

Champaben and me

At my work, she is a statistic—one of 400 million South Asians living on a dollar a day. But for three days in the Kutch desert of Gujarat, India, she was my host, my co-worker, my teacher, my friend.

Champaben (the name means a beautiful flower) is an agricultural worker who literally earns a dollar—50 rupees—a day. She lives in a two-room house with her husband and four children. Her gets up around 5 a.m. to cook breakfast and lunch—on a wood stove in an enclosed kitchen--before heading off to work in the fields at around 7 a.m. The house has electricity but no running water. After work, one of Champaben's chores is fetching water from a communal tap about a mile away. I had packed the Gujarati translation of a report I had done, "Making Services Work for Poor People," but I never gave it to her; Champaben can't read.

She was my host in a village immersion program for World Bank staff, organized by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), an NGO based in Gujarat. The purpose of the program is for Bank staff to experience how poor people—our ultimate "clients"—live, so that we can better serve them. I didn't realize how much the experience would teach me about development economics. I also didn't expect it to be so much fun.

At SEWA's orientation before starting the program, we were advised not to start off by asking too many questions, to allow our hosts to initiate the conversation. For the first half day after I arrived, Champaben didn't ask me a single question. [This was frustrating for me, as I had a ton of questions I wanted to ask her.] When she did ask me a question, it was: "What kind of trees do you have where you live?" I suppose it was the one thing she was sure we had in common.

Soon we were chatting like old friends. I joined her at work, weeding an overgrown field. She told me to start weeding one row, while she weeded the adjacent one. When I was half-way through my row, I looked up and saw Champaben had finished five rows. This was the only time when she spoke to me in English: "Speed!"

I proudly told her that I was a cook, and would like to cook with her. Shrugging her shoulders, she showed me how to make *rotilas* or breads for dinner. While I faithfully followed her instructions, at dinner she pulled out, from a stack of light, fluffy rotilas, one thick, dense one that was almost inedible. That that was the one I made.

I was called "Shantabhai" ("bhai" being a typical suffix for men, meaning "brother", while "ben" is the suffix for women). In the evenings, I would overhear conversations between Champaben and her neighbors which would be a string of incomprehensible Gujarati ending with "Shantabhai," and then everybody bursts out laughing. I didn't dare ask what they were saying¹.

¹ Every name has to have a meaning. They had no trouble with my name, because it means "peace." they did have trouble with the name of my South-African colleague Jeff Racki, because "Jeff" has no real

The generosity of poor people is overwhelming. By almost any measure, Champaben is extremely poor. Yet she spends most of her free time helping those less fortunate than her. One evening, we went to chop firewood for a very poor family whose household head was sick. Another evening, we brought some vegetables to a poor, Muslim family. One of the children was the size of a one-year-old, but had well-defined features. It turned out she was five years old and malnourished.

One of my colleagues, Junaid Ahmad, was supposed to do an immersion in a neighboring village, but at the last minute couldn't make it. His host was so disappointed that she insisted on bringing the meal she would have cooked for him to Champaben's house for me to eat.

The conversation with Junaid's would-be host brought home to me the fact that the government, which is supposed to help poor people, was largely absent from their lives. This lady had been seriously ill. When I asked her what kind of doctor she had seen, she looked at me as if I was some kind of fool. "Of course I went to the private doctor. The free public clinic hasn't had anybody there for years."

Sometimes it's worse. Champaben is the convener of a village savings association that has leveraged some public funds to run a day-care center for working mothers. Late one night, after the kids were asleep, there was a meeting of the association at Champaben's house. For political reasons, the government grant for the day-care center was about to be cut off. The center may have to be closed. Every one of the mothers (and a few fathers) spoke about the damage this would do to their lives. One of their statements nearly brought me to tears: "We adults can understand if they close the center. But how will we explain it to the children?"

Nevertheless, there was an almost instinctive reverence for the government. I asked Champaben whom she voted for in the last election. She told me to ask her husband (this was the only time she ever referred me to her husband). He said that they usually vote for the Congress Party because they are supposed to help poor people. But last time he voted for the rival party, the BJP, because the candidate was from a neighboring village.

Late one afternoon, several of us were chatting in the area outside Champaben's house (which is also the village road). A man walked by. Champaben, who had been speaking volubly, immediately became silent and covered her head with the end of her sari. After the man left and I asked what was going on, she explained: he was the local politician.

I left Champaben's house with a renewed appreciation of how both markets and governments have failed poor people. Poor people are essentially helping each other, and how they do so with charm and grace--and with humor. I want to go back.

meaning in Gujarati. But it turns out that "Racki" means a string you tie around your wrist, so he is now called "Rackibhai."