethnoscape may be shallow and rather stereotyped and I would sometimes find myself trying to convince people that what they saw in those programmes was not an accurate portrayal of family life or morality in North America, but a fiction. More than once, days which began for me in the early dark in Ahmedabad and involved hours of travelling over stereotypically trackless wastes, to what seemed to me remote villages, would end in being invited in to watch Star TV or Doordarshan. On one such journey, the SEWA team had been invited to stay overnight in the home of a local SEWA organiser, and what seemed to me the timeless beauty of the early morning *puja* in the Brahmin household was followed by American rap music from MTV via Star TV.

Summary

This chapter has considered the ways in which SEWA wages what I have called ideological struggles in its efforts to create an alternative form of development for the urban and rural poor. The principal elements of the ideology are: the need for development which is to benefit women to begin with women, a grassroots ethic of participation and the effort to conceptualise existing organisational structures (such as the union) on its own terms, for its own purposes. I have suggested that SEWA's ideology is both practical and

visionary, in that its long term purpose is to effect changes in the lives of the economically marginal women of Ahmedabad. SEWA's ideological struggles are waged through the establishment of an institution - the bank - which would not otherwise be accessible to the economically-marginal women. Another means by which SEWA works to effect change is through its representational strategies. That is, it represents its members as self-employed and as entrepreneurs, in an effort to suggest that the values attached to those terms also apply to its members. They are, in SEWA's terms, not just the poor who absorb the wealth of the city but are active contributors to the economy.

I have pointed out that SEWA is part of what Appadurai has termed the global ethnoscape. The globalising of the economy has had the effect of throwing textile mill employees out of work and forcing the majority of them into the informal sector. SEWA taps into international networks of development agencies, trade unions and informational technologies to bring the economic issues which affect the self-employed women of Ahmedabad to national and international attention.

As the 10-point list of questions makes clear, SEWA's approach to women-focussed development is based on the idea that women's economic activities are the ground on which the kinds of social change they require must be built. The list is practical and visionary. It is based on the factors which contribute to women's ability to work, such as the need to be sufficiently nourished, and extends to abstractions concerning their self-conceptualisations (self-reliance for instance).

SEWA's ideology and action focus exclusively on women, and it constructs its members as economic actors, situated in social contexts, but capable of overcoming the gendered obstacles of those situations. I take up some of these issues again in the concluding chapter. First, however, I will discuss the organisational structure of SEWA.

CHAPTER FOUR: SEWA'S ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

The construction of an effective organisation requires an institutional structure in which and through which to disseminate its ideology. In this section I will show that the structure of the Self-Employed Women's Association represents the ideology of SEWA and that SEWA's concept of development as an holistic endeavour is demonstrated in the forms of the organisation. I will also describe how the various departments are set up and how they relate to each other and how the organisation has developed as its membership has diversified and it has responded to new challenges.

Membership in SEWA

I begin with a discussion of membership and with the ways in which SEWA recruits new members. The terms 'member' and organiser' represent *continua* rather than discrete categories at SEWA. All organisers are members and the organisers who move about the *galis* (narrow residential lanes) and poor areas will most likely come from the ranks of the self-employed. The organisers receive a small salary for this work. In most cases that salary supplements their income although in a few cases it might provide an income where they have none. Most of the organisers have direct working experience of a particular trade and some of them have experience in resolving problems between workers and employers through negotiation. Many SEWA members are recruited by members of their own families or by neighbours. The credibility of the organisers is based on a number of things. One is their ability to convince potential members that they understand the problems faced by self-employed women because that is their own experience. They must also be able to convince the women they would recruit that they understand the economics of poverty. The details of their own lives are evidence of this in many cases. Finally the organisers must be able to convince the illiterate *pappad* roller or the home-based garment worker that SEWA membership will be of benefit to them and that their own experience

(that of the organisers) with SEWA has been beneficial. It is at this 'immediate' level of operation that SEWA's operating principles are conveyed and demonstrated. Organisers must demonstrate patience and willingness to listen to concerns, to return over and over again if necessary to demonstrate the intended goodwill of the organisation and to support new members in whatever problems they face. The demonstrated power of the organisation to interact with existing political and legal systems is also a strong element of the organisers' persuasive arsenal. The story of SEWA's struggle on behalf of the vegetable vendors in Manek Chowk (recounted in Chapter Three) has a certain salience for the educated reader who encounters it in a text. That same story told by an illiterate *bidi* worker who has experienced the benefits of membership in SEWA has the power to persuade others in a similar situation that there is benefit to be gained from belonging to SEWA.

Officially SEWA membership consists of paying the annual Rs 5 membership fee and having a card with a photograph either signed or stamped with a thumbprint. This entitles a woman to be a member but does not obligate her to participate in the affairs of the organisation if she does not wish to. Her degree of participation in SEWA can range from paying the membership fee and never going to a meeting to becoming an active organiser herself. Some organisers are 'found', others are 'made'. Those who are found tend to be outspoken and articulate to begin with and to quickly understand the value of belonging to SEWA. Two of the women I came to know best fell into this 'active organiser' category, and one of them was elected to the Executive Committee (discussed below) while I was in Ahmedabad.

When a woman becomes an organiser she might attend training programmes, work at recruiting new members, encourage other members to take part in training programmes, attend meetings in the residential localities and at the Reception Centre and travel as a SEWA representative to villages and to other cities. How much of any of these things she actually does will depend on a number of factors, only one of which is her wish to be

involved. She may face resistance from family members who think she belongs at home or who think that going to SEWA is an excuse to avoid domestic responsibilities. The concerns of family members with women going out in public beyond the confines of their neighbourhoods were discussed earlier. It is also the case that for some of the self-employed women of Ahmedabad the Rs 5 membership fee and the cost of the photograph (a one time expense of Rs 5) must be carefully gleaned from minuscule earnings. All members are eligible to join the Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank (discussed below) and to take part in health care or child-care programmes. SEWA will help those members who wish to do so form a co-operative. (The formation and operation of co-operatives is discussed later in this chapter.)

When a woman joins SEWA she joins a union. The first thing to note about SEWA's organisational structure is that it has grown from being an auxiliary of a trade union to being an accredited trade union in its own right. It is now an affiliate member of international unions as well as India-wide and international movements concerned with ways to help the very poor. The union is the principal structure of SEWA. It is the umbrella organisation under which every member and every activity are gathered.

A Union of the Self-Employed

SEWA was registered as a Union under the Trade Union Act in 1972 and now claims to be "Gujarat's single largest union" (Annual Report 1993:1), with 54,236 members in 1993. Of those, 23,743 were urban members, and 30, 493 were rural members (*ibid.*). Those 50,000 members of SEWA are distributed across numerous spaces, occupations and communities.

Governance of the union, as outlined in the 1988 SEWA Annual Report (pp. 20-21) is as follows: The 50,00 members of the SEWA union elect someone to represent their trade (*bidi* rolling, for example or vegetable vending) in a ratio of one representative for every 100 women in those trades. Those representative form the Trade Council

(*Pratinidhi Mandal*). Each trade also has a Trade Committee (*Dhanda Samiti*) which exists in parallel to the Trade Council. Trade Committee members are elected but not in any specific representative ratio. A Trade Committee can have anywhere from 15 to 50 members. The Trade Committees meet every month to discuss problems. The Trade Council members also belong to the Trade Committees. Every three years the Trade Council elects an Executive Committee. That Executive Committee had 25 members in 1988 and in 1993 had 30 members. The Executive Committee holds internal elections for officers. In addition to the elected members of the Executive Committee some are 'invited'. In 1993 five of the 30 members were invited.

The Executive Committee is the apex decision-making body of the union and the bank. This Committee is another example of SEWA's ability and willingness to incorporate people from all sectors of society and to operate as a grassroots organisation. The Executive Committee is headed by a President, who is the leader of the co-operative with the most members. In 1993, this was the leader of the *bidi* rollers. Ela Bhatt sits on the Executive Committee, in her capacity as General Secretary of SEWA. There are two other Secretaries, both invited. One of these women left a Ph.D. programme in mathematics at Harvard to work at SEWA. There are three Vice-Presidents, one of them a self-employed woman who was a member of the original TLA-SEWA. The other two are both university educated.

The 1993 Annual Report lists these seven women first, without further designation, and the remaining 23 (of whom five are invitees) as members. Of the 18 members whose trades are listed, three work in textiles (embroidery, patchwork and block printing); six work in 'land-based co-operatives' (nursery, agricultural labour and dairy co-operatives); four are tobacco processors; two are *bidi* rollers (in addition to the President) and two others are tobacco-processing workers. Two members are vegetable vendors. The list is completed by one ready-made garment worker and one 'paper picker.'

The five people who sat on the Executive Committee in 1994 as invitees are all high-powered women and high-powered members of the organisation. That is to say, they are involved in high-level decision-making and head the branches of the organisation. Four of them bring professional qualifications to the work they do at SEWA. The head of *Lok Svasthya* (the health division) is a woman who has a degree in Public Health from an American university. Another highly-educated woman heads the SEWA Academy, the educational and media 'Wing' of SEWA. The video unit is part of this wing. The training sessions which 'concientise' women in SEWA's ethics and purpose are held under the auspices of the SEWA Academy. As the name suggests, the Academy also houses the library. The Academy has been given the task of co-ordinating and carrying out research on the self-employed women of Ahmedabad. Another invitee is Ela Bhatt's daughter-in-law, a woman who gave up a career in the prestigious Indian Administrative Service (IAS) to head SEWA's Rural Wing. Another is a professional banker who left the formal sector to head the SEWA Bank. The other member of this group is a woman who has a part in the last chapter of this thesis. Her qualification for invitation is her many years of devoted *sewa* at SEWA. She is also a former Vice-President of SEWA.

What is now the independent organisation called SEWA began its existence in 1954, as the Women's Wing of the TLA (Bhatt 1976, Sebstad 1982:1).[1] The purpose of the Women's Wing was social work for the female kin of TLA members. The Women's Wing offered sewing classes, typewriting and other income generation programmes. It also made efforts to improve the working conditions and the economic situation of its members. The umbrella term for all of these activities was called "upliftment". In 1972,

[1]The TLA (also known as *Majoor Mahajan*) was formed in 1920. Patel (1987) gives a membership figure of 100,000 in her discussion of labour relations in Ahmedabad. One of the founders of the TLA was M.K. Gandhi who, in 1917, negotiated a wage settlement between the owners and the workers in a number of textile mills. Anasuya Sarabhai, sister of one of the wealthiest mill owners, pleaded the case of the workers, who were demanding that a "plague bonus" which had been promised to them, as inducement to stay on the job during an outbreak of plague, be paid to them. The mill owners were refusing to pay. This refusal, coupled with a very high rate of wartime inflation, caused great hardship for the textile workers. Gandhi instituted a system of arbitration, demanding that each side treat the other reasonably (Patel 1987, Gillion 1967).

the Self Employed Women's Association was begun within the TLA, when Ela Bhatt became involved in the efforts of some women handcart pullers who were trying to earn a more stable income. In what has been a part of the way SEWA has operated ever since, there was a public rally and a demand for better wages. The idea that the self-employed should also have a union was born during that rally.

For the first decade of its existence SEWA was a part of the TLA, a powerful trade union, the oldest in Gujarat, and one associated with Gandhi[2]. Under the leadership of Arvind Buch (the President of the TLA and the President of the Women's Wing) and Ela Bhatt (the General Secretary of the Women's Wing) some 5,000 women in the informal sector were drawn into the domain of the trade union, with the intention of organising women who had no formal contractual relationship with the textile mills and improving their economic situation. That it has managed to survive independently and to prosper is a tribute to the skills of the leaders, the support and enthusiasm of the members and their combined ability to maintain the organisation.

Most but not all of the women in the original SEWA worked in trades connected with the textile industry. They worked as headloaders transporting bundles of cloth around the city and as home-based spinners who supplied thread to the mills. Others were engaged in trades unrelated to the textile industry, such as selling vegetable and picking paper and rags and other materials from the streets. Some, but not all, were the wives and kin of TLA members.

SEWA was driven out of the TLA in 1981. A number of factors contributed to the split as that split is recounted in the SEWA's 1988 SEWA Annual Report (p.12). One factor was the TLA leadership's resentment of Ela Bhatt's increasing assertiveness. The TLA seems to have seen the rising power of the SEWA union as a challenge to its own authority. The fact that Ela Bhatt was awarded the prestigious Magsaysay Award in 1977

[2]Sujata Patel (1987) provides a Marxist-historiographic analysis of the foundation of the TLA, and its earliest efforts to gain benefits for its members.

probably contributed to the rising resentment. The ultimate break came in 1981 during an anti-reservation riot in which upper-caste people attacked some of the 'Harijans'[3] who belonged to TLA and to SEWA. Ela Bhatt was unwilling to be silent on the subject of violence against 'Harijans' while the TLA had decided to not make a public statement. This was because to remain silent on the subject of violence was, according to her, to contribute to violence.[4]

There are numerous ideological aspects to this break, as the account of the event in SEWA's 1988 Annual Report indicates. One aspect of the break is that it was a woman who spoke out, when the Women's Wing was supposed to be grateful for its inclusion in the TLA. The fact that Ela Bhatt spoke out in defiance of the TLA's decision to keep silent is another. It appears that Ela Bhatt was also becoming more of an activist for women's rights than the union wished her to be (1988 SEWA Annual Report:12). As the story goes, she had just returned from a journey to Israel where she had been studying *kibbutz* operations when she spoke out publicly on the reservation issue. She was summarily told to leave the TLA. Whether the TLA leadership thought the women would stay without her or whether they were no longer willing to contend with the competition between the self-employed members of SEWA and the formal-sector majority of its membership is not clear.

SEWA has grown rapidly since it became an independent organisation, although there are conflicting figures in SEWA documents about the numbers. Most SEWA reports

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[3]Harijan was Gandhi's term for Untouchables or outcastes. The term means 'people of God'. There are probably people for whom the term has a positive connotation. There is also a widespread effort in India to refer to 'former untouchables' as *dalits*. This term means 'the oppressed'.

[4]In his discussion of social movements in India, Shah discusses a number of studies of "industrial working class" movements, which he notes are concerned primarily with the formation and recognition of trade unions and with efforts by those trade unions to improve working conditions, job security and wage rates. However, some trade unions have become involved in other social issues, such as Reservation policies. Shah notes that union members belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes went on strike in Ahmedabad in 1981 "protesting against the anti-reservation agitations launched by caste Hindus. Caste Hindu workers also went on a one-day strike in support of the anti-reservation agitation" (Shah 1990:193). This account corroborates SEWA's version of the story. Shah cites one study which argues that "There has been a failure of the unions to present themselves as part of the democratic movement, to take up civil rights issues, the rights of peasants, the 'residual' dimensions of working class life [and] the rights of working women and tribals" (Shah 1990:194, citing Waterman, 1980).

give a figure of 5,000 members when SEWA was forced into independent existence in 1981 (Sebstad 1982:1). By the time the organisation had been independent for three years, there were 22,745 members (Bhatt 1989:203), and the claim was made that "SEWA [had] reached a total of about 40,000 women workers" in 1989 (1989:203). In 1993, SEWA reported a membership of 54,236 (Annual Report, 1993), which would be a tenfold increase in membership over the decade. These numbers reflect both a growth in numbers and a shift in focus from a strictly urban operation (23,743 urban members in 1993) to one which operates in the rural areas (30,493 rural members in 1993) in nine districts of Gujarat. Table 1 provides the membership figures for the period from 1972 to 1993. The figures for 1973 to 1987 are taken from SEWA's 1988 Annual Report (p.21). The remaining figures are taken from the Annual Reports for the years 1988 to 1993.

Table 1. SEWA Union Membership, 1973-1988

Year	No. of Members	Year	No. of Members
1973	320	1984	22,739
1974	3,130	1985	15,741
1975	3,850	1986	20,811
1976	1,630	1987	15,144
1977	1,748	1988	--
1978	730	1989	--
1979	2,041	1990	--
1980	4,934	1991	46,016
1981	6,087	1992	41,867
1982	10,733	1993	54,236
1983	13,386		

Practically speaking, membership in the SEWA union is the means of access to any other facet of SEWA other than to the bank. That is, a woman must belong to the union in order to belong to a co-operative or have her children attend a SEWA *anganwadi* or *balwadi* (child-care centres). The desire to belong to the union must be combined with some ability to work. The ability to work, and the definition of 'work' are on SEWA's own

terms, rather than those of the formal sector[5]. The work can be of any kind, so long as it is honest and respectable and done by an adult (*i.e.*, SEWA does not engage in the issues of child labour.) In SEWA's terms this might be the ability to manufacture a saleable object by recycling used goods (making kitchen utensils out of used oil drums, for example) or the ability to bargain with wholesalers for a commodity for resale (vegetables, for example), or the willingness to take on steady employment (office cleaners, for example).

In symbolic terms a union of the self-employed is an oxymoron, a term comprising a set of contradictions. The idea of the self-employed forming a union seems to contradict the traditional principles of a trade union, as they have been articulated in North America and in India. Those principles are based in the idea that workers who have a contractual relationship with an employer can unite to withdraw their labour from that employer, when there is a conflict about wages, working conditions or the right to work. The employer must then negotiate a settlement of claims or grievances with a single body of workers' representatives. Also contained within the traditional principles of a trade union is the practice of other unions honouring the withdrawal of labour, which does not happen with a union of the self-employed.

The SEWA union meets none of these criteria. SEWA's insistence that its members are first and foremost members of a union, and that it is union activities which define the organisation, is an important aspect of its struggle to define itself on its own terms. However, this union cannot bring any pressure to bear on the work-related issues which its members face, because the union is not a party to the wage negotiations its members engage in. The relationship between a trade union such as the TLA, its members and their employers is fixed in legislation and there are agreed upon negotiating procedures to deal with problems. However, the members of the SEWA union have no power to put pressure

[5]The formal sector is so called because its members have contractual relationships with employers which establish the terms of employment, salary and benefits such as pension schemes and holidays. Protection of the rights of formal sector workers is also applied to the right to retain employment, to have access to promotion and to negotiate wage increases. The formal sector comprises both government and private sector operations.

on employers by withdrawing their labour, because the SEWA union has no contractual relationship with its members' employers. SEWA's members work as individuals with informal economic agreements with individual traders, who are themselves self-employed. The SEWA union is not the same kind of organisation as the union in which it was formed. For one thing, the TLA and other trade unions work full time on the issues of economic relations between factory owners and their employees, while SEWA has moved into such areas as co-operative formation and the marketing of goods and services, which are not the domain of a trade union.

Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank

In principle, everyone at SEWA belongs to the union, and every member of SEWA is a member of the bank. However, in practice, it is possible to be a member of one of these branches and not the other. Many people, in fact, only join the bank, finding it useful to have access to the financial services offered, but not needing or wanting or being eligible to join, the union or a co-operative.

The Bank, like the union, was also formed while SEWA was part of the TLA, in 1974. It is one of SEWA's cardinal principles that access to credit is necessary if women are to become 'self-reliant'. And self-reliance begins with economic independence, in SEWA's view. Women's economic dependence on men is the crux of SEWA's position that the self-employed are at the mercy of moneylenders, most of whom are men, and that wives are at the mercy of husbands who control the funds of the household.

The Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari (Women's Co-operative) Bank was formed in 1974 when 4000 women contributed Rs 10 each to a founding fund. The Bank had 18,000 shareholders in 1985[6] and lists 41,419 depositors in its 1993 report. The financial services

[6]Of the 71 people employed by the bank, 35 are organisers (16 of them organising training programmes for savings, co-operative financing and loan recovery); 16 are administrators and six are service people, which includes the computer operators.

offered include loans which can either be 'secured' with collateral (such as jewellery or any item which has value) or 'unsecured'. Unsecured loans are given on the basis of a member's reputation for thrift and being vouched for by an organiser or fellow *mandli* (co-operative) member. If a loan is not repaid one of SEWA's loan recovery officers will try to ensure that the member repays the loan. A loan recovery officer from the Bank will visit her and try to encourage her to repay the loan, perhaps on re-negotiated terms. The SEWA Bank is proud of its 97% repayment rate.

Financial services also include such things as insurance schemes, such as the maternity schemes which provide a cash amount for the period following childbirth, so as to enable the mother to regain her strength without having to return to work immediately. The bank offers a Life Insurance programme (operated by the Life Insurance Corporation, a government body) in which premiums (*hafta*) are paid into a policy, and death benefits are paid when a spouse dies. Without the SEWA Bank it would be all but impossible for the very poorest to obtain insurance coverage. A family can be driven even further into debt when a family member dies, needing to borrow money for funeral expenses at the same time as losing a breadwinner. The SEWA Bank also provides financial advice to its members. For example, the people in the Loans department at the bank would most likely try to convince the beneficiary to put the money into a bank account, because she might otherwise be persuaded to hand over the money to a male relative and be left with nothing.

The most important function of the Bank, as it is perceived by the organisers, is the provision of loans for the purpose of income generation. Some of these loans are made directly by the SEWA Bank from its own funds. Other loans are made to SEWA members, through the bank, by government departments. The SEWA Bank also finances a large number of Trade Groups, which are neither co-operatives nor independent enterprises.[7]

[7]I list the Trade Groups here to give a sense of their diversity. The following trade groups are financed by the SEWA Bank: head loaders, hand-cart pullers, used garment dealers, vegetable, fruit and egg vendors, patch workers, garment workers, household workers, agarbatti workers, scrap collectors, construction workers, hand-block printers, pappad rollers, cloth vendors, kerosene vendors, fish vendors, potato chip vendors, wood dealers, spinning wheel workers, puffed rice producers, embroidery workers, snack shop keepers, waste paper vendors, carpenters, blacksmiths, typing

The SEWA Bank is affiliated with the Friends of Women's World Banking (FWWB) an international organisation whose purpose is to provide credit to women for income generation purposes. Ela Bhatt is the Chair of FWWB in India.

SEWA's Rural Operations

An important aspect of SEWA's organisational structure is the division of its activities into rural and urban sectors. SEWA's Rural Wing includes organising activities and co-operative formation in all districts of Gujarat. These divisions into rural and urban are based on the kinds of development projects being carried out and on the Government's allocation of funds for rural and urban projects. The union, principally an urban organisation, does have members who work in the tobacco industry in rural Kheda District as well as many others who roll *bidis* in Ahmedabad city. Most of the work of the Rural Wing, however, concerns "land-based" activities, such as those listed in Table 2 below. Some of the Rural Wing work involves the revival of traditional crafts, as these activities are taken up to earn cash when agricultural work is either not necessary if one owns land, or not required, if one is a labourer on someone else's farm. The revival of traditional crafts is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

The Rural Wing organisers acknowledge that "union" membership and labour organising activity has little meaning for landless labourers. In the city, it is possible to argue that union membership for the self-employed has some meaning, since there are examples of other unions there. In the villages, however, efforts to organise people as *union members* would make little sense, because (i) landless agricultural labourers have no bargaining power with the landlords for whom they labour and (ii) they are easily identified, perhaps as troublemakers, since they are village residents and known to

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and duplicating services providers, ribbon makers, betel nut (*supari*) workers, agricultural labourers, weavers, bamboo workers, milk producers, detergent powder products, newspaper vendors, *bidi* workers, lathe machine operators, dog dealers, photographers, electric goods producers, plastic goods vendors, house repairers, book binders, cobblers, brick workers, potters, essence producers and household-goods makers" (SEWA Annual Report 1988:47).

everyone. In the city, a gathering of disaffected workers might be tolerated: in the villages, the threat of violent response from employers is always present. I travelled to some of these projects with an organiser who told me that she and the women she was encouraging to join SEWA had been threatened several times by landowners who resented her 'interference' in the lives of 'their' labourers.

Land-based Co-operatives, 1993. Most of the 14 land-based co-operatives are engaged in social forestry. The members of these co-operatives raise plants and saplings, either in gardens adjacent to their homes or on land donated for the purpose by village *panchayats* (elected councils). The International Labour Organisation has contributed funds to the wasteland development programmes. To see this work being done is to understand the meaning of 'labour intensive'. I saw a hand-dug well, 40 feet deep, on one journey to a nursery co-operative. The thousands of seedlings for the nursery are placed in handmade bags with some soil and fertiliser. Every drop of water which those seedlings will require is carried by hand from that well.

As the following table, taken from the 1993 Annual Report (p.43) shows, this is the most lucrative of all the work in which SEWA co-operatives engage. Of the 14 co-operatives, three were registered in 1988, four in 1989, one in 1991, and the remaining six are not yet registered. The first 13 co-operatives listed in Table 2 are located in Ahmedabad District. The last one is located in Mahesana District.

Table 2: SEWA's Land-based Co-operatives, 1993

No. of members	No. of acres of land developed	Water resources dev'd.	Nursery Saplings raised	Woman-days worked	Average monthly income in rupees	Total income in rupees
6	10	1 well	30,000	1,000	375	15,000
27	-	1 plastic-lined pond	1,37,000	2,571	not given	38,567
5	-	2 wells	10,000	333	1,000	5,000
not given	-	1 well	-	2,736	not given	41,000
11	5	1 well	55,000	1,834	2,500	27,000
12	5	1 well	1,10,000	3,667	4,584	55,000
35	9	-	1,00,000	3,334	1,429	50,000
8	1	-	40,000	1,334	2,500	20,000
5	1	-	30,000	1,000	3,000	15,000
5	1	-	30,000	1,000	3,000	15,000
5	1	-	25,000	834	2,500	12,500
2	0.5	-	10,000	334	2,500	5,000
1	0.5	-	5,000	117	2,500	2,500
41	10	1 plastic-lined pond	-	-	-	-
		1 nursery tank	50,000	365	450	80,041
		1 cement pipeline	30,000	324	350	60,809

In addition to these nursery co-operatives, SEWA's rural members are also engaged in 13 artisan co-operatives which produce embroidery, patchwork and beadwork items. All of SEWA's rural co-operatives operate under the government's DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) programmes.

Co-operatives

One of the bases of SEWA's claim to be a grassroots organisation is its participation in Gujarat's thriving co-operative movement, for which the state is famous. The formation of co-operatives is also at the heart of SEWA's efforts to establish "alternative economic structures" (SEWA Annual Report 1988:48) for its members. The

formation of co-operatives is also part of SEWA's efforts to transform the relations of production within which its members work, to help them sell their products, and to transform the ways in which the women perceive themselves.

It is a tribute to SEWA's organising genius, and to SEWA's power and "visibility" in Ahmedabad, Gujarat and India, that the organisation has enabled so many, and such diverse, co-operatives to form. In 1994, the number of co-operatives under SEWA's wing had reached a total of 60, of which 35 were dairy co-operatives, 14 were "land-based", six were 'artisan' co-operatives, two were engaged in 'trading and vending' (one of them the fish marketing co-operative formerly run by the woman who sells tea outside the Reception Centre) and three were 'service' co-operatives. Of those 60, all but seven were state-registered co-operatives and those seven were in the final stages of being registered.

Membership numbers vary widely in these co-operatives, as does the difference between the number of registered and 'active' (SEWA's own term) members. In the dairy co-operatives, for instance, only 1,408 women were active (as defined by SEWA), while 2,237 were registered. The income figures also vary, depending on the amount of milk produced and sold, with the average monthly income of individual members ranging from a low of Rs 422, to a high of Rs 1,396. Ten co-operatives have more than 90 members; 13 have 30-50 members, nine co-operatives have between 51 and 90 members and three co-operatives have less than 30 members[8].

The 1993 membership and income figures for the Ahmedabad co-operatives are shown in Tables 3a, 3b and 3c. Of these six co-operatives, four were formed in 1982, one in 1986, and one has yet to be registered. With only one exception, the fish marketing co-operative, these co-operatives have much larger numbers than the dairy co-operatives. No-one is listed as being 'inactive' in this table, although in fact, in at least one co-operative (the Vijay weavers' co-operative) most of the registered members are not

[8]SEWA's report provides a summary, a schematic representation which tends to stress cumulative totals, and gives no data on the number of hours worked, the number of cattle owned or the problems faced by the co-operatives.

working in the occupation for which the co-operative was registered. Tables 3a, 3b and 3c are reproduced from the 1993 Annual Report (pp. 41-42).

Table 3a: SEWA Craft and Artisan Co-operatives in Ahmedabad

Co-operative Activity	No. of Active Members	Annual Sales in rupees	Average Monthly Income in rupees	Annual Profits in rupees
Sabina Patchwork	300	9,86,041	257	29,433
Aabodana Block-Printing	232	1,460,641	397	41,529
Baansari Cane & Bamboo	244	239,282	787	22,179
Vijay Weaving	not given	23,887	not given	not given
Utsah Weaving	20	1,90,232		1,856
Shakti Embroidery	45	177,405	103	47,000

Table 3b: Trading and Vending Co-operatives

Co-op Activity	No. of members	No. of active members	Annual Income in rupees	Annual Sales in rupees	Average Monthly Income in rupees	Annual Profits in rupees
Vegetable and fruit	80	24	30,30,468	29,17,702	1,200	1,12,766
Fish trading	25	4	57,600			

Table 3c: Service Co-operatives

Co-op activity	No. of members	Annual Sales in rupees	Annual Profit in rupees
Cleaning	300	426,269	22,101
Nasta Ekam*	70	1,118,844	29,000
Paper pickers P**	400	not given	not given
Paper pickers T***	350	not given	not given
File makers P	350	not given	not given
File makers T	200	not given	not given

*Catering and packaged snacks service

** Permanent co-operative members *** Temporary co-operative members

Although the union is the most fundamental organisation which operates at SEWA, there are other ways of operationalising SEWA's activities. SEWA's shift into the organising of co-operatives - the subject of this chapter - does not deny the validity of the organisation being a union, but works in tandem with it. The increasing number of co-operatives being established by and within SEWA is an indicator of a close-knit relationship with the government, since it is government funds which fuel the co-operative movement in Gujarat. There are many benefits to forming co-operatives: a registered co-operative which relies on raw materials such as cane and bamboo, for instance, will be granted the right to a steady supply of cane and bamboo at protected prices. These are both important elements in the economic security of a co-operative. Given that one of SEWA's aims is to break the exploitative bonds between middlemen (cane and bamboo traders in this case), and the women who need a resource to make a living, the formation of a co-operative is an effective strategy. This legislated right does not guarantee that there will not be problems with the supply of resources, and problems with the costs being illegally raised[9], but it does mean that there are established legal grounds on which to lodge complaints. This in itself is a move 'forward' for women who work in the informal sector. When a co-operative has been registered, it is entitled to government support for training and loans and grants for working equipment. There are problems with every stage of this process, as the accounts in this chapter show.

One of the Vice-Presidents of SEWA, Lalita Krishnaswamy, has been given the responsibility of heading the Gujarat State Co-Operative Federation. Its first task (one which was beginning to be formulated while I was there) has been to survey the number of co-operatives in the state which are run by women and are presently defunct. The purpose

[9]When I spoke to a member of the *baansari* cane and bamboo co-operative, I was told that the traders had been refusing to give the SEWA women their 'share' of the bamboo, and had been holding out for higher prices than those set by the government. Other, non-SEWA co-operatives would still be in competition with each other, and also with the SEWA co-operative, despite the structure of the co-operative. For SEWA's purposes, the formation of this co-operative is a step in the right direction, as its formalises the relations of the women's labour, but for this co-operative and others, the formation of a co-operative is only the earliest beginning of an improved situation.

of the survey will be to try to learn why those co-operatives have failed. This will undoubtedly be an opportunity for SEWA to bring its ideological position and operational strategies to bear on the lives of women in all parts of the state. One reason SEWA was asked to do this is its success in rural areas. The success most applicable to the discussion in this chapter is SEWA's success in organising rural artisans. For many of those women, doing 'handicrafts' is a way to earn an income when there is no agricultural labour to be had. The creation of beautiful garments and household objects is a necessary skill in many communities, as women make their own wedding garments and household items.

This high-ranking organiser's role in the state-wide endeavour is yet another example of the discourse about improvements in the economic situations of poor women being multi-directional: in this case, having an effect on Government policy, and serving as a source of information and expertise, rather than being a 'recipient' of government programmes.

SEWA has retained its original membership of paper-pickers, *chindi*-workers, small-scale vendors, salt producers, and others in similarly modest occupations, and has insisted that they, too, could form co-operatives and thereby gain access to the rights and benefits which accrue to a more conventional co-operative, in which the members are more likely to be educated, to have assets, to know how to keep accounts and produce marketable goods for sale. According to SEWA's own assessments, these are amongst the most important factors in the successful operation of a co-operative, but, if one recalls SEWA's definitions of 'self-employed' labour, and the fact that most of SEWA's members are uneducated and unschooled in commerce and marketing, it is evident that there will be a great deal of support required from SEWA and from other government agencies, if the co-operatives are to operate successfully.

It seemed to me that membership in a co-operative might be the most accessible way of thinking about membership in SEWA, for most of the self-employed women. The organisation's affiliations with international unions has some value, certainly, as does the

fact that SEWA is a registered trade union, but this value is abstracted from the lived realities of earning a living. It is co-operative membership which is the tie that binds, so to speak. Co-operative members are responsible to each other for the continued existence of the co-operatives and for the success of their operation. A committee of elected co-operative members is responsible for the management of the co-operative: that committee makes decisions about purchasing raw materials, the allocation of work and the marketing of the finished goods. The profits of the co-operative are divided amongst the members as their salary.

Often, but not always, co-operative members are one's neighbours. They are also likely to be people with whom one has long-standing ties, and/or experiences in common. This is evidently the case for those co-operatives which have revived traditional skills, such as weaving, cane and bamboo work and block-printing since these are skills which are associated with 'communities'. If the traditional craft being revived is one that has 'always' been done by a particular community, then the members of that co-operative will be from that community.

Summary In this chapter I have traced the structure of the organisation, principally the union, the bank and the co-operatives. I began with a discussion of membership, however, because SEWA's efforts to build its numbers from amongst the grassroots are vitally important to the organisation. The fact that membership is based on the need to earn an income, rather than on caste or community, is an important aspect of SEWA's efforts to encourage women to think of themselves as economic agents and as workers. The self-employed women are involved in the highest levels of decision-making within the organisation, which supports SEWA's claim to be a grassroots organisation. However, SEWA is clearly an organisation which relies on the commitment and expertise of a number of highly-educated organisers who are in positions of power. This has some potentially problematic implications, as those women's understandings of the purpose of

the organisation are different from those of the self-employed women. For the high-level organisers I spoke to, building the organisation was SEWA's most useful contribution to effecting change in the situations of the poor.

The organisational structures represent a number of different things. For instance, a union of the self-employed, which would seem to be an anomaly, has been established by SEWA to signify the right of the economically-marginal women of Ahmedabad to have a voice in such things as labour legislation, as well as the ability of the union to influence that legislation. The union is the forum in which the problems of the economically-marginal women are revealed to be structural, rather than being private economic relations between individuals. The term union, of course, has another significance, which is the joining together of women on common ground. SEWA's insistence that it is still a union (*i.e.*, after it was thrown out of the TLA) signifies the ability of the organisation to be independent and to grow despite the difficulties it has faced. The international union affiliations are a means of attempting to ensure that the work-related problems of SEWA's members are expressed in international *fora*.

The Bank provides a critically-important asset to the self-employed women, which would not be available to the majority of them otherwise. Credit is the key to some of the new possibilities which SEWA envisions for its members and which they envision for themselves. The existence of a state-registered co-operative bank whose members are all women is another example of SEWA's efforts to link the economically-marginal women with the economic structures of the state, as is the involvement of SEWA in government-run co-operatives and rural-development programmes. A discussion of the formation and operation of two of these co-operatives is the subject of the next chapter.

Figure 1. Women gather in front of the SEWA Reception Centre. The tea stall run by Shantaben is behind them.

Figure 2. Village women who have come to SEWA for training sitting outside the Reception centre.

Figure 3. A SEWA member engaged in a social forestry programme. She has been watering the seedlings contained in the plastic bags.

Figure 4. A large-scale nursery project. The seedlings in these plastic bags will be distributed in a wasteland development project. The two women on the right are SEWA organisers.

Figure 5. Some members of the *Saundarya* co-operative.

Figure 6. Some members of the *Vijay* weavers' co-operative, gathered on the roof of one member's home.

Figure 7. Some village weavers who are relatives of one of the *Vijay* co-operative families in Ahmedabad gather for a photograph. Note that the loom takes up almost the entire width of the room.

Figure 8. Members of one of the *Vijay* co-operative families gathered outside their home in Ahmedabad for a family celebration. The space they occupy is the room between two houses.

Figure 9. The daughter of a *Vijay* co-operative member at work at the bobbin-winding machine in her home.

Figure 10. A member of the Design Library staff holding an embroidered shirt she has designed and stitched.

Figure 11. Some of the members of the *Saundarya* co-operative in the home of one of the members.

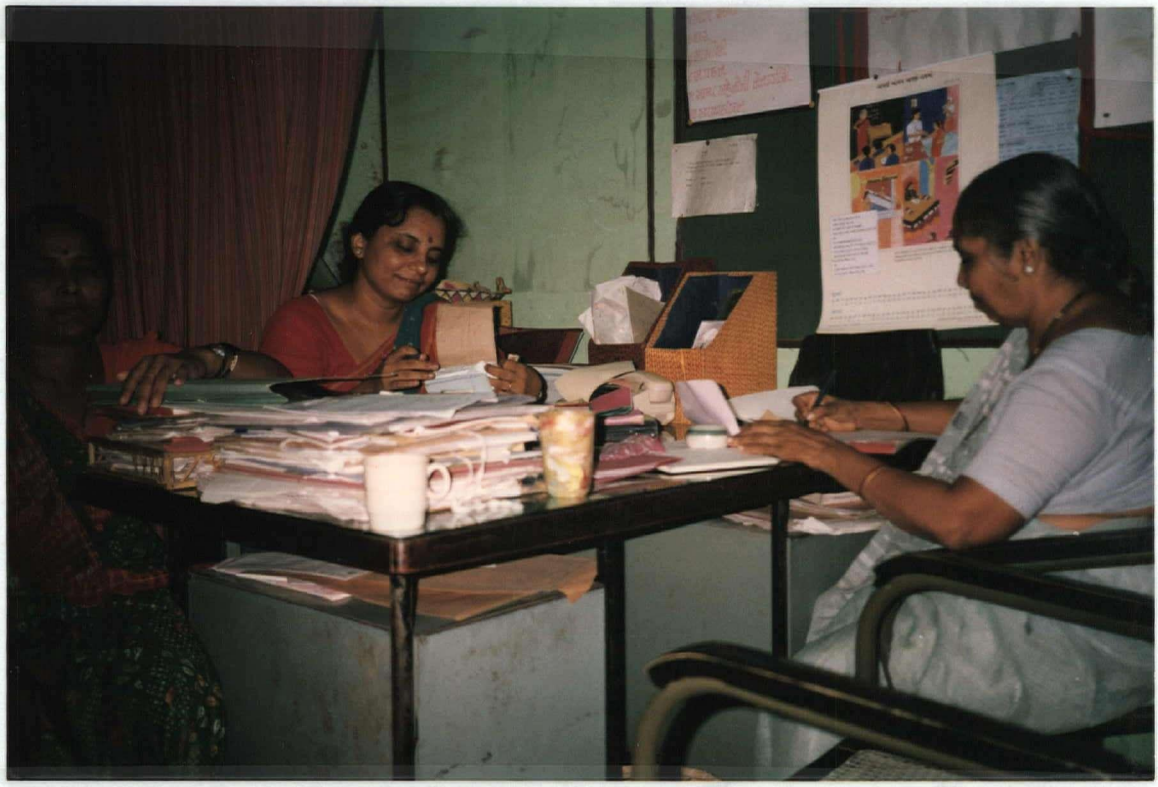

Figure 12. Three SEWA organisers at work in their Reception Centre office.

CHAPTER FIVE: CO-OPERATIVE ENDEAVOURS

In this chapter I turn to a discussion of the specific ways in which ideas, ideologies, structures, conceptualisations and representations operate in two of SEWA's urban co-operatives. My purpose is to relate to specific situations some of the issues which have been raised in previous chapters. I mean such things as how SEWA makes connections between its members and the organisational and financial resources which might work to benefit them. I will also discuss some of the issues concerning organising, and some of the claims made by SEWA about its efforts and the effects of those efforts on the self-employed. I cannot, after all, claim to 'know' what SEWA membership 'means' to co-operative members, because of the limitations of my linguistic ability, but I am able to provide some intimation of the ways in which some of these co-operative members talk about the organisation. I am better able to discuss the ways in which the conceptualisations of the self-employed women and their work, by the high-ranking organisers, affect the members because I was able to discuss these matters in English with some of those organisers.

I had thought before going to Ahmedabad that I would like to study the operation of a weaving co-operative. There were a number of reasons for this. I knew that weaving was one of the traditional skills which SEWA was trying to re-establish, in its income-generating programmes for women, so it fit with my wish to learn about an 'alternative' route to 'development'. I thought, at first, that close involvement with a weaving co-operative might clarify some aspects of SEWA's connections with a Gandhian ideology, but this proved to be a nebulous connection. That this connection turned out to be more rhetorical than practical was the means of my learning that a 'Gandhian' approach is one of the ways - important but not exclusive - in which SEWA organisers conceptualise the organisation and its work.

Studying the operation of a particular urban artisan co-operative seemed an 'accessible' and feasible way to examine whether the very poor could alter their economic situation through the revival of a 'traditional' skill, and whether this 'revival' might work for some skills and not for others. I wanted to examine how this 'revival' was conceptualised by weavers and by SEWA organisers, and how it might actually work. In practical terms, this meant learning how SEWA found and recruited the women who would become the members of the co-operative; what institutional resources were utilised in the establishment and operation of the co-operative, and how a weaving co-operative was related to the organisational structure of SEWA. I also needed to know what procedures were in place, once a co-operative was established and operating, to ensure its continued existence.

My search for an understanding of these issues led me into the organisational structure of SEWA, and into the numerous ways in which issues and practices are conceptualised and operationalised by SEWA members and organisers. There are numerous 'styles' of interaction practiced by SEWA organisers. I discuss two of these in this chapter as personal styles and, more importantly, as ways of manifesting the organisers' strategies as they relate to kinds of work. I discuss the combinations of connections made on behalf of members and the conceptualisations of SEWA's purpose which I understand to operate at SEWA, as they relate to two groups of co-operatives: the artisans' co-operatives and the paper-pickers' co-operatives.

Before any understanding of any kind could occur, I had to find some weavers. That proved to require quite some time and effort. My efforts to establish that connection began when I suggested to the organiser in charge of the artisans' co-operatives that I would like to interview members of a weavers' co-operative. She agreed with my request to introduce me to some members of an urban weaving co-operative, and suggested that a study might contribute to SEWA's knowledge of the current situation of that co-operative. (This was the same woman who had suggested that researchers at SEWA should

contribute to SEWA.) She went on to say that there were problems in the operation of the weavers' co-operative, and that relations between it and the organisation were somewhat strained, but she was unwilling at that stage to be any more specific. Eventually, I came to realise that there were competing perceptions between organisers and members about what was most productive and beneficial for the co-operative. This issue could be called a struggle *by* SEWA, on behalf of some of its members, and a struggle *with* SEWA, in which the purpose of the organisation conflicted with the purpose of some of the co-operative members. There were also struggles *within* the co-operative, concerning the allocation and use of resources.

Having gained the organiser's agreement, the next stage required gaining the agreement of the co-operative members themselves. Since the organiser was extremely busy with numerous projects and often out of town, it seemed best for me to make those connections on my own. Had they turned down my request, I would have made the request of the block-printers who worked on the roof of the Reception Centre. As it happened, I was given to understand that I could meet with the weavers in a few days' time, although this was not what actually occurred.

At the same time, I was getting to know some of the paper-pickers. This came about because of the layout of the Reception Centre, which is to say that the office of the organiser in charge of the paper-pickers is immediately inside the rear entrance of the Reception Centre, and next door to the office of the head of all the artisans' co-operatives. While waiting to meet with that woman, I would often fall gratefully into the comfort of the purple couch outside the office of the woman responsible for the paper-pickers. It was from that vantage point that I watched people flowing in and out of SEWA, and saw some of the everyday interactions between members and organisers. Some of those interactions were amusing, such as the time an organiser flew down the stairs and told everyone to be quiet and sit up straight, as some visitors were coming through. So we did, and those visitors saw a group of women murmuring quietly, in contrast to the hectic and

argumentative engagement of a few minutes earlier. Ordinarily, though, women came through the rear entrance to attend meetings, to ask for work, to bring problems to the attention of the organisers, to show samples of their embroidery work to the head of the Design Library, and to confer with each other.

That spot was one of the best places to gather news, talk to friends who had been summoned to meetings, and to learn about the daily and weekly routines which formed the institutional fabric of the relationship between the self-employed women and the organisers, as well as about the networks of friendship which operated amongst the members. As we waited with each other, with our various needs and purposes, we would try to communicate, and we did get to know each other somewhat. From the women I met while sitting on that purple couch, most of whom were paper-pickers, I eventually learned something about the complexities and the conflicting conceptualisations of the designation 'paper-picker' and their assessments of the long-term benefits of SEWA membership. I also learned about the connections between paper-picking and weaving, which is a connection I would not have made otherwise, since some of the women who were collecting paper from the roadside were members of a sub-caste whose original income-earning occupation was weaving.

Those women kindly invited me to their homes and to their places of work. Initially, I could not understand why these paper-pickers came to the Reception Centre every day, or why they had no paper, or why they even *had* a place of work, since I thought they roamed the streets collecting paper. In order to comprehend any of these things, I had to learn how the paper-pickers fit into the structure of the organisation. Because the weavers were still elusive, I decided that I would take advantage of the opportunity to learn about the paper-pickers, as well.

My relationship with the members of these two co-operatives became two more of my 'windows' on Ahmedabad from the point of view of a number of families, as distinct

from 'the organisation', thus allowing me some points of contact and contrast with the views from within SEWA.

Kagalwalis (Paper-Pickers)

There are several branches of the paper-pickers, gathered as discrete but connected co-operatives under the same SEWA leadership. There are a total of 300 SEWA members who are paper-pickers. I came to realise that it was (i) paper and (ii) position in the caste system and (iii) the role of the organiser 'in charge' of them that connected this *group* of co-operatives to each other. There are hierarchies within hierarchies in SEWA as in any organisation, and this is true of the paper-pickers. One group, the largest in number, forms the base of the paper-pickers' pyramid. They are the women who roam the streets gathering scraps of paper, and other items which have some commercial value (such as glass bottles or plastic carrier bags) which they then sell to a trader in that commodity. It is heartbreaking to see the very thin women, men and children who do this gathering, who are sometimes dressed in roughly-fashioned garments made out of the plasticised sacks they carry to put the paper in. Most of them labour in the neighbourhood rubbish dumps where housewives and their servants discard organic material. It is unusual for something which has *any* potential for further economic value to be discarded. Householders wash and save the half-litre plastic bags in which milk is sold, which are then sold to a man who returns them to the dairy. Old newspapers are typically recycled in the same way. Old clothing is recycled into wash cloths. It is rare, then, for the paper-pickers to find anything of value, beyond the waste paper and plastic. The work requires many hours of labour in a day, in order to earn a minimal amount of money, and the people who do it are faced with a number of potential hazards, even outside the economic hazards of being cheated by the trader, having their sacks stolen, being physically abused and being chased away by competitors. Broken glass (which a household does not want to keep) is occasionally a hazard, but more likely is the possibility of picking up a disease from a contaminated

object. The strain of bending down many times a day takes a toll over the years, and of course each climatic period has its own hazards: the work must be done in the intense heat of summer, when any physical effort is a struggle, and in the winter, when staying warm in poor clothing is impossible, and during the misery of the rainy season, when it is impossible to stay dry, to cook properly and to keep the paper dry. Because the paper is sold by weight, traders will buy it when it is damp. The collected material must be carried home on foot, not so much because the paper-pickers would be unwelcome on the bus, as because the Rs 1-2 busfare is beyond the economic capability of people who earn so little in a day. The paper and associated items are then sorted, and when enough material has been accumulated, sold to the traders.

The women who do this work were amongst the first to be organised by SEWA, when it was still part of the TLA (Sebstad 1982, 1988 Annual Report). They occupy, I would suggest, a primordial position in the lore of SEWA. Their work is the least-valued work it is possible to do, even on SEWA's scale of respectable labour, and for that reason SEWA can legitimately point to its efforts on their behalf as one aspect of 'organising the grassroots'. 'Paper-picking' carries connotations of 'scavenging' and 'sweeping', which was formerly the work of Untouchables (Searle-Chatterjee 1978) and is just a step above begging. It is perhaps combined with begging and with prostitution, for some women. It is also, necessarily, public work. These women have no relationship with an employer, their work has no productive capacity, and it seemed to me that they are potentially the most exploitable of the women whom SEWA takes to be its members.

I was invited to attend a meeting early one morning with two SEWA organisers and a wealthy householder who wished to 'organise' the paper-pickers in his neighbourhood. He wanted to do them some good, and had heard of SEWA through some friends. This meeting provided a contrast to other, far less formal and more interactive, SEWA organising activities which I attended, whether they were meetings in neighbourhoods or at the Reception Centre. It is useful, however, to recount some of the

details of this meeting, because it was an encounter between the women whose work I have just described, two of the high-powered SEWA organisers and the householder.

These two SEWA organisers, Ranjanben and Jayantika, have long and honourable associations with things 'Gandhian'. For both of them, "trusteeship" of the very poor, by people in their position, is a vital element in their being Gandhians. Both are middle-class, Brahmins and about 60 years old. For these women, involvement in SEWA is "social work" and thus fits the model of *seva* which they adhere to. This model sees people in their position do 'good works' for the unfortunate. I would suggest that the idea of SEWA being a 'union' has little meaning for them. Neither of their husbands has any connection with the TLA. These women are compassionate in their understanding of 'paper-pickers', pointing to the distressing conditions in which they labour, and the disadvantages they face. However, both women saw paper-picking as being respectable and useful work and better than no work at all. One of the women told me that the paper pickers' work prevents the accumulation of waste which causes pollution. While this is true it is also the case that some of the traders who buy the paper and plastic from the women make a great deal of money. They are probably good traders but they also exploit the women who do the labour of gathering the 'raw material' for their businesses. They do this by paying low rates for the paper.

Ranjanben has been 'in charge of' the paper-pickers for many years and has a long history of what is referred to as honourary (in North America we would call this voluntary) work. She joined SEWA three months after the break with the TLA, and has devoted herself in the intervening 22 years to the growth of SEWA and the upliftment of 'Harijans'. Her mother also worked with "Untouchables" when that term was in common use. Ranjanben originally worked in the SEWA Bank as a loan recovery officer, and was then assigned to work with the paper-pickers. Although she is still active in her work at SEWA, her advancing age and the fact that her husband has recently died make it seem likely that she will gradually reduce the amount of time she spends at that work. She is a

former Vice-President of SEWA and in that capacity, is presently an invited member of the Executive Committee.

The other SEWA organiser present at this session was also a Brahmin and a Gandhian. She combines her work at SEWA with membership on the board of the *Vikas Gruh* and *Jyoti Sangh*, both organisations which house, feed and educate the children of the very poor and look after the "unfortunate", principally unwed mothers, abandoned wives and elderly women who have been abandoned by their families. At SEWA, she is the editor of the fortnightly Gujarati-medium newsletter called *Anasuya*, named for Anasuya Sarabhai, a member of the immensely wealthy family whose fortune was made in textiles and a founder, with Gandhi, of the Textile Labourers' Association[1]. Anasuya Sarabhai's career as a social worker functions as a model for these women who revere her example.

The meeting had been called for 8 a.m., which was early for such an event, but necessary if the paper-pickers were to be in one place before scattering for the day's labour, if they were not to lose potential income from their day's work, and if the householder was to get to his office in the factory he owned on time. As several Ahmedabadis, rich and poor, pointed out to me, in English, "time is money". The meeting was not typical of a SEWA organising meeting which is more often informal and held in the poor areas, but it was interesting and instructive nevertheless. The wealthy householder and his wife and the two members of the SEWA/Ahmedabad status-sphere, as it were, and the 'foreign guest' sat in chairs on the verandah, accepting cool drinks in glasses proffered by one of the household servants. The women who collected paper for a living sat flatfooted, knees drawn up to their chests, and heads covered, in a circle on the lawn, some of them declining to approach too closely, and sitting by the compound's rear wall. Their refreshment was water, drawn by dipper from a plastic bucket.

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[1]Sujata Patel (1987) lists Anasuya Sarabhai as the president of the women's section of the TLA until 1972, so I deduce that she must have been active in the founding of the women's wing.

The householder spoke first, welcoming the paper-pickers and introducing the SEWA women and myself, telling the paper-pickers that they should listen carefully to what the SEWA *ben*s were saying, and encouraging them to take advantage of what was being offered to them. I was introduced as a foreigner who was sympathetic to SEWA, and as an embodiment of 'foreign' endorsement of SEWA. The women on the lawn were told about the SEWA bank and the union, and invited to come to the Reception Centre and see for themselves what benefits the organisation could offer them, and to become members. It was difficult to know what the women on the lawn made of it, since they spoke quietly amongst themselves, and asked no questions. For me, this was one of those extremely frustrating moments when my inability to speak Gujarati held me back from communicating. The women I was with conveyed the gist of what was said, but it would have been so much richer to have been able to talk to some of those women and discuss their perceptions of the meeting. When the meeting ended an hour later the paper pickers dispersed and the organisers and I thanked the householder for his hospitality.

All those paper pickers who do become members of SEWA are invited to participate in a "training programme". At first, I found it hard to imagine that there could be any value in such a programme. Indeed, it seemed a travesty of the idea of a training programme, because I could not see that they were learning anything of value, or that they were in any better position to earn a living after the training programme than before it. However, it was a part of my education in how SEWA thinks and operates, and part of my education in 'grassroots development' (*i.e.* the ways in which extremely small improvements might begin to effect other improvements) to comprehend that there *was* indeed practical value in that training programme. A group of new *kagalwalis* (paper-pickers) would be taken to the Victoria Gardens, across the street from the Reception Centre, for their training. There, they were provided with two things which would qualify as items of 'appropriate technology'. One was a pointed stick on which to impale scraps of paper (so as to save bending down and avoiding contamination from dirty objects). The

other item was a large sturdy bag, made of plasticised, and therefore water-resistant, material, with the SEWA name and address (in Gujarati and in English) and logo printed on it. The bag has a dual value: it keeps the paper dry, and it identifies the owner as a member of SEWA. I was told that this identification might be useful in deterring someone attempting to harass the woman carrying it.

For the women and children who do this kind of work, the purchase of even such implements as these would be all but impossible, given what they are able to earn. Their earnings are sometimes as little as Rs 5 per day. SEWA devised the programme because government funds have been made available for training programmes, and the only way to utilise those funds is to *have* 'training programmes'. The participants were paid a stipend (a word that has been adopted into Gujarati, or at least into Gujarati at SEWA) for each of the two days of the training programme.

The long-term potential benefits of SEWA membership for those women and others who gather waste paper from the streets lie in the strength of the organisation, and its avowed and demonstrated willingness to act as advocates for them. Those new members would also be able to open savings accounts in the SEWA bank, something they could not do at any other bank, given that they are mostly illiterate and have no material assets. As SEWA members those women would be able to attend meetings where they would meet women from numerous communities who were in similar economic circumstances. An extremely important element of SEWA's 'creation of a development alternative' operates at this 'grassroots' level, where women who know what it is to earn Rs 5 for a day's labour, meet and talk to other women, in different occupations and from different communities, with similar concerns.

As I have said, this 'organisational meeting' was not typical of SEWA's organising methods, as I experienced them. Most often, it is the women who are paper-pickers or *bidi* rollers who walk the *galis* and the *chawls* they themselves live in, or in other poor areas in the city, working to convince women to join SEWA. I have intended this narrative

account to express some of the ways in which new members gain access to the benefits of SEWA membership.

The Saundarya Co-operative

To return to the paper-pickers who are long-term members of SEWA: Another group of women who fall within SEWA's category of 'paper-pickers' are the women I was meeting on the purple couch, who have been formed into a co-operative named *Saundarya*. These women occupy the apex of the hierarchy of paper pickers, as I will show. This co-operative had 300 members in 1993, of whom 65 are employed on a regular, part-time basis in cleaning offices and bathrooms in government premises. Some of the remainder work on a contract basis for government offices, such as the Income Tax Office or the Photo Litho Press[2]. I learned from these women and their families what I know about the lived realities of being poor in Ahmedabad, such as never having enough money for daily expenditures, efforts to find alternative ways of earning a living for adults and grown children when the mills had shut down, and about the conditions of daily life in a *chawl*. Through the members of those families, I was exposed to the conditions which have led theorists, planners and social workers to describe the need for economic 'development' and poverty alleviation. I also learned something about the strategies with which they dealt with these issues.

With those co-operative members, I was able to put SEWA's constructions of the working poor into social contexts which are a great deal more complex than SEWA's representations would suggest. They involve familial ties as well as ties to 'native places', and involve economic activities outside those connected with SEWA. For some of the women, the socio-economic context includes connections to the formal sector, through relatives who are employed. SEWA tends to represent its members as social isolates, and

[2]The latter provided a windfall for the co-op when it disposed of a year's worth of records. In order to take advantage of the windfall, the co-op had to marshall all of its human resources, including its participant-observer, as the files and dossiers and printed works were tumbled down the stairs and into the street.

as victims of the economic order of things. I will elaborate on these matters in the course of the following section.

Almost all of the members of the paper-pickers' and weavers' co-operatives with whom I spent time lived in crowded conditions in the dwellings that were built to house the textile mill workers. They are like the houses built for similar purposes elsewhere: dark, small and cramped, with minimal facilities. At first, I found it difficult to distinguish the finer gradations of economics, space and facilities that made one locality different from another, but as I learned my way around, I learned to make my own judgments about neighbourhoods. Those were not made on practical terms such as affordability and the amount of living space, but on aesthetic ones: the amount of space and available sky being important at first to my claustrophobic self.

When we had moved past the first stages of knowing about each other, they pointing out the poor condition of their homes and me assuring them that I was there to learn from them and grateful for their hospitality, we were able to discuss the problems they faced in finding decent housing. These included having enough living and working space and decent facilities, affordability and closeness to relatives or other people one knew. Being close to where one works is also important, since transportation costs can absorb a high proportion of a small income, but the days of living close to a place of work are over, for many, because so many of the mills are closed.

In some members' families, five adults and five children lived in a single room, with a latrine attached to the house and used by the people in several families. These 'colonies' or 'housing societies', as they are called, run off the already narrow and crowded side roads. The present leader of the *Saundarya* co-operative lives with her parents, her brother and sister-in-law and their five children - a total of 10 people - in a one-room dwelling. Their house has a metal roof, which keeps out the rain but heats up unbearably in the hot season. The roof is sometimes electrically 'hot' because the household's illegal electricity connection is unsafe and uninsulated. I was warned several times not to touch

the roof/ceiling when entering their home, and it was a test of my willingness to go back that I overcame my anxiety. I tried to dissuade those friends from operating anything electrical for my benefit, preferring a hand-held fan to the dangers of the electrical one, but they were well-practiced in the art of twisting bare wires and inserting them into a home-made socket and I simply had to trust that it would work again, as one appliance (a small television, a food "mixer" blender and a fan) was unplugged so that another could be operated. Cooking is done on a Primus stove (Petromax) using kerosene for fuel, while water for the households is collected in a metal barrel. During the rainy season, this barrel would have filled quickly with water: otherwise water was carried from a communal tap at the end of the lane.

Distinctions of economic standing and the differential ability of parents to provide for their children, and families to provide for their parents, operate here, as elsewhere. Laxmiben's family is fortunate in having three members who have jobs: her brother works in one of the textile mills, and she and her sister-in-law are both members of a SEWA co-operative. Three of the children attend school, and the retired parents look after the two youngest children.

Ambikaben, another *Saundarya* co-operative member, is at the other extreme of this economic and social continuum. She is about 55 years old and a widow whose husband was paralysed for two years before he died. She is extremely poor and in debt to the SEWA bank for the sum of Rs 5,000 for a loan to repair her house which was damaged by heavy rains. Her husband's illness also created great expenses. It seems inconceivable to me that she could have been loaned such an amount, but she was firm in saying that this was correct. It seems even less conceivable that she could ever repay it, especially now that two of the breadwinners in the family - her husband and her son - have died. When her son died in 1993, she lost any hope of economic security in her old age and is now responsible, with her daughter-in-law, for raising a four year old grand-daughter and an infant grandson. This minuscule family lives in a two-room house whose

only furnishing is one bed. Ambikaben's daughter-in-law gathers waste paper from the streets to supplement the family's income, while the children are left in the care of a neighbour. Ambikaben was one of the original TLA SEWA organisers, and has been a member of SEWA for twenty years. She has been a paper-picker all her life. She is proud of her organising activities, telling me that she had encouraged many women to become members of SEWA.

Laxmiben's neighbour Priya has a dwelling only a yard away from Laxmiben's, and divided from it by barbed wire. To get from one house to another one must climb over the barbed wire. Priya's home is too small to accommodate her five children, so her three eldest daughters attend a residential school called the *Vikas Gruh* in another part of the city, and the youngest daughter and their only son attend the Municipal School which is only a few hundred yards down the lane. The children come home for the day during Diwali and Navrattri, and during the school holidays they help their mother pick paper and do whatever work comes their way. Priya's one-roomed home was decorated with pictures cut from the discarded paper she found in the streets. I thought that, at one time, she might have been better off financially, as the interior of her home was crammed with trunks. Priya's husband has been unemployed for many years, and now helps her sort and bundle the paper she picks up from the street. He is an articulate man and we talked more than once about economic and social problems. He felt strongly that his poverty was the result of caste-discrimination. Priya has quarreled with the organiser of the paper-pickers, and so cannot be a member of a SEWA co-operative. She would not discuss the details of the quarrel with me, perhaps fearing that I would inadvertently reveal something to the organisers. Without access to the SEWA *godown*, she must carry home the paper she collects, and she and her husband and two of their children sort it in the small space between their door and the adjacent household. It is then carried to a paper-trader's place of business. Priya is an enterprising woman and wants to start a broom-making business, but without SEWA's backing, she cannot borrow the funds to do so. Not only can she not

borrow money from the SEWA Bank, but without SEWA's intervention, it is more difficult for her to obtain a loan from the *Mahila Nigam*, which is a government-operated organisation which loans money to members of the Scheduled Castes. However, because the leader of the *Saundarya* co-operative is her neighbour and friend, and is sympathetic to her situation, Priya `is able to get some 'contract' work now and then (contract work is discussed below). Another neighbour, Nirmala, had a husband who seemed tailor-made for the negative stereotypes which SEWA holds about husbands. He was a dour, broken-down man, who drank and beat Nirmala, and restricted her movements, not allowing her to go to the nearby *mandir* with a group of women from the area during a religious festival, and forbidding her to become a member of SEWA. Nirmala works as a cleaner at the Calico Museum of Textiles, one of the jewels in the cultural crown of Ahmedabad, earning Rs.4 for four hours' work.

Some of the members of the *Saundarya* co-operative live in comparative comfort in well-built cement houses with tiled floors. One of these members has three adult sons (two of them employed) and a husband who is employed in a textile mill. In another family, the husband is also employed, although the fact that there are three daughters means they will have to find three dowries in the coming decade. Kinship ties, some of them to people with jobs in the formal sector, also extend laterally, in some families.

Although they are called *kagalwalis* (the Gujarati term for paper-picker) by the SEWA organisers, the term is somewhat misleading for the members of the *Saundarya* co-operative because they earn the fixed portion of their income by cleaning offices and call themselves *safaiwalis* (cleaners, or cleaning ladies). (The unfixed portion of their income is discussed below.) SEWA has arranged contracts with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and the Government of Gujarat to clean offices at institutions in the city and at some of the government offices (called *Navi Sachivalaya*) in Gandhinagar, the 'planned' city which is the capital of Gujarat, located some 14 kilometres from Ahmedabad. Each contract has a built-in three-month trial-period, which is followed by a six-month

probationary period, after which a written contract is signed. That contract is good for two years, and is valued for the security it provides. I was told by one of the co-operative members that they were 'not allowed' to see the contract, but the members would have been apprised of its terms by the manager of the co-operative. The salary is calculated by dividing the sum of the contract by 12 (months per year), subtracting the expenses incurred by the co-operative, such as funds for supplies such as aprons, buckets and cleaning cloths, and transportation costs. (All of the *Saundarya* members live in Ahmedabad, and travel every day to Gandhinagar by public transit. Others travel to offices within the city.) That amount is divided by the number of people in the co-operative. Each member's salary works out to approximately Rs 200 per month for a three-hour day, six days a week.

The fact that the contracts had been negotiated is evidence of SEWA's ability to make a case for the women's right to employment. Individually, or even as a private (as distinct from SEWA) co-operative, they would have had no chance to establish a contractual relationship with government officials. It is also the case, however, that the right to collect waste paper from the government offices has been contested since SEWA members began to collect it as I relate below.

The *Saundarya* co-operative was headed for many years by Ambaben, who died in the autumn of 1993. Ambaben had fit SEWA's archetype of 'paper-picker', driven to that work by her husband's unemployment. She had served on the SEWA Executive Committee for a term. Ambaben's second-in-command was a woman whose surname identifies her as a "former Untouchable". She detests being called a "Harijan" and refers to herself as *dalit*. The SEWA organiser in charge of the 'paper pickers' insists on the term *Harijan* however and would not refer to anyone as a *dalit*, perhaps because to designate some people as 'oppressed' would require acknowledgement that some people are privileged by virtue of their caste. Laxmi does not fit any of the stereotypes which designate 'paper-picker' as victims. She told me that she has a B.A., but would not talk

about why she was not utilising her education in earning a living. When she and I visited some friends of mine in another city, she referred to her activities at SEWA as social work. Given her efforts on behalf of all the paper pickers and particularly the *Saundarya* co-operative this seemed an accurate description. Laxmi speaks up for the co-operative members when their rights are threatened, and when something is needed. For example, she and the other members wanted the daughter of a co-operative member who had died to be given a position in the *Saundarya* co-operative, but this was resisted by the high-caste organiser, and so never happened. She is a person who fits Appadurai's model of those people in the global ethnoscape "whose lot is hard [and who] no longer see their lives as mere outcomes of the givenness of things, but often as the ironic compromise between what they could imagine and what social life will permit" (Appadurai 1991).

Laxmi is an eloquent critic of the political and economic situation of people in her situation. She is one of the many SEWA women who could be called a "social experimentalist" (Fox 1990). She is a believer in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the man born an "Untouchable" who went on to become one of the authors of India's Constitution. She is an active member of a *dalit* organisation. This membership does preclude intense devotion to deities and prayers for their intercession. I recall the intensity of her prayers at a small neighbourhood shrine one evening, right after we had spent quite some time talking to a *dalit* leader in the housing society around the corner from her house.

Laxmiben capitalises on existing opportunities for the women in the *Saundarya* co-operative and creates new ones. She also defends the co-operative members against any effort, by anyone, to cheat or harass them. Within SEWA, she is known as 'Big Laxmi', a not altogether complimentary designation which refers to her size, the loudness of her voice and the fact that she speaks directly about issues, where others might be polite and oblique. I have, however, heard her speaking in a placatory manner to the high-ranking SEWA organisers, when she has needed to make a request on behalf of another co-operative member.

It was Laxmi who suggested she and I go together to the offices of *Gujarat Today*, a Gujarati-medium newspaper, so that we might be interviewed. We had met a writer from the newspaper at a meeting, and he had suggested an interview. We travelled by bus to an area of Ahmedabad called 'Shah Alam', a predominantly Muslim area. We found the office, went in and spent an hour discussing, in English and Gujarati, SEWA's work, Laxmi's work, my impressions of and experiences in Ahmedabad, and the situations of Muslims and other religious minorities in Canada. Laxmi hoped to garner some publicity and opportunities for new work for the co-operative, on the principle that contacts have to be nurtured if they are to be productive. When the interview had been completed, we left, and I suggested we stop to have a look at the *masjid* around the corner. She was at first reluctant, then agreed to go inside. I think she would not be seen as less than willing to do something by anyone, so we covered our heads and went in and looked around.

SEWA's claim to *engender* entrepreneurial spirit in its members is inappropriate when applied to Laxmi, who needs no safe environment in which to culture the seeds of independence or self-reliance, having had that in her family and in her working life. Of all the people I was able to talk to, she was the most vocal critic of SEWA, saying that the organisation held her back. She had won a prize, consisting of a trip to Delhi and a medal, for her activities in the *dalit* organisation. I could not ascertain the reasons for her not being allowed to go, as she swore me to secrecy about the matter. I found it intensely frustrating to agree, but could not betray her. She did, eventually, receive the medal sent to her from Delhi, which she showed me proudly. I surmise that SEWA would not want one of its members speaking for the organisation at a national-level *dalit* meeting, as this might be construed as SEWA making a political statement. There could, however, have been more prosaic reasons, such as a timing conflict, or her being required to attend to SEWA business.

It was Laxmi who conveyed an invitation to me from her father, to visit their 'native place'. I was happy to agree, because I thought we were going to a village, and the countryside was lovely after being in the city. We had been there once before and had had an intense conversation with a religious leader, about the position of women in Hinduism. Expecting a similar experience, I was surprised when we arrived in a small town, after a four hour bus journey, and learned that I was to be the 'guest speaker' at an all-male meeting. Had I known this was her purpose, I would have pointed out that there were many women far more qualified than myself to address the meeting. She had calculated, however, that I would not embarrass her and her father (who was a member of the group holding the meeting) by refusing and that the 'value' of my foreign-ness would override the negative value of my female-ness.

Laxmi insisted I speak, because she wanted a woman to break the barrier, to which she objected, but could not break herself. Women were not allowed entry to this meeting, nor had any woman had ever addressed this group. To my discomfort, she sat in an ante-room while I went inside. After the customary greetings and welcome, I tried to convey some information about economics and politics in Canada, and then answered the numerous questions put by the men, most of them about working conditions and social and political systems in Canada. I included information about women in all my responses, particularly information about women in the workforce. We discussed unions, minimum wage legislation, Canadian versions of workplace discrimination, and related issues. A man who spoke fluent Gujarati and English translated for us, and I had enough Gujarati by then to understand the gist of the questions. When that portion of the meeting finished, I went out to confront Laxmiben, who laughed and said it had been a fine occasion. The satisfaction came later, when she informed me by letter that the long-standing tradition of not allowing women in had been put aside, and that other women would now be able to go to meetings and speak.

The history of the paper-pickers' struggle to maintain the right to collect and sell the waste paper collected from government offices is evidence of the fact that corruption seems to be a 'total social fact' as Mauss might say and is one of the things SEWA must contend with at every turn. All of SEWA's efforts to aid its members need to be understood in light of the fact that the 'underground' economy and the black market pervade every aspect of social life. The origin of the struggle between the SEWA members who are paper-pickers and government clerks who want to sell that paper on the black market goes back to 1975 when SEWA was still part of the TLA (SEWA Annual Report 1988). The TLA allowed a small number of SEWA members to form the *Sujata* co-operative and to gather and sell waste paper from the textile mills. However, this agreement exposed the fact that some clerks were illegally selling the waste paper to traders as a profitable byproduct of their jobs and sharing the profits from the sales with government officials. The clerks were not about to surrender this source of income. There was also corruption within the ranks of the paper-pickers - some of them SEWA members, some not. One of the members owned a *godown* (warehouse) which the co-operative used to store the collected paper. That particular iteration of the struggle ended with the SEWA members being thrown out of the *Sujata* co-operative, thereby losing their investment.

The competition between the SEWA members and the government clerks has never been resolved. Another co-operative - *Saundarya* - was formed by the SEWA members. Another contract was engineered, this one with the government at Gandhinagar. Another *godown* close to the office tower was rented. The clerks and government officials colluded again to keep the women from collecting the paper. What often stands in the way of a resolution of these problems is the fact that people are unwilling to speak up for fear of reprisals. SEWA has documented many examples of people being cowed into submission by threats, or recognising the impossibility of changing situations in which they have no real power. In this instance, however, the *safaiwalis* at Gandhinagar acted and

spoke up. Their action involved keeping watch over the *godown* at night, to protect their paper from being stolen. One night, a truck came to collect the paper. What happened next has earned Laxmi and the paper-pickers a place in the history of SEWA: when the truck was half full, Laxmi and her fellow co-operative members came out of hiding and prevented the truck from leaving. Laxmiben then had the courage to name every person involved in keeping the women from collecting the paper. She did this in a television interview so her allegations were made public. A resolution of sorts followed, in that they were allowed to resume collecting the paper. She is extremely proud of this action and vows that she will do whatever is necessary to keep the co-operative operating.

SEWA has remained adamant in its support of the right of its members to collect that waste. The SEWA women are still seen by the office clerks who want to sell it themselves as competing for a resource which, as the clerks see it, belongs to them. That resource is the waste paper which is not recycled by the government's internal recycling schemes. It is classified as 'Class D' paper. Classes A, B and C are already re-processed. According to the terms of their contract, the women can collect the Class D waste from the offices, and sell it on the open market, according to the terms they define as acceptable. Typically, this means establishing a contractual relationship with a paper trader. And, typically, those paper traders are the 'middlemen' who cheat the paper pickers.

In the eyes of the clerks, they are being deprived of a source of income which is theirs by right. According to the government's policy, the Class D paper is waste. If the clerks utilise it, then nothing is lost. SEWA sees itself as creating a source of income out of that waste paper for its members. The grounds of SEWA's argument on behalf of the *kagalwalis* were that the women had the right to work, and that SEWA would vouch for their honesty and for the quality of their work. The women said that without SEWA's backing, they would never be allowed in a government office. The work does not, however, constitute a shift to formal sector labour, since it was SEWA, and not the

individual women, or the co-operative, with whom the contract was made, and the contracts were signed by the top-level SEWA organisers.

Theoretically, then, it is SEWA which holds the right to determine who will clean the government offices and who will not. In practice, so far as I was able to determine, this right is one of the sites of internal ideological struggle between levels of organisers. Laxmiben is the manager of the co-operative, and is in charge of its daily operations. It is part of her job to monitor and evaluate the quality of the work being done. If someone is late, or is not doing some part of the work, she has the right and the obligation to call that person to task, and to 'fire' her, if she does not improve. People cannot be thrown out of the paper-pickers' co-operative, because they are share-holders, but they can be kept out of this particular cleaning co-operative, which itself is at the apex of the cleaning co-operatives. (Other cleaning co-operatives operate at other government offices in Ahmedabad.) One woman was 'thrown out', while I was there. This is a difficult matter, because Laxmiben knows the situation of every one of the members, and is related to some of them. Her sister-in-law, whose home she shares, and one of her father's sisters, are also co-operative members. There was a complaint about the quality of the cleaning laid by a government official while I was there. It is difficult to evaluate the legitimacy of such complaints, which could be genuine, or could be trumped-up by someone with a grievance. The response to such a complaint begins with Laxmi, who will hear the *safaiwalis'* side of the story. If the problem cannot be resolved, one of the two SEWA office-workers who reports to Ranjanben will intervene and, if there is still no resolution, then Ranjanben herself must intervene. When she does, the results are not always satisfactory to the women.

There was a four month long 'situation' in 1993, referred to by SEWA as a strike, which happened when the women withheld their cleaning labour. This arose because of yet another effort by the clerks to deprive the women of the right to the paper. It seems to be an irresolvable problem, because no matter how well-constructed a contract SEWA has,

there seems to be no political will within the government offices to resolve the problem permanently. The problems of the cleaning staff must seem remote and irrelevant to the government officials who are in charge of the affairs of the state.

Presently, the *safaiwalis* use a large room to which they have the key, in which to store and sort the paper they collect from the offices. Periodically, it is collected by a man who owns a paper-recycling business. The paper is transported to his godown, some 10 kilometers away, from where it is sold. The *safaiwalis* had negotiated their own contract with him, in terms of payment for the paper.

One source of contention between the co-operative members and the organiser in charge concerns the control of the time of the members. Someone from the co-operative has to go to the Reception Centre every day, to record 'attendance' at Gandhinagar. Similarly, the co-operative members are required to go to the Reception Centre to collect their salary, once every two weeks. Their salary is paid into the co-operative's account at the bank, and a salary cheque is made out to Laxmiben, by Ranjanben. Laxmiben would then cash the cheque and distribute the salary on the spot to the women who had come with her that day, then deliver the salaries to the other women. She did not like the fact that the women doing the work were not paid directly, but there was nothing she could do to alter this.

Another issue is that of control over the time of the *safaiwalis*. A relevant example of this concerned the co-operative members being required to attend a first-aid workshop, a fact which requires some explanation. This came about because the same organiser and her practical nurse co-organiser had arranged for some *dais* (midwives) to attend a first-aid training session in an *ashram* close to Gandhinagar. The first aid training was intended to supplement their midwifery practice, and to enable them to accumulate more qualifications. They were to be given a first-aid kit on completion of the course. Arrangements had been made for a doctor to attend the session, and to give certificates to the graduates. Some of the designated women could not come, at the last minute, so the

organiser decided that the *safaiwalis* would be equally good candidates for the first-aid training. The point of contention was not that the training would or would not be useful, or that they did not appreciate the free lunch, stipend and certificate, but that the *safaiwalis* had little choice about whether they attended or not. Every afternoon for a week, then, they completed their work at Gandhinagar, then travelled to the *ashram*.

Another source of internal contestation between the *safaiwalis* and SEWA concerns the right to work in a particular office. This might be because one place is easier to get to than another, or because friendships are formed, or perhaps because there are unofficial benefits to be gleaned from working in a particular place. I was told by some of the women that SEWA prefers to maintain a pool of women, to whom it assigns work as it sees fit. They, however, prefer to remain in one place.

I suggested earlier that one of the original members of the SEWA bank was 'fixed' at one level of representation, in the lore of the organisation. She is fixed in the conceptualisation of the organisation as an 'illiterate woman' for whom SEWA membership has been a transforming factor in her life. She, however, has a different view of this, although she values her membership in SEWA and has a strong sense of the value of her own contribution to the success of the organisation. I would suggest that the 'paper-pickers' are similarly 'fixed', so to speak, at a level of representation that situates them with respect to their position in the caste system ("Harijans", as the organiser calls them). SEWA's evaluation of its efforts on their behalf are, so far as I was able to ascertain, focussed on the distance they have travelled since joining SEWA. That is, their current position - I speak now of the *safaiwalis* at Gandhinagar - is thought of by the organiser in terms of the path they have travelled, from roaming the streets collecting waste paper, vulnerable to disease and harassment, to having secure work and a certain income. They are required to be grateful for the benefits that have accrued to them, and to temper their 'demands' for SEWA's intervention on their behalf when it comes to problems with the government clerks. I do not mean that SEWA does not intervene, but it did seem to me

that more might have been done on their behalf. Of course, this is an ongoing problem, and only one of many faced by the paper-pickers, of whom the *safaiwalis* are a small proportion, and it is unlikely that it can ever be finally resolved until the *safaiwalis* are in a much stronger position, should that ever happen. During the four month long 'strike' that occurred while I was in Ahmedabad, the *safaiwalis* were without income, and forced to live on savings, to borrow money, and to 'do without', depending on their circumstances.

At one point, I asked the organiser what could be done, and she suggested that the 'paper-pickers' could go back to picking up paper from the streets until the situation was resolved. I found this statement difficult to swallow, given what I had been told about SEWA's purpose and intentions. From the *safaiwalis*' point of view, they needed to be at Gandhinagar every day, showing, by their presence, their determination to stand their ground. They did this although it was costly for them to travel back and forth when they were not earning money. They also wanted to ensure, so far as it was possible, that the paper in the *godown* was not taken away by government clerks. The situation was eventually resolved, at least until the next time it occurs, through negotiations between the co-operative members, the organiser and the government officials. It seemed that the fact of SEWA being a union had no effect on their situation, as no other workers joined them in their efforts. Ultimately, the SEWA union was not in a position to bring any other than moral pressure to bear on the employers.

In terms of SEWA's own ideology, the *safaiwalis* are an autonomous co-operative, but in practice the woman in charge of this co-operative still operates within a social work model and retains control of the conditions of the *safaiwalis'* labour. So far as I was able to ascertain, the *safaiwalis* did not negotiate the terms of their own contract with the government officials at Gandhinagar. Rather, it was negotiated on their behalf by the SEWA organiser. That same organiser retains control over who will belong to the co-operative, which seems to render the argument that SEWA members should be self-reliant a rhetorical argument. Although SEWA can do little, it seems, to alter their relations with

their employers, SEWA *can* do something about meeting some of the *safaiwalis'* needs which are related to their ability to work, such as child-care and health care programmes. I think that for most of the co-operative members, the benefits of relatively steady work in clean surroundings outweigh the issue of control by the SEWA organiser.

For someone as politically active as Laxmiben, SEWA, depite the constraints it places upon her, is a useful site in which she is able draw on a number of social resources. She stays at SEWA so that she and her extended family can eventually afford a better place to live. She also stays for the sake of her fellow-co-operative members, for whom she feels some responsibility. Within SEWA, she herself now has a degree of visibility and status, in part because of her actions with the clerks at Gandhinagar. She is now on the Executive Committee and works to bring the concerns of the paper-pickers to the attention of other people in the organisation. She knows that the present leadership will change, and wants to have a voice in the decision about the new directions which SEWA might take in its interaction with the paper pickers.

Shri Vijay Vankar Mahila Utpadak Sahakari Mandli

I first learned about the *Shri Vijay Vankar Mahila Utpadak Sahakari Mandli* (the *Vijay* weavers' women's co-operative) when I interviewed the President and Secretary of the co-operative in the Reception Centre. This occurred during the time when one of the office-workers was arranging for me to meet all the members of the Executive Committee. The President of the *Vijay* co-operative, Hemaben, has been on that Executive Committee for one term. Shardaben is the co-operative's manager, and had accompanied Hemaben to SEWA on the day we met. The women are good friends, live in the same *chawl* and come from neighbouring villages in Mehsana district.

Our first conversation was remarkable for the expressive quality of the two women's versions of their first encounters with SEWA organisers. Hemaben was forceful and emphatic in her speech, Shardaben quieter, but also enthusiastic in her depiction of her

engagement with SEWA. Hemaben has been interviewed by other foreign and Indian researchers, on account of her membership on the Executive Committee, and is skilled in constructing a linear narrative.

Both women were instrumental in establishing the co-operative. The two women told the story of going to the Reception Centre for the first time to participate in a *bhajan* (religious song) program. They had been invited by a woman who knew of SEWA, who lived in their locality. After that meeting, Ela Bhatt contacted Hemaben and asked if she would participate in a literacy programme being started by SEWA. Hemaben agreed, and started teaching reading and writing in the area where the women live. She combined that teaching of basic literacy with organising for SEWA, that is, teaching women about the potential benefits of SEWA membership and encouraging them to join. That organising work included doing an extensive survey of paper-pickers. The two women said they contacted 1700 women, from all over the city, and asked them about the economic conditions in which they laboured. (It is one of SEWA's principal contributions to the discourse on the self-employed, that they have a large body of data on the urban poor, much of it collected by self-employed women. [Jhabvala and Bali n.d.])

When Ela Bhatt learned that Hemaben and Shardaben came from *vankar* families (families traditionally engaged in weaving) she asked whether they had an interest in resuming those skills, and leaving paper-picking behind. In other words, it was SEWA which suggested to them that they alter the kind of work they did. They said they had an interest in becoming weavers again, but that they had no money to buy looms, raw materials, or the auxiliary equipment needed for weaving, and no place to set up a loom, even if they should own one, since their houses were so small. Some of the families they knew had brought a loom to the city, but sold them because they could not afford to operate them, and needed the money it would bring for other things.

Hiraben and Shardaben fit some aspects of SEWA's representation of the working poor: both had been engaged in paper-picking to help to feed their families when their

husbands had lost their jobs at the mills. Shardaben had four children to raise, and Hemaben three. They had met Elaben (Ela Bhatt) together, when she came to their neighbourhood, then had gone to the *bhajan* session to learn more about SEWA. Both decided to become members, and have remained loyal members since, despite the fact that their co-operative cannot be said to be functioning. Hemaben and Shardaben both said that Elaben told them to 'leave paper-picking', and to become weavers again, which is a different representation from that of the organisers, who aver that the paper-pickers came to them, asking for help in re-establishing their skills.

Once I had 'made contact' with these two women, I was able to interview the other members of the co-operative, and, after a long time, visit their place of work. Hemaben, whom I had thought I would be able to rely on as a source of information, went back to her village. I did not see her again for three months. This was, in fact, one indicator of the fact that the *Vijay* co-operative was in trouble, but it took a great deal of time before I was able to find out the actual details of the problem. In the meantime, I visited Shardaben and her family often, and got to know some of their neighbours.

Shardaben and her husband have raised three sons and a daughter to adulthood in a two-room dwelling in which it is hardly possible for their grown children to stand upright. It would take only the easiest lengthening of a stride to travel the distance from their house into the one across the way. A space perhaps four bricks square constitutes a minuscule threshold, while the roof is used to store anything too big to keep inside. Because the houses are so small, people must spend a lot of time outside. When a visitor comes, the young people go outside, becoming observers of the events in their own homes. Here, young men who are between jobs, or home from work in the factories, exchange information, recount film plots and plan journeys, and young women earn money making decorative objects for sale in the bazaar from the foil/plastic wrappers they have saved or been given. Others spin wool or cotton onto bobbins, count and bundle the wire-thin metal hooks which will be used to thread warps at the textile mills, their wages

calculated in rupees per thousand. Some turn a bicycle wheel to spin cotton thread. Babies are put out to catch some fresh air, the elderly sit or lie on charpoys (string cots), school-going youngsters do their homework, the cows wander up and down the narrow lanes, a tolerated nuisance.

Shardaben's husband has moved in and out of work in the textile mill for the last decade, a fact which led her to 'paper-picking' in the first place, to supplement the family's income. Her youngest son has finished school, and is not yet working. Her two other older sons are able to find employment on occasion. The eldest, Kirtan, found a part time job in a soap factory while I was there, and Arup, younger and flamboyant, has hopes of owning a shop some day. The daughter, aged nineteen, helps her mother in the household, and works on occasion in SEWA's *nasta ekam* co-operative, which cooks and sells food for parties and other events. Five adults, then, and no steady income. And no evidence of weaving, at that point. I was told that, one day, they would take me to the place where they worked, but they kept putting it off.

An issue which was preoccupying the family during the time I was in Ahmedabad was the fact that their daughter has arrived at the age when neighbours and family members were insisting she be married. Their problems in finding her a husband were connected to their economic situation, since, although they were firm in telling me they would not be paying a dowry, they were also in some despair at the fact that it would cost some Rs 10,000 to settle their daughter in a marriage. This amount was said to be required so they could buy her bangles and other adornments, clothing and household items. The amount seemed out of all proportion to what they might have been able to raise, but they did eventually manage to accomplish the wedding. The fact that Shardaben is a member of the SEWA Bank was important in that accomplishment, since she was able to borrow some of the required amount from the bank. Other amounts were borrowed from family members. Two of her husband's brothers had steady jobs, one as a bank teller and the

other as the proprietor of a ration store. The couple's sons also contributed some of the necessary funds.

Some time after I had got to know some of the members of the *Vijay* co-operative, the SEWA organiser in charge of all the artisan co-operatives kindly made available to me the results of a study which she herself had written for the ILO, based on research done as a 'work term' project by a management student, some five years earlier. That study begins by situating the art of weaving as an ancient skill and as something at which Indian artisans have excelled for centuries. It goes on to say that, with domination of British colonialism, and the flooding of the Indian market with inexpensive imports, the handloom industry was destroyed. Gandhi's efforts to establish *khadi* as a symbol of independence and self-reliance are noted in the report. The contemporary economic situation of Ahmedabad is invoked when one woman's husband is said to lose his job at the textile mill.

SEWA's response to the paper-pickers' desire to establish themselves as weavers began with an assessment of the problems faced by these women, and assessments of possible routes to solutions. SEWA's proposed solutions moved on three fronts: training, the acquisition of space and facilities, and the formation of a co-operative. The training and the co-operative formation required connecting the women with government programmes. Before anything could happen, Shardaben and Hemaben needed to find enough people willing to join SEWA so that SEWA then could help them to register themselves as a co-operative.

Eventually they found 30 women, of whom 24 were selected to take part in the training programme. This sounds a simple matter, put in summary form, but it required weeks of intensive effort by these two women, and many meetings with women in the neighbourhood, following kinship and other kinds of linkages, to seek out potential members. One problem at this stage, and something that was still a problem when I was talking to them, was that of numbers. They were told that the government had stipulated that a weaving co-operative needed 51 members. This was apparently a requirement that

does not apply to other co-operatives. They never did find 51 women, but SEWA convinced the government that the numbers would be made up, and to allow the co-operative to form with the numbers they had. This has remained a problem, since the numbers never did reach 51, and have in fact fallen.

Paradoxically, this co-operative 'owns' six floor looms, a warping frame capable of holding a 100-metre warp, two *charkas* (spinning wheels) and a bobbin winder. It owns a *godrej* cupboard and an electricity meter - all of this stored in the workshop. But the co-operative has not woven a metre of cloth in months. Only four families are still actively engaged in the co-operative. One of the original members had died and several others had returned to the villages, possibly due to the economic pressures. The problem then became one of maintaining the status of a registered co-operative. When I left Ahmedabad, the co-operative was still officially registered, but had not filed a financial report in two years.

The women had come from weaver families, but because women do the preparatory and finishing work of weaving, they had no actual skills in weaving cloth. They were willing to learn, so SEWA got them registered in a government-sponsored training programme. Participation in this training program might have transformed their lives. They were the first *women* to be trained as weavers, and had to overcome resistance from the men giving the training, and their husbands. Shardaben's husband was himself a skilled weaver, and the family had come to Ahmedabad so he could take a job in the textile mill. He objected to her going to the training, but recognised that she would gain a valuable asset by going, and that the stipend she would receive would bring in more money than paper-picking ever could. Some of his resistance concerned the fact that it is men who give the training. His wife's attendance at the training programme represented a profound transformation in their domestic relationship. She would have to go out every day, and would be interacting with men whom her husband did not know. The skills she acquired in that training programme might conceivably be better than his, since he had had

to do preparatory and finishing work in the mills, rather than actually weaving, because weaving was reserved for the caste Hindus (Gillion 1968:101). She would also become a weaver, in a different sense of that term than had been the case earlier. That is, she would go from being a female member of a weaver caste and family, to being someone who had an occupation in her own right. She would acquire the craft independently of him, and would, theoretically, take her place beside him, rather than her labours contributing to his finished product. This is another aspect of what SEWA calls self-reliance. In fact, when I did manage to spend time with them in their workspace, I saw Shardaben doing the preparatory work of winding a warp and threading yarn onto the bobbins, and her husband doing the weaving.

In the year-long training programme, Shardaben and Hemaben were taught how to do every step of the weaving, not only carding and spinning and winding a warp, but also threading the loom and throwing the shuttle. They were also taught how to create designs which would be marketable (marketing is discussed in the following section). The women also received training in the management of a co-operative, through another government-run programme. They were taught how to make cost-effective purchases of raw materials, how to maintain an inventory, how to keep records, and how to establish reasonable prices for their finished products. The organiser made a valuable point about the successful operation of a co-operative, when she pointed out to me that many of the co-operatives, including this one, find it difficult to conceptualise independent operation. If this co-operative was eventually to operate independently - if it was going to become self-reliant, in terms of SEWA's 10-point programme - it would have to manage every stage of its operation through the skills and expertise of its members.

This is a difficult matter, because the women have no experience in 'entrepreneurship', and a great deal of experience in being dependent and reliant. They thought that SEWA would become the equivalent of an employer, or that it would intercede in the management of the co-operative. SEWA has done some of these things,

but most of SEWA's efforts have been focussed on putting equipment in place. This is both a metaphorical and a practical endeavour: SEWA has ensured that the structures have been made available. These structures include the co-operative itself, the workplace, the looms, the raw materials and the marketing outlets. But, valuable as these are, the required 'self-reliance' is much more difficult to accomplish.

The question of a place to work has been an almost insurmountable problem. I have said that Shardaben's house was too small for a loom. Hemaben's house was quite a bit larger, but still not spacious enough for the floor space required. In only one of the weavers' homes was a loom actually set up, and that was in the home of the wealthiest co-operative member. In that home, the loom was set up on the roof of the three-storey house. That was also the only loom I saw that was set up for weaving cloth. When Shardaben and her family and I would go to that home together, it was always the husband who was doing the weaving.

The problem is not only that there is no space to set up a loom: it is that any space that a family does have is already being utilised for income-generation. This is the case in the home of Jyotiben, another *Vijay* co-operative member. Although she is member of the co-operative, she and her family make a living by doing contract work for one of the textile mills. Contract work involves taking work into one's home and being paid a sum of money for an amount of work. In her case, the work was winding thread onto bobbins. The mill had supplied them with an electrically-operated winding machine, which took up the small 'add-on' room at the back of their small house. So far, then, I have discussed four households and one operating loom. In the one other household which was an active member of the co-operative and producing woven goods for sale, the loom was much smaller, only about two feet wide, and set up outside the home. Here, too, it was the man in the household who was weaving, and not the woman (although she was the co-operative member) and he was not weaving cloth, but a small mat called an *asan*, made out of narrow strips of woven material. In fact, these *asans* were a source of profit, albeit

a small profit, for the *Vijay* co-operative. Weaving *asans* did not require the large outlay of money which had been put into the looms which stood idle in the co-operative's workspace. Objectively, the production of *asans* was probably a more appropriate item than cloth to have begun with. However, the members saw the production of *asans* as lowering their status as weavers.

The story of the *Vijay* co-operative's workspace is the story of thwarted hopes originating in SEWA, and in the women members of the co-operative. When it had become obvious that the women could not set up looms in their homes, SEWA tried to help them find a workspace in their neighbourhood. That effort failed, because the officials who owned the right of access to it wanted 'black money' money to finalise the arrangement, and it was not forthcoming from SEWA. SEWA had then helped the women find and lease another space, which was located in the basement of an industrial building that had been a factory at one time.

I had heard about the workspace many times before going there with Shardaben and her husband. I could not understand why they were not weaving every day until they told me that, although they had a workspace, they had been forced to pay an exorbitant sum to the owners for electricity, and owed money to the owners. I was told they were being charged a rate of Rs 1,000 per month. This amount might have been reasonable for the light manufacturing operations in the other spaces in the converted factory, but there was little likelihood of the weavers' co-operative generating enough income to pay that bill, pay the rent on the workspace and make a profit for its members. The problem was further compounded by the fact that the workspace did not have its own meter, so the co-operative could not determine whether the electricity bill was legitimate or not. While I was there, Shardaben's husband was engaged in the lengthy and expensive process of having an electricity meter installed. The co-operative had borrowed money from the SEWA Bank to pay for the meter, but would have to pay it back. Electricity was necessary because the underground room required lighting if it was to be useable.

Dank, dusty and claustrophobic as that place seemed to me, that space represented and symbolised a number of things, amongst them safety for the co-operative members during the communal violence. The *Vijay* co-operative members with whom I talked were proud of the fact that they had not missed going to their workshop during the post-Ayodhya riots which had swept the city in 1993.

The workplace also symbolises some of the ways in which the disparities in world-view between members and organisers can operate, as I have suggested. One aspect of this disparity lies in the fact that the co-operative members want to weave the complex designs they were taught during their training programme but SEWA has identified their co-operative as producers of plain cloth. The co-operative *had* been financially successful for a time, and had produced and marketed some very good quality plain woven cloth. However, it has now become a non-co-operating co-operative.

The problems of the *Vijay* weavers' co-operative are both 'internal' to the membership *and* situated in the problem-ridden socio-economic conditions of Ahmedabad. The internal problems include not having enough active members to produce the woven cloth as well as the issue of the efforts of one member's husband to control the operation of his wife and the co-operative. The employment opportunities in Ahmedabad for a middle-aged man who had lost his job because the mills had shut down are extremely limited. Equally important is the issue of control, which in this co-operative has more to do with family and gender relations than with the wider social issues. The heart of the problem was, I realised eventually, that the husband of one of the principal co-operative members wanted to use the co-operative as a means of private entrepreneurship, getting loans through his wife's membership in the bank to finance his activities. He too is an expert weaver, and he is an articulate critic of the social system which places people like himself below others. He and I spent a lot of time talking about the caste system, during which I learned that he claims his family were *Kshatriyas* originally. He resents his wife's participation in SEWA, as it allows her to operate independently of him, and to have a

voice in a women-only organisation from which he is excluded. I do not suggest that he 'represents' all of the husbands and male family members of SEWA women, but he was an interesting example of the obstacles which can arise, when domestic relations conflict with those of the organisation.

Not for a long time did I realise that I was also being 'struggled over'. On Shardaben's part there was an expressed willingness and desire to tell me everything about the co-operative, and to introduce me to every one of its members. On her husband's part, there was the desire to control what I would learn, who I would speak to, who came to their house and so on. All of this became evident gradually. I thought at first that the fact he was always with his wife at the Reception Centre was a manifestation of protective care, then thought that, since he was unemployed, he might be going to SEWA in order to occupy his time. Much later, I realised that he was acting as the salesman for the co-operatives' output, and that he controlled every aspect of the co-operative's working and non-working. I do not know the extent to which the other families were involved in his efforts.

The reasons for the weavers' co-operative's dysfunctioning are to some extent also based in disjunctures between the ways in which SEWA perceives them, and the ways they perceive the organisation. While the *safaiwalis* will most likely continue to function as a co-operative, the weavers most likely will not. The weavers face a different set of problems from those of the *safaiwalis*, and the internal relations amongst the members are different. Within the weaver's co-op, it is clear that the domestic relations in one household have had a negative and determining influence on the operation of the co-op. It is also the case that the organiser in charge of the artisan co-operatives sees them as not being quite capable of standing on their own feet. She explains the failure of the co-operative in terms of the women's unwillingness to be independent and self-reliant. She views them as being incapable of putting aside their 'dependence' on SEWA, and as seeing the organisation as the equivalent of an employer. SEWA insists that it is not an employer,

and that co-operatives must become self-reliant, both economically and so far as decision-making is concerned. Co-operatives are required, after an initial period of support from SEWA, to contribute towards the expenses of the stores which sell their goods. Many of them resist this, it seems, because they think that SEWA is making a profit from their endeavours.

It seemed to me that, in the case of the weavers, the co-operative structure was not the best route to a solution. The formation of a co-operative served as an organisational 'template' laid over a situation, and not enough thought was given to the implications of its formation. Ideally, a fully-functioning weavers' co-operative could have provided enough employment for a number of people, some as weavers, some in the preparatory and finishing processes. Co-operatives had worked for some trades and for some groups of women, but it seems clear, in retrospect and to an outsider, that the chances of this co-operative being successful were always slender. There were not enough people to form a co-operative. The skill of weaving was conceived of by the would-be members as 'belonging' to the men in the families. There was money put into equipment that would stand idle, because only one family had enough room to set up and operate a loom. Nor was the auxiliary equipment (carding combs, spinning wheels and warping frames) owned by anyone in the co-op. Nor was it the case that all the weavers were without employment in the first place. Some *had* turned to paper-picking, and earned a pittance doing that, but some had employment in trades associated with the mills, and, for them, it would be taking a risk to leave behind steady employment for something speculative. The co-operative did work well for a while, and I was told that all of the plain cloth it had produced had been sold in the SEWA stores. Now, however, it only produces the *asans*, the small mats made from remnants of cloth.

No-one is responsible for the fact that communal tensions sometimes wrack the city and make it impossible to get to a place of work, but the fact that the workplace that was eventually leased for the weaving co-operative was a long way from the homes of any

of the members, and the fact that that particular neighbourhood was a sensitive one (*i.e.*, there were many Hindu and Muslim places of worship, and residents, and police *chowkis* on many corners) was a factor in the co-operative being likely to fail. Home-based work has its own hazards and exploitative relations, but a room full of women working in an industrial building surrounded by men, none of whom were kin, would be unlikely to be accepted by the women or their husbands.

I have discussed the fact that the husband of one of the women in the weaver's co-operative seemed to want to control her every move, as he wished to control my access to information. I think that he also saw himself as a likely candidate for the manager of a group of women weavers, which would not only run counter to SEWA's intentions, but would also be unlikely to be accepted by the men in the families of the other members. This is one of the hazards of teaching women a skill that their husbands think is exclusively theirs, and which they use to define themselves, socially. This man saw his wife usurping his position and his skill, and clearly felt threatened by this. His wife had found a place in an important organisation to which he could not belong, while he had become displaced from his workplace, and clearly resented both displacements. If SEWA allowed men to be members on a par with women, he would certainly be one of the men who would assume the 'right' to take charge. His wife is caught in the dilemma of wanting to fulfill her duty to SEWA, which means attending meetings when they are called, earning a living by weaving and repaying her loan to the bank, and living with his not always suppressed resentment.

Despite these difficulties, however, Shardaben's position has improved as a result of her membership in a SEWA co-operative. She is a shareholder in that co-operative and that share has economic value. She speaks to the women in her *chawl* with the authority of someone who has moved outside the domestic domain, as her female neighbours have not. She also participates in SEWA meetings, although with some discomfort because 'her' co-operative is not successful. And whether the Vijay co-op begins to function again or not,

SEWA is in a better position to organise another group of weavers, having gained a great deal of practical knowledge from this original experience.

Had the *Vijay* co-operative continued to produce cloth that would be marketed by SEWA, its products would have joined a flow of goods which originate in places such as this urban workspace and many of the villages where SEWA members live. SEWA connects its members with the market for cloth in Ahmedabad and in other parts of India through its participation in trade fairs. Some of these are strictly 'commercial', and set up for profit by the large 'handloom houses' and government Emporia. Others are organised and subsidised by the government to enable NGOs to sell their products. And yet others are set up so that government-sponsored co-operatives can sell their goods. SEWA participates in the latter two kinds of trade fairs, and its artisan co-operatives make a profit in doing so. SEWA also participates in the marketing of the artisan co-operatives' goods through a section of the organisation called the Design Library, and through three SEWA stores which operate in the city of Ahmedabad. The Design Library and the stores are the subjects of the following section.

The Design Library

Located on one rented floor of a building adjacent to the Reception Centre, the Design Library represents an element of SEWA's desire to be self-reliant in creating its own expertise rather than depending on the expertise of others. Formed in 1987, the Design Library is now an important node in a network of connections which link the urban and rural SEWA members who embroider and weave cloth and make beaded jewelry or leather items, with the middle-class women who will be able to choose from a selection of items in one of three SEWA shops in Ahmedabad, or at a "textile fair" in Delhi, Madras or another large city.

The head of the Design Library is a remarkable woman who is comfortable in talking to every people in all social strata. When she meets the women of the cane and

bamboo co-operative in their workshop which is also a *godown* (warehouse) in an extremely poor part of the city, she is a remarkable figure as she sits on a *charpoy* waiting for the members of the co-operative to gather. Tall, healthy, well-fed and well-dressed (in *khadi*) and energetic, she seems to be an anomaly amongst the thin and poor women who are members of the co-operative. A subtle gesture from her as the meeting is about to begin indicates that she and I should move to sit on the thin *dhurrie* (woollen rug) which has been spread on the ground where the co-operative members have gathered. In the 'ordinary' course of social interaction, this woman would have every right to remain seated on a higher level than the women she is speaking to, but she chooses, it seems easily and naturally, to undo the hierarchical order on this occasion. She speaks to the women about the need for quality control in the items their co-op produces, and about the need to meet orders on time, so as to ensure that contractual obligations are met. Her language is that of the market: making a profit, maintaining accurate accounts, inventory control, fiscal responsibility. It is informed, as I know from talking to her, with a profound sense of the need for change in the lives of these women and for these and other women to be "empowered" and to become self-reliant. It is also informed with a practical knowledge of the tactics of the traders who try to ensure that the best materials go to those able to pay the most for them, as the free market dictates. I have also seen her act in a manner more 'suited' to her social position, when she has been representing SEWA and government officials were present.

The Design Library maintains an extensive archive of traditional and contemporary designs for clothing, embroidery patterns, colour combinations and samples of completed work done by co-operative members. These designs are made available to anyone who might be interested in purchasing a large number of garments or other objects, through portfolios of photographs, photocopies and hand-drawn sketches. These portfolios are used for marketing purposes. Anyone wishing to place an order for garments, table cloths, cushion covers and beaded ornaments can come to the Design Library and decide on the

specific characteristics that they think will sell well. Some of the designs are 'traditional' and are identifiable as belonging to certain regions of Gujarat, such as Banaskantha or Kutchch. There is a large market for these traditional designs amongst the middle class. They are especially in demand during Navrattri, the 'nine-nights' festival in October, when many urban Gujaratis wear the costumes of villagers.

Another purpose of the Design Library is to create new designs which are put together as prototypes. These new designs indicate a sophisticated sense of the kinds of designs which will sell. This is an extremely important aspect of SEWA's efforts to maintain the profitability of the co-operatives, because if the items they produce cannot find a market, the co-operatives cannot function. In the case of the middle classes buying 'traditional' designs, the desire for authenticity competes with that for stylishness, which is, almost by definition, constantly changing. The Design Library informs the co-operative members of those changes in style, and tries to ensure that the goods they produce find a market.

The Design Library staff are, in a sense, typical of the 'mix' of professionally and traditionally trained people which operates at SEWA. The manager of the Design Library is a graduate of Textile Design programme at the Ahmedabad Polytechnic Institute, while neither of the two women who embroider designs is literate. It is already something of a shift in conceptualisation, to define the village women who embroider as artisans, as SEWA does, in an effort to have their skills acknowledged. In a similar effort to effect a 'shift', SEWA designates these latter two women as 'designers', in acknowledgement of their responsibility in creating, rather than simply reproducing, designs. Both of them have received training in silk-screening in the last year, and use this skill to create some of their designs.

The Design Library staff do not themselves constitute a co-operative; rather, they are salaried employees. I said earlier that SEWA provides opportunities for some illiterate women, which could not be conceivable otherwise. One such woman works in the Design

Library. She is a low caste woman who, most of the time, carries and serves water to the Design Library personnel. But sometimes, when the educated woman whose job it is to co-ordinate the photocopying for all the Reception Centre offices is busy, this woman operates the photocopier, which is housed in the air-conditioned Design Library. The example of a *paniwali* operating a photocopier might seem utterly trivial, yet it has great significance, when considered in cultural terms concerning gender and employment. Because of the extremely high unemployment and the 'fact' that it is most often men who use technological devices, an illiterate woman would most be most unlikely ever to be be allowed to operate a photocopier. In fact, it was only at SEWA that I ever saw a woman do this.

Quality control is also an important aspect of the Design Library, as SEWA tries to establish long term contractual relationships with marketers of the textile products. Such considerations as the use of high quality materials and colour-fast dyes are important to the Indian market, and will be increasingly important as SEWA branches into the export market. The Co-operative Federation acquired an export license while I was in Ahmedabad, and, in part because the woman responsible for the Design Library is responsible for the Gujarat State Co-operative Federation, the SEWA co-operatives will be able to export their goods. This organiser told me she was sure that, even after customs and other taxes were paid, exporting textiles and handicrafts would still be lucrative. The Design Library then, is a vital link between the artisanal co-operatives such as the block printing, weaving, embroidery and cane and bamboo co-operatives and the markets for the items they produce.

The Design Library is one element of SEWA's marketing strategy. Another is the three stores which sell the products of the co-operatives. Next door to the Reception Centre is the SEWA *Kalakruti* (handicrafts) shop, the first store established by the organisation, under the direction of Lalita Krishnaswamy. The shop provides full time work for four women, and is one outlet for the goods that the co-operatives produce.

The shelves of SEWA Kalakruti are stocked with bolts of hand-woven cotton cloth, most of it either block-printed or tie-dyed. Some woollen shawls are sold in the winter. One can also buy ready-made *salwar kameez* and *dupattas* and cotton *saris*, all of them made by SEWA members. The shop sells embroidered cushion covers, bedsheets, some leather shoes and bags, hand-woven carry-bags, and some paper file folders and account books which have been created by members of one of the branches of the paper-pickers' co-operative. A few decorative items such as the *torans* which hang above the door in Gujarati homes, are also for sale. Marketing the goods the co-operatives produce is a major concern, since income-generation and production must be followed up by the sale of the goods produced. All three SEWA stores are one of the means of fulfilling this marketing function. If the co-operatives had to sell their goods on the open-market, they would probably have to sell them at lower prices because of the cut-throat competition which prevails. The SEWA stores are all 'fixed-price', so that no bargaining is allowed. The store does not sell the *khols* which its *chindi*-worker members make. The quality is not high enough and the cost of selling them in the store, which the co-operative must bear, would be too high. The *khols* are sold directly from the *godown* where they are made.

Another of SEWA's shops is located in the heart of Navrangpura, an ultra-posh part of Ahmedabad characterised by gleaming office towers, where one can shop at Benetton, drink cappuccino and catch up on computer technology. Luxury goods imported from Europe, the Gulf and America are sold in some of the shops. Called Banascraft, the SEWA shop sells hand-made and embroidered clothing and decorative items from Banaskantha, a region of Gujarat famed for its textile crafts. The prices at Banascraft reflect the fact that the shop is in the wealthiest part of the city. The shop seems to be a world apart from the claims that SEWA is a grassroots organisation whose members are the self-employed, but everything in the store is made by a SEWA member. The standard of the goods is very high, and the goods must compete with similar items in

other shops, both private and government-supported. Banascraft's principal competitors are the government-supported *Gujari* and the Handloom House, and a shop called *Hastakala*, which sells only the work of co-operatives. Of these, only the *Hastakala* stores carry SEWA items, the *asans* made by the Vijay co-operative. Otherwise, the competition is the hundreds of clothing stores in the city, and the evening Law Garden market, where handicraft producers sell their own and other people's textiles. Many of the sites of the competition are lavish and sophisticated places and SEWA must compete with them on the same grounds, which are essentially the quality of the material and workmanship and the appeal of the designs. The designs here reflect the fact that there is a middle-class market for 'ethnic' apparel and decorative items for the household. In some cases, that means lavishly-decorated clothing, and in others an elegant simplicity which is costly to produce.

There is yet another store, this one located in a massive high rise tower in another 'posh' part of the city. Its products are more like those of the SEWA Kalakruti shop than those of the Banascraft store. This store also sells the *asans* that the Vijay co-operative produces. Some of the funding for this store comes from the co-operative Federation, for which the SEWA store also serves as a meeting place. The existence of these stores is a testament to the organising genius of the head of the Design Library, and her efforts to ensure that SEWA is 'visible' to the wealthiest sectors of Ahmedabad. It might seem incongruous that these stores should be located in the most expensive parts of the city, but, as this organiser sees it, the stores are a manifestation of SEWA's new position and 'presence' in Ahmedabad. Similarly, selling costly clothing to the middle classes might seem to be a long way from a Gandhian position of simplicity and self-reliance but for this SEWA organiser and for the organisation at large, it is not a contradiction of the purpose of *seva*, but a practical, forward-looking application of that purpose, and a logical extension of SEWA's efforts to connect the self-employed women with the resources and

programmes which the government has established in *its* efforts to alleviate poverty and raise the standard of living of the very poor.

"In the end, the question put to ethnography is not merely 'what was it like' but 'what can it teach us'?

Jorgensen (1981:7)

"Ethnography must redefine itself as that practice of representation which illuminates the power of large-scale, imagined life possibilities."

Appadurai (1991:200)

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

I have argued in this dissertation that SEWA makes a number of valuable and potentially lasting contributions to ways of conceptualising and acting upon the situations of some of the very poor in India, although this has not come about without costs, obstacles and confrontations. One element of that contribution is the organisation's efforts to establish new ways of thinking about and acting upon the connections between gender, labour and poverty. Another is its efforts to resist those aspects of Indian society which, whether actively or passively, victimise women, the poor and the lower castes. SEWA's efforts are comprised of a critique of practices harmful to women; efforts to influence government policies concerning women and the implementation of programmes intended to benefit them. I have shown that SEWA utilises both ideological and practical strategies in its efforts. SEWA also attempts to establish bonds between women of different communities and sub-castes, as part of its efforts to alter women's perceptions of themselves and each other in particular directions. That is, it attempts to encourage women to think of themselves as economic actors and to relate to other women in terms of the similarities in their economic conditions. Many of SEWA's 50,000 members have now had some exposure to other ways of thinking about themselves and their relationships to women in similar economic circumstances.

I have discussed the reasons for the existence of SEWA, situating the organisation both in terms of its origins in the TLA and in the wider context of the proliferation of social movements in India. SEWA is one of many movements which have arisen in

response to the increasing desperation of the marginalised. I have also pointed out the reasons SEWA has adopted a reformist position. SEWA's Gandhian roots determined that it would contest issues within the framework of legal possibilities and that its efforts to construct alternatives would be premised on utilising the resources of the state (Addenda 1 and 2). This is the point of SEWA's insistence that its members make contributions to the economy and have a right to its economic and social resources.

In Chapter Three I discussed some of SEWA's strategies in presenting the problems of very poor women as issues which are worthy of the attention of those people who direct the economic and development resources of the government. SEWA works to bring to public consciousness issues which would otherwise remain invisible. This is the point of much of the organisation's work. SEWA efforts on behalf of the *chindi* workers and the vegetable vendors, for example, were aimed at alleviating their specific problems, but also aimed at saying that these women represented not 'only' a few marginalised women in a city in Gujarat, but all of the women who labour in the self-employed sector. Practically speaking, SEWA's power means that even those women who are still collecting paper from the roadside can draw upon its informational and legal resources if they are harassed. SEWA can have little direct effect on the conditions of their labour, but it provides a resource that is more powerful than their families, and which works on their behalf.

Because of a number of factors, SEWA now has the moral authority to criticise the working conditions of all women who work in the informal sector, and to demand changes in the legislation which affects them. Those factors include the organisation's many years of experience, its high national and international visibility, the prominence of Ela Bhatt and the fact that SEWA has remained independent of political affiliations.

To say that the economically marginal women of Ahmedabad have the same rights as the members of the middle class is to make a moral argument, which has then to be made operational through specific programmes. I have described some of the strategies

devised by SEWA for tackling those problems. These include both organisational structures and representations of purpose and action. I have suggested that the existence and the strength of the organisation have made it possible to define the terms of situations (whether problematic or beneficial) as it sees fit and to rework such terms as traditional and modern in ways that challenge those aspects of social and existential realities which denigrate so many women and keep them poor.

SEWA defines itself as a union of the self-employed. A trade union of self-employed women who work in the informal sector and who are encouraged to think of themselves as entrepreneurs is a prime example of an effort to reconceptualise prevailing ideas. These definitions function as the form and the content of an ideology and as political strategies. They are a powerful means of engendering the possibility of different conceptualisations of the economically marginal women of Ahmedabad. SEWA argues that such revisions of prevailing ideas are a necessary condition of any effort to bring about social change. Those definitions are also a means of representing SEWA's ideology to its members and to an audience outside SEWA.

SEWA insists that it has the right to use the terminology of the dominant discourse, and to invest that terminology with the meaning and significance it deems desirable. This is perhaps most evident in the case of the designation 'union'. SEWA has insisted that it, too, is a union, although its members do not have the kinds of relations with employers which are ordinarily thought to be associated with a union. This stems in part from the origins of SEWA within the Textile Labourers Association, and speaks of the desire of those who had been TLA members to disallow the right of definition to the union which had cast out its women members. In insisting on the designation 'union', SEWA situates itself critically with respect to the parent body, and claims that it has retained the original meaning of the term, while the TLA had used its power as a union to throw out those members it deemed to be the least valuable and the most vulnerable. The

claim is that the TLA had valued form, structure, and relations with those in power over the needs of its members.

The fact that SEWA took that expulsion as the starting point of its own independence, rather than fading away or joining another union in which it might only have replicated its secondary status is an important aspect of SEWA's charter myth. Those members of the original SEWA have seen and participated in the struggle for independence and self-reliance. Those members and those activists who have joined SEWA in the intervening years have passed on the story of the break with the TLA and the subsequent decades of growth and diversification in the organisation. The ideological message which SEWA takes from this is that anything should be possible to accomplish in the future if the current membership considers the difficulties SEWA has faced and overcome in the past.

The explicit argument in SEWA's position that any woman can belong to the SEWA union is that union means joining forces with others in a similar position. SEWA defines that similarity on its own terms. It is premised on two things: on gender and on economic position, insofar as the latter relates to earning a living. In putting its platform in terms of gender, SEWA acknowledges its ideological position while the TLA, like so many other powerful organisations, seems to have taken for granted that belonging to the TLA meant being male. While it is the case that SEWA was originally a part of the TLA, its membership and activities were always segregated along gender lines. To the best of my knowledge, SEWA is the only organisation of its kind in India which is a registered union. SEWA's definition as a union is as practical as it is symbolic, as its affiliations with international unions show, although it is interesting that SEWA does not list in its English language documentation affiliations with any other trade unions in India, so its claim to be part of the social movement of Indian trade unions may be open to question.

The trades which most of SEWA's members conduct are not those ordinarily considered to have any value to an employer. Yet SEWA argues that the placement of

value is a moral act which is a necessary element of planned change. Many of SEWA's trade union members perform low status occupations (such as weaving) which are reserved for them from birth. Others have turned to particular kinds of work (paper-picking, for example) as a result of economic necessity. This is different from the ways in which people usually take up an occupation in India, which is either to gain an education and then go into business or a profession or to take up the occupation traditionally done by one's sub-caste or religious community. The desperation arises from several things. The mills are closing down, and practicing economic 'rationalisation' of their operations, so that people with low-level skills are less and less likely to find employment. The economic desperation has also come about because of changes in the world market, principally the shifting of capital resources to more profitable grounds than the textile mills of Ahmedabad. This need to turn to any conceivable kind of work in order to feed their families and to retain their place in the social hierarchy (*i.e.* not to become homeless pavement dwellers or beggars) is the negative side of the 'imagined possibilities' discussed by Appadurai.

Even when the work that SEWA members do is related to an occupation traditionally assigned to a sub-caste or community, such as weaving, block-printing or cane and bamboo work, SEWA argues, I would say legitimately, that its efforts with those members and its efforts on their behalf, alter the members' relationships to the labour. SEWA works to alter those relations from dependency to self-reliance, insofar as that is feasible. SEWA works to alter the physical, the economic and the social conditions in which the labour is performed and the terms in which the labour and the labourers are valued. It also works to alter the terms of the feasibility itself. That is, it attempts to create opportunities from within existing social and economic systems for its members and argues that its members, the "self-employed", have the same right as anyone else to the economic resources of the state. The claim that the right to those resources is the same as the right of everyone else - of men, the middle class, the educated, those people who are

wealthy in social resources - is a radical claim. It is also different from saying that the poor 'deserve' to be the recipients of the programmes devised for them by others.

SEWA's experience in organising makes possible new ways for bureaucrats to think about and to interact with the economically marginal women of urban and rural Gujarat. The governments of India and of Gujarat have, in the last few years, identified women as the focus of their development strategies. These governments have the funds and, potentially at least, the political will to implement programmes of poverty alleviation, income generation and resource development and management, as the success of the SEWA nursery co-operatives discussed in Chapter Three indicates. The value of SEWA and other NGOs in such schemes is that they have in place organisational structures through which to implement such schemes. Now, when the government of Gujarat wants to reach "the grassroots", in its own efforts to reach the desperately poor, it is able to draw upon the expertise and experience of SEWA and other NGOs and to discuss ways and means of implementing programmes with them. The example of the involvement of some SEWA members in drought-relief work, mentioned in Chapter Two, is one example of this discourse with the state government. SEWA's involvement in the government's DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) schemes and the government's relocation schemes for oustees provide other examples. SEWA is in a position to understand the problems of urban and rural poverty as, in part, the problems of women's lives. That understanding, and the years of persistent efforts by SEWA to draw attention to the problems of the poor, can aid in the Government's own efforts to transform rural economies. SEWA asserts that the understanding it has accumulated in its years of struggle is another kind of expertise, an expertise which complements that of the scientific or economic expert (*i.e.*, the irrigation expert, the economist, the agricultural expert) and that of the bureaucrat.

The co-operation between the government of Gujarat and SEWA is another of the ways in which SEWA engenders new possibilities for interaction between NGOs and

government agencies. I was told by high-ranking organisers that the government is not 'the enemy', as one of them put it to me, and that it makes more sense to bring pressure to bear on the direction that government agencies and policies take, than it does to stand aloof on the moral and ideological 'high ground'. The government has its own health care, child welfare and 'development' programmes, many of them now directed at women. SEWA incorporates those programmes within its own purposes and its own ways of functioning. That is, SEWA's participation in such development programmes takes places within the ideology of SEWA. This participation nevertheless leaves SEWA free to criticise those programmes it considers to be deficient and free to direct the efforts of the government in the directions it (SEWA) thinks are most useful. This means that SEWA makes strategic choices about which programmes to participate in, and that the government utilises SEWA's expertise as it sees fit. Ela Bhatt's participation in the National Commission on Self-Employed Women is an example of this bi-directional interaction between SEWA and, in this case, the central Government. SEWA had long insisted that a study which focussed on women in the informal sector was necessary. When the government accepted that recommendation, Ela Bhatt was asked to chair the commission which did the study, and now SEWA and many other organisations have a body of data, drawn from every state, from which to argue that specific policy changes are required and should be implemented, as well as proposals for implementation. Given SEWA's years of experience, its rich fund of expertise and its demonstrated ability to launch successful programmes, SEWA is in a strong position to make specific recommendations directed towards women.

At SEWA, economically-marginal women are credited with being agents in devising techniques of earning a living and coping with poverty. They have also been encouraged to consider new ways of conceptualising their relationships with their husbands and male kin and with men and women in positions of authority. Many of SEWA's members now have some experience in managing their own money, since they have bank accounts and can take out loans in their own names. The members have some

experience in the power of joining forces with other women so as to make their needs known and to publicise their demands. None of these things is necessarily beneficial. Nor do they mean that women do not conflict with each other as men do, or prefer to leave the *status quo* unchanged and just take what benefits they can. They do, however, provide the potential for change.

To say that SEWA's representational strategies have the potential to transform existential situations is not to give priority to ideational systems, or to suggest that ideas work 'in themselves' to create change. It is, however, to say that without a re-thinking of social categories, nothing that could be called a transformation is likely to occur. This is, in essence, the argument of the 'women and development' literature: that unless and until conceptualisations, in this case of women and of their work, are altered, any effort to change their situation is unlikely to be successful. Until women are conceived of as economic actors, as agents of change, as people capable of making decisions about themselves, a government programme which conceives of them as beneficiaries is unlikely to make the kinds of transformation which are required. It *is* possible for some of the development schemes which the government and SEWA envision, such as wasteland development schemes and higher wage rates for *bidi* rollers, to come about through legislation and government programmes, but the relationship between experts and recipients will not change through those means.

SEWA's representational strategies provide the grounds for the possibility of a transformation in the ways the participants are conceptualised and programs operated. This is the point of SEWA's efforts to reconstruct women, and 'the poor' as agents and as contributors to solutions, rather than as beneficiaries and recipients of expertise and 'aid'. Realistically, SEWA cannot alter the fact that the economic structure of India benefits the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Nor can SEWA ensure employment for the vast number of people who require it. The organisation does not have the power to help its members enter the formal sector. It can, however, provide a model for action that people

in governmental or non-governmental organisations can utilise if they wish. That model consists of lines of communication, strategic decisions about participation in schemes, and affiliations with governmental agencies and other non-governmental groups. It is also concrete activities such as the formation of institutions such as the Bank and the co-operatives.

There are certainly some discrepancies between SEWA's ideology and the ways in which the organisation actually works. The fact that the head of the co-operative with the largest number of members is selected to hold an important position on the Executive Committee suggests that a participatory ethos operates at SEWA. Yet the middle class organisers retain most of the high-level authority and they make, so far as I know, the high-level decisions, concerning such matters as the allocation of finances and decisions about participating in government development programmes. Those women can choose to share that power or to delegate authority, but the power to make those choices is itself vested in them.

In my discussion of the two co-operatives in Chapter Five I pointed out that the self-employed women were constrained by decisions made on their behalf by SEWA organisers. In the case of the weavers' co-operative, the decision about the formation of a co-operative was made *for* the members, rather than originating with them. Even with the assistance they were given, there was little likelihood that the co-operative could succeed, given the lack of numbers and the power of the social forces operating against the co-operative. Those social forces included an unemployed husband who wanted to control the co-operative and the fact that some of the women who became members were not willing to give up the relative security of their low-paying jobs for the sake of possible long-term benefits. They also included an important member of the co-operative moving back to the village, and one family's preoccupation with a daughter's marriage. It seemed to me that the high-level organisers were somewhat out of touch with the social realities of the co-operative members, and that the promise of potential change was more appealing

than realistic, more ideological than practical. It also seemed to be the case that the members were not able to match the organiser's conception of their futures. The members wanted a different kind of relationship with SEWA than the one the organiser envisioned for them, a relationship closer to that of an employer than SEWA saw as being its mandate. The members had not been able to establish a self-reliant co-operative, or to conceive of themeselves as entrepreneurs, in the relatively short period since the co-operative had been formed.

A disparity between conceptualisations also existed in the relations between the paper pickers/office cleaners and the organiser who was charged with responsibility for them at SEWA. In this case, the problem runs in the opposite direction from that which pertains in the weavers' co-operative. That is, within the *safaiwalis'* co-operative there is a struggle between the organiser, who operates within a social work model, and an extremely independent woman who perceives that SEWA is holding her back.
In this case, it is the independent self-employed woman who has experienced what has been called "a shift in consciousness" (Eyerman and Jamison 1994:4) while the woman who has spent two decades as a SEWA organiser seems to have resisted such a shift. This is not to say that this organiser has not worked hard on behalf of the paper pickers, but she has not kept up with the aspirations that some of them have acquired.

The organisation called SEWA has gone from strength to strength since it was forced to become independent. It has increased its membership tenfold. It has expanded its operations into all of the rural districts of Gujarat. It has established itself as a participant in the state government's policy-making on women and development. It has achieved that strength through 'on the ground' organising, which has enabled people like Ambaben (the 'paper-picker' woman who died) and Shardaben (the manager of the almost defunct weaving co-operative) to participate in other possibilities than those which their social networks would ordinarily make possible. It has also achieved that strength through the establishment of strategic alliances with national and international organisations. SEWA

has become a participant in the 'culture of development'. This term has sometimes been used in a pejorative sense, to mean that NGOs and other participants strengthen their own positions without altering the conditions of the poor, but I use it here to mean that SEWA participates as a source of expertise, information, and experience, in both national and international *fora* on the issues which concern economically-marginal women around the world. (SEWA went to Beijing for the 1995 Women's Conference, for instance.) This is a positive reversal of the direction in which expertise in the 'development discourse' has so often travelled.

There is a paradox contained in the strength of SEWA. The organisation retains the right to define such things as work and membership in its own terms. Some of those terms have been created at SEWA (self-employed, for instance) and others have been drawn from arguments in the literature on women and development. Others, such as the concept and practice of 'self-reliance' and the non-hierarchical valuing of work, are drawn from a Gandhian ethic. The paradox is that these definitions sometimes have a determined quality that can be as unidimensional, one might say as 'essentialist', as the definitions they oppose. This is evident in SEWA's position that economic and working conditions are the grounds for every aspect of SEWA's activities. Read positively, SEWA's insistence that its members are workers, and that their activities are *work*, in a social context which often denies or ignores both of these definitions, is heroic. SEWA has not lost sight of its mandate to work with the poorest members of society and it has made that mandate work. The strong and fairly rapid growth of the organisation, the increasing diversity of its membership, and the holistic ethos of the organisation's approach to development (discussed in Chapter Three) have all been generated from the idea that it is the need to earn a living which is fundamental to changing the situation of the economically marginal. SEWA does create an alternative economic context for its members, through its efforts to alter legislation and to influence government policies. It also does this through court cases

on behalf of its members (the vegetable vendors in Manek Chowk, for instance) and through direct intervention with employers.

However, it is also the case that, while the ability to earn a living and the need to increase wages and improve the conditions in which that wage-earning is done, are critically important to the women who belong to SEWA, that does not necessarily translate into their agreeing to define themselves as 'workers' any more than would be the case in North America or anywhere else. SEWA intends the definition of its members as workers to suggest 'solidarity' and unity, and to have these definitions overcome existing alliances to caste and community. Although these abstractions from community are possible to some extent within the confines of the Reception Centre, it seems unlikely that the power of 'community' will lessen as a result of SEWA's efforts, in a social climate in which the forces of communitarian antagonism are growing in strength.

There are some problems in SEWA's representations of its members to outsiders and to themselves. SEWA's representations of 'the poor' who are its members is a sympathetic rendering, but it is biased in certain ways, and the terms of the representation are not necessarily those its members would understand or accept. For one thing, the members are represented as social isolates, outside of their economic relations with an employer. In most of SEWA's literature, women are represented in terms of the labour they perform, and sometimes as (abused) wives and (abandoned) mothers or as heads of households in their own (unwished for) right. What is missing from these representations, however, are the social relations in which the women live. These are usually familial, as one would expect, and also extend to networks of friends. The women I got to know were rich in their social networks, and for some of those women, those networks were the source of alternatives to their economic situations. Many of the women I met had relatives who worked in the formal sector, so could, for instance, borrow money from them in a crisis, rather than going to the moneylenders.

The transformative capacity I have alluded to is evident within the daily round of activities in the Reception Centre and in the interactions between SEWA members and organisers. In those interactions, people who might never come into contact with each other ordinarily, given such constraints as hierarchical relations and communitarian divisions, meet to discuss strategies for such things as wage rates and working conditions. They meet as equals sometimes, as happens when paper-pickers from across the city attend meetings to discuss their common problems. Other times, the hierarchical habits of lifetimes prevail. But they do meet. When Ambikaben, an elderly widow who has her own version of SEWA's success story, meets the organiser in charge of the paper-pickers, a woman who is now discouraged to think that her lifetime of effort has had little effect in transforming the 'paper-pickers', they meet on social terms which were set long ago. Ambikaben is subservient, quiet-spoken and grateful for whatever help she can get. The other woman is secure in her sense that she has the right to disburse benefits and to grant Ambikaben her time and attention. When this organiser and the head of the *Saundarya* (office-cleaners) co-operative meet, they acknowledge the contentions between their points of view. However, they work together with their different intentions and purposes. The younger woman who calls herself a *dalit* and who identifies herself as a social worker when she is talking to people about her membership in SEWA knows that the older Brahmin woman will not always be in charge of the 'paper-pickers', and that her own relationship with whoever comes to occupy that position will likely be different from her relationship with the present leader. I think it is unlikely that she herself will be given official charge of the paper-pickers, but I also think that more, and different, possibilities might be engendered when a new person takes over.

It is difficult to generalise from my involvement with a small number of people at SEWA, about the ways in which the members of SEWA perceive themselves in relation to the organisation, and how they conceptualise themselves *as* members. I think it is unlikely that the women who have joined the independent (post-TLA) SEWA see themselves as

members of a union. Some of them have husbands who are members of trade unions, and know how a union works and what it does for its members. For women in that position, SEWA's claim to be a union would be acknowledged as symbolic. Other women, perhaps especially those who work in home-based labour, or in village co-operatives, are, for different reasons, unlikely to think of SEWA as a union. The home-based worker who sews for the readymade garment trade will have seen little evidence of joint action on her behalf, and, for her, SEWA's affiliation with international garment workers will likely be an abstraction. As I suggested earlier, co-operative membership is more likely to be the most accessible way in which women experience their membership in SEWA and "imagine new possibilities" in their situations.

I did not set out to study co-operatives which were dysfunctional, although it turned out that there were problems with both the *Saundarya* and the *Vijay* co-operatives. The problems were of different kinds and probably represent only a fraction of the potential difficulties which the co-operatives face, although I cannot say whether all of the co-operatives had operating problems. It seemed to me that they were all vulnerable to any number of natural and social forces, such as fluctuating supplies and prices of raw materials, competition from others in the same businesses, and resistance from entrenched interests, to name only a few. However, SEWA represents most of its co-operatives as functioning successfully. With the exception of the 1988 edition, SEWA's Annual reports list co-operatives, incomes, numbers of women and so on without any analysis and with claims of success in facing various struggles. This is not an unusual phenomenon since any organisation's Annual Report is likely to stress the successes the organisation has enjoyed and to reserve its problems for private discussions.

The block-printers' co-operative was described to me as an example of such a success. (Had I found an interpreter with whom I could have worked full-time, I would have done a comparative study of the block-printers' and the weavers' co-operatives, to see whether I could ascertain the reasons for the differences in their experience.) Here it is

only possible to say that the block-printers seem to have a close and positive relationship with some of the high-ranking SEWA organisers. Twenty of the block-printers work on the premises of the Reception Centre, which might mean that it is easier for them to report problems and for the organisers in charge to respond to them. The block-printers' co-operative has become 'self-reliant' in the way that SEWA defines the term, which is to say that it makes its own decision and has operated successfully for ten years. As it happens, all of its members are Muslims, although I cannot say whether that has had an impact on the success of the co-operative. It must be said that SEWA's strategies on behalf of both of the two co-operatives whose members I got to know have not been successful, either in the terms set by the organisation or in terms of the aspirations of the members.

The question remains whether a woman-centred approach can solve problems that other approaches cannot or do not, and whether the premises, operating principles and results of a women-centred approach are different from and better than models based on the assumption that women will benefit when men's situations improve. It seems intuitively evident that an approach which begins with women would be better for them than an approach which takes them to be adjuncts of men, and I have no doubt that the 'trickle across' approach does not effect structural changes for women. However, the social reality of many women's positions in Ahmedabad is a great deal more complex than such an either/or position would suggest, as I learned from the weavers and paper-pickers with whom I was interacting.

The weavers' co-operative seemed to me to be an example of a woman-focussed effort not being the most-useful approach. The paradox of women-focussed development is that, while it addresses the issue of putting income and decision-making directly into the hands of women, it also participates in a dichotomy. To recall an issue discussed earlier, I suggested (following Rooney) that the creation of alternatives on genuinely different grounds, as distinct from a reversal of the terms of the existing situation, is extremely difficult to accomplish. It may be, as social activists in North America have argued, that

there has to be a period of time in which the disadvantaged are allowed time to catch up, or to develop their own position. Certainly this is the argument in India, when it comes to the 'reservation' for the 'backward castes', although this has become an extremely contentious and dangerous matter. I think that is critically important to begin with women, and to remain focussed on them, insofar as income-generation and related matters are concerned. But I also came to think, as I learned about some of the problems of the women I got to know in Ahmedabad, that SEWA's exclusive focus on women does not accurately reflect the way the women members themselves think about their husbands and male kin. The issue is that women do not consider themselves in isolation from the men in their lives, any more than they consider themselves as income-earners exclusively. So SEWA must transform those ways of thinking about men, as well as ways of thinking about work. SEWA puts its arguments in terms of empowering women, and uplifting them, and there seems to be no doubt that this is a necessary condition of transformation. SEWA's argument that there is a need for women to be the focus of this kind of work is based on a critical assessment of the roles of men in domestic and economic relations, but also on an ideological position. This assessment is supported by many of the women's organisations in India, whether they are activist, conservative or radical. However, practically speaking, the domestic economy in many households is such that every member who is capable of doing so contributes to the household. Altering the conditions and the terms of the woman's labour is a valuable thing to do, but to leave out the men seems to me to create some problems of its own. Certainly, it would be difficult to ensure that the men did not take over, as I fully realise the man I have been discussing here might have wished to do. And SEWA probably has enough to do in transforming the way that its women members think without having to do the same thing for men. But it cannot be denied that the exclusive focus on women does also create its own problems. SEWA has considered allowing men to join, but that would be done extremely carefully, and probably in the face of opposition from some members, if it were to happen at all.

The rapid growth of the organisation is a mixed blessing, I would suggest. There is more and more work to be done all the time, and the resources to do that work do not always keep pace with the need. Relations between members and organisers have inevitably become more formal as the organisation has grown and diversified. Women who used to be able to go directly to Elaben, Ranjanben or Lalitaji (all highly placed organisers) now find themselves waiting for an appointment, or seeing someone who is in a lower position in the organisation. This increasing formalisation bothers some of the older members who have been with SEWA a long time and for whom SEWA is an extension of their family. They have been accustomed to closer ties and more immediate responses to their problems than are currently the case. One organiser has put in place a number of lower-level assistants (three in total), who keep records and are on hand to respond quickly to a pressing problem if the need arises. She does not travel out of the city very often, but there are days when she is too tired to go into the office. Then, the other women are there to respond to whatever problems arise.

Ela Bhatt and the other high ranking organisers do travel frequently and anyway cannot respond to the innumerable problems and concerns which make up the average day at the Reception Centre. When Ela Bhatt is out of the city or out of the country, Lalita Krishnaswamy is in charge of the operations of SEWA. Sometimes, they are both away in different parts of the country. These short-term absences are not a problem of course, as there are other people on hand. The issue arises, however, of the next generation of leadership of the Self-Employed Women's Association. Some of the long-term leaders are in their early sixties. One of the high-ranking organisers is younger by a decade, and so might be available when the older leaders retire. I surmise that the decision about the next generation will be made by democratic means. A high international profile has always been a characteristic of SEWA and that profile has been maintained by people who are multi-lingual in Indian languages and in English. This will probably have some effect on the decision. Ela Bhatt's daughter-in-law holds an important position in the organisation but I

heard no suggestion of a "succession". Perhaps SEWA will do the unexpected again and elect an illiterate Gujarati speaking woman to head the organisation. Certainly the next generation of leaders will have a continuous supply of issues to deal with. If the economic liberalisation presently underway continues, that scenario will have specific implications for the self-employed women of Ahmedabad. If it stalls, there is little hope in sight for anything other than more of the same for the very poor.

I found that there is a world of difference in worldviews, in the ways in which some of the self-employed women perceive the phenomenal rise of SEWA, and what they see as the unchanged conditions of their own situations. I was told by several of the members that SEWA has prospered while they remained as poor as ever, despite years of faithful membership. This is a contentious point: the organisers see themselves as devoting their lives and careers to building the organisation and helping the poor, while some of the poor see the growth of SEWA being the result of *their* efforts which have not been acknowledged and have not garnered them the same benefits as have accrued to the organisers with the highest visibility. It is not the fault of SEWA that some of its members are still extremely poor, any more than it is *because* of SEWA that the wealthier organisers arrive at the Reception Centre in private cars. The disparities are far older than the organisation. However, there is resentment. The organisers point out that SEWA is not a charitable organisation, and requires that its members be accountable to the co-operatives and to the bank, repaying loans, filing reports with accountants and so on. Some of the members see the organisation prospering, new buildings being purchased and rented, new vehicles in the parking lot, and they see their own position relatively unaltered over time. It was even suggested to me that SEWA has prospered at the expense of the women. I would say that this latter point is clearly *not* the case, but rather an instance of the self-employed women not being aware of the amount of money required to operate an organisation like SEWA. They do, however, know that '*lakhs* (hundreds of thousands) of rupees', as one of them said to me, flow into SEWA, and they know that some of that

money goes to support the staff and maintain the building and operate sophisticated computers. And so it does. The issue here is the disjuncture between the perception of those in the upper echelons that the organisation must maintain itself so that it can continue to do its work, and the perceptions of some of the very poor members that the conditions of their own lives have not altered appreciably in the course of their membership.

There is no doubt that anyone might despair, considering the gains which SEWA is able to accomplish, even acknowledging, as one must, that those efforts are heroic. Even when SEWA brings all of its resources to bear on a situation, whether that means financial resources or mounting a legal challenge, or collecting a number of women together in a protest, the resulting difference can be minuscule and temporary. A Rs 2 per 1,000 increase in the wage of *bidi* rollers, for example, strikes the outsider as an extremely small gain, yet SEWA organisers and members must conceptualise that increase in positive terms or they would be driven to cynicism. I met no-one at SEWA who *was* cynical about the work of the organisation, although many were disheartened by the slow pace of improvements. Membership in SEWA does open up some economic opportunities which would probably not exist otherwise, for many women. For a small number of the members, this had led to employment with SEWA. Many SEWA members now have regular employment and others have some security in knowing that their working conditions are the concern of a powerful organisation. On a wider scale, however, the organisation is caught between the desire to integrate its members into the economic mainstream (for example through co-operatives) and the desire to construct development alternatives which exist alongside the mainstream.

I have attempted in this dissertation to describe how SEWA is one of the sites in which reformist development alternatives are being created in India. I have tried to point out that the location of this particular and particularly successful development alternative is not situated in a set of utopian ideas about the poor. It is situated, like most alternatives

that are likely to be successful, in ways of perceiving existent possibilities and then struggling to bring them about.

I have tried to show that at SEWA a number of prevailing dichotomies which comprise the development discourse have been re-constructed according to SEWA's ideology. That ideology is an example of the organisation's ability to construct 'itself' on its own terms, and to resist prevailing dichotomies, both conservative and radical. I have tried to show how SEWA's ideology is conservative *and* visionary, careful *and* transformative, and that it is pragmatic and idealistic. It is visionary in that it aims to transform the social and economic conditions of the extremely poor from the ground up, beginning with the poorest of the urban poor and extending in recent years to the rural poor. SEWA's ideology is pragmatic in a number of senses. Its adherence to Gandhian principles and methods, in a political culture which seems to serve only the powerful, is one example. Those principles include negotiation, rather than confrontation with adversaries. Determining 'reasonable demands' on behalf of its members is another example of a Gandhian position. Another is the acceptance and conserving of any gains which have been made. The story of the vegetable vendors in Manek Chowk provides a good example of this. SEWA launched a lawsuit on their behalf and enabled them to 'hold their ground' (Bhatt 1989:209). However, it is also the case that the Supreme Court actually granted the women the right to sell their wares on the terrace (roof) of the Municipal Market. The order also required the municipality to provide shelter from the weather, and running water, as well as to maintain the exterior stairwell of the building. None of this has been done, and may not ever be done. SEWA counts it as a victory, however, to have enabled its members to retain their place, and to have their right to do so formally encoded into legislation. Similarly, the *bidi* workers' right to a Rs 2 per 1000 *bidis* wage increase seems minuscule, and seems to have required heartbreaking effort for little return. But SEWA says: something is better than nothing, and counts as an improvement the fact that a wage increase is now in place.

SEWA practices a morally-ordered expediency, by which I mean that the means it adopts are as important as the ends it pursues. Nothing will be done which would contravene its principle of non-violence, for instance. The expediency comes from responding to perceived needs, whether they are perceived by SEWA organisers, or brought to SEWA by women needing help, or, as has happened in the past, by the evidence of pressing problems. Examples of the latter are SEWA's drought-relief efforts, which began in the mid-1980s, and its riot-relief work. More recently there have been efforts to include in its membership some of the people who have been affected by the Narmada Dam Project.

In Chapter Two I discussed some of the dilemmas which inevitably arise around the subject of ethnography when the 'subjects' are very poor. I would not argue that these dilemmas mean that no work should be done by anthropologists with people who are not on the same economic plane. But they do mean that discrepancies in position must be acknowledged, sympathies acknowledged, and claims to be inhabiting common ground, by virtue of gender, or to be gaining 'the view from below' carefully and critically examined (Caplan 1994, Visveswaran 1994, Haraway 1991). And those dilemmas do mean that it is a difficult matter to inhabit multiple positions, in the field as well as in a text. In this text, I have pointed out the many ways in which SEWA works to alleviate the working conditions of its members. I have also discussed the discrepancies I found, between the worldviews of the organisers and the members with whom I talked, and the resulting problems. The value of an ethnographic study is that it allows one to situate those people in social contexts, and to convey some sense of the complexities of the lives of the women who are members and organisers. I have suggested that, although SEWA tends to represents its members as victims of the social and economic order, arguing that they are at the mercy of employers, and that SEWA membership is the means of transforming their lives, I found that women make practical and ideological choices for their own reasons, and are not simply the grateful recipients of ways of improving their situation. I have no

doubt that SEWA has transformed the domain of possibilities for the self-employed women who are its members. It is also the case, however, that although SEWA argues that its members represent the majority of women in the workforce in India, its own efforts have reached only a very small number of those women.

I am left with the question of whether my effort to learn about SEWA was 'fruitful journey' to use Ann Gold's phrase about pilgrimages (Gold 1988), and what that might mean. I was not able to learn as much as I wished about the view from below. I believe that it was a fruitful journey and that despite the difficulties I learned a great deal about the organisation and its ideology and about the strategies which operate as the fields of endeavour for the organisation and for its members. I said earlier that, in a conversation that was supposed to be about endings, I found myself saying that I was ready to begin. That statement remains true although it now means something different. Obviously, I would begin 'again' from a different position, having a great deal more knowledge about the organisation. I would formulate new questions which would be informed by what I have learned. I would try to find out what constituted a successful co-operative, in terms of the organisation and the terms of the members, so as to be able to learn which specific social and economic factors had contributed to that success. I would also try to trace a co-operative from its inception, so as to comprehend the terms on which it was established. I would also find someone like one of the women who sat on the wealthy householder's lawn hearing about SEWA for the first time, and try to trace her involvement in the organisation. I would want to know how she perceived the opportunities of SEWA, what specific changes her membership made in her life, and what skills, knowledge and perceptions would she bring to that membership. That would be a long-term project, but one worth pursuing. It would also be of interest to live in a village where a SEWA co-operative was being established, so as to see how the villagers, women and men of more than one generation, conceptualised and participated in a development project conceived by outsiders as being a grassroots effort. One advantage of such a project would be the

ability to see where people situated a development scheme in the wider social and political context of the village. I realise that any such effort would be fraught with interesting dilemmas (Enslin 1994, Escobar 1991, Sacherer 1986), some of which would be familiar, others not, but my experience at SEWA, limited though it was, has left me with the desire to further extend my understanding of alternatives to mainstream development in India.

ADDENDUM 1: SEWA'S CONSTITUTION

The constitution of SEWA is contained in the following 12 articles (quoted in Selliah, 1989:11ff). Selliah notes that the constitution was originally created while SEWA was part of the TLA, and that it was revised in 1985 to reflect the goals of the independent organisation (1989:14).[1]

1. To organise self-employed women who by their own labour earn a living, either (a) by employing themselves in vocations such as garment sewing, garment cutting, drawing fibres, knitting and embroidering, tuition and the like or (b) by working as domestic servants, midwives, washerwomen, babysitters, cotton blowers, spinners, printers, incense stick makers, medicine pounders, basket makers, rope-makers, bidi workers, hand-cart drawers, casual workers, and those otherwise earning their livelihood by physical or mental labour, by union and co-operation - in order to regularise their relations with each other.

2. To make all possible efforts to procure raw materials and work, and to secure training and facilities to develop their members' potential.

3. To organise co-operative societies and obtain help from the state and the central Government for the social, economic and political advancement of self-employed women.

4. To organise tours, excursions and seminars so as to promote unity, co-operation and community living among self-employed women.

5. To arrange programmes for the promotion of their health, social security and sense of patriotism.

6. To endeavour to be helpful to the Government and to other social agencies for the advancement of women in general.

7. To make all possible efforts to advance their morals, to remove the evil effects of old customs, to prevent their exploitation in any form, to promote women's self-respect, and to provide employment assistance for their children.

8. To promote relations with national and international associations of self-employed women, and to encourage women's welfare activities through voluntary assistance.

9. To examine problems of unmarried, widowed, neglected, physically handicapped, helpless or destitute self-employed women in particular, and to try and solve their problems, so as to raise their standard of living and status.

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[1]Selliah notes (a) that "the union's constitution was unanimously adopted by the union's conference in 1985" (1989:14) and that the revised version was created "with the assistance of the ILO's adviser on rural workers' activities" (ibid.).

10. To investigate ways and means of securing for them proper remuneration and returns by finding new types of work or employment for them.

11. To establish a public trust, if necessary, and to procure aid by way of donation or assistance from the Government, social agencies and public trusts, in order to be able to make every effort for the economic advancement and development of self-employed women.

12. To see that the laws concerning the security of self-employed women are properly administers, and that progressive and specific legislation is enacted for their welfare.

13. To establish and co-ordinate different sections of self-employed women.

ADDENDUM 2: Objectives of the Mahila SEWA Trust, 1976 (from Bhatt 1976).

1. Physical, mental, moral, economic and social UPLIFT of all women residing in India.

2. TO LOOK AFTER special problems of economically and socially backward women and to extend assistance in kind or cash to their problems of occupation, employment, health, education, cultural uplift and initiate welfare activities for their children and implement schemes of welfare for orphans, handicapped and organise playgrounds, gymnasia, vikas gruha, cultural programmes and further extend relief to dejected women in distress and work for their rehabilitation, maintenance, training etc.

3. TO WORK OUT death benefit schemes or to donate in cash for any death benefit scheme that is operated for economically weaker and socially backward women, to arrange to train self-employed women who are illiterate in the job of accounting, financing, buying, selling and marketing and assist them to earn [a] better livelihood.

4. TO ARRANGE FOR research surveys on their social, economical and alround aspects of their life, to organise television, radio and cinema and other audiovisual programmes for family planning and welfare, national savings and all other types of developing activities and buy whatever equipments necessary for the said cause.

5. TO ORGANISE co-operative activity for their social, economic, family progress, work schemes of education on co-operation, adult education and provide material to read, write and encourage their thinking power to serve themselves, their families, relatives and community at large and to cultivate spirit to adopt secular attitude and aims to foster sisterhoods and friendliness amongst them, with national and international solidarity movement and widen contact, correspondence, mutual visits and assist each other in times of natural calamities and exchange views by participating in seminars, lectures, furnish written papers and organise tours of national and international cities, towns and villages wherein some programmes and projects are being worked for women and children welfare in general and self-employed women in particular.

6. TO ASSIST, ENCOURAGE AND ENTHUSE those male friends and dedicated workers who will be working for the welfare, betterment and uplift of women in general and self-employed women in particular (Bhatt 1976:*vi* ff.).

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[1] The *Economic and Political Weekly* periodically publishes a Women's Studies section. The pages of the Women's Studies section are identified by the prefix WS and are numbered sequentially beginning with WS1 within the Women's Studies section. The regular numbering procedure applies to the pages which precede and follow the Women's Studies section.

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